

## Literature Studies

## Who's there?

Interview: Maximilian Burkhart



"The play probably wouldn't pass muster with a TV drama editor today." „Hamlet“, with Lars Eidinger in the title role.

Source: Evie Fylaktou/epa ANA

How do Shakespeare's plays strike us today? The dramatist was born all of 450 years ago, yet his plays – in ever new interpretations – remain vital. Literary scholars Tobias Döring and Andreas Höfele try to explain why.

London in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare's time: In a theatre much like Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, "the wooden O", on the south bank of the Thames, the spectators are cheering on the dogs at a bear-baiting. Are the roots of modern drama to be found here, in the voyeur's delight in violence and cruelty?

**Höfele:** That is certainly one of the foundations of modern drama. Early modern drama must have been just as exciting as the nearby spectacle of bear-baiting, but the latter is not its antecedent in an archaeological sense, even though there are obvious structural similarities between the bear-pits and the theatres of the time, and theaters hosted bear-baiting sessions on days when no plays were scheduled.

Nevertheless, many of Shakespeare's dramas, *Titus Andronicus* for example, depict cruelty with a degree of bloodthirstiness comparable, perhaps, only with that found in Kleist. Titus butchers Tamora's two sons and serves them up to her in a pie. Is the nucleus of theatre not in significant measure made up of representations of cruelty and violence?

**Döring:** But that's not an invention of Shakespeare's. What you are really getting at is that the sheer spectacle of the plays is more than modern bourgeois

audiences want to experience in the course of an evening out.

**Höfele:** That is certainly true of Shakespeare – as it is to this day of the cinema. Sex and violence are obviously what interest audiences most. But theatre is not only a matter of the vicarious enjoyment of violence, but also of the resources it mobilizes in opposition to the violence. The most excruciating scene in Shakespeare is the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*. In full view of the audience, an old man, bound to a chair, has his eyeballs pried out of their sockets by Cornwall, who uses the frightful phrase: "Out, vile jelly!" And in this situation, the victim compares his plight to that of a bear being harried by the dogs. Here is a direct link with the bear-baiting next door. But in this very scene we have the counter-vailing figure of Cornwall's servant, who stabs his lord and pays for it with his life. So in this scene we have the complicity with the cruelty and the voyeurism of the spectators, but also the refusal to acquiesce to it. The moment when the lowest depth of inhumanity is reached is also the moment that provokes a reaction in favour of the victim.

**Döring:** The focus on Shakespeare's canonical status may be misleading. His rival and precursor Christopher Marlowe is no less shocking. We may find a theatrical

practice that confronts us with these physical violations repulsive, but violence is a basic element of the theatre, and it has a dramatic function. Moreover, words can be equally shocking. Richard III's atrocities are not committed in the open; his violence is all verbal – but by no means innocuous.

But what concept of humanity lies behind all this? Is it something we can relate to today, or is it not an altogether more pessimistic notion?

**Höfele:** Yes and no. Much of Shakespeare is yes and no. The interesting point is that Shakespeare doesn't give an unambiguous answer to the question.

**Döring:** And that is characteristic for Shakespeare as a dramatist.

**Höfele:** He poses questions and he puts in question. That is what makes him as interesting today as he ever was. Like probably all great artists, Shakespeare soaked up the currents of thought and intellectual impulses of his time. Take that scene in *Lear* again. Does it give us a pessimistic image of humanity, or does it not present an extraordinarily optimistic one? This servant, who says no to injustice, who steps in, takes action, is the very essence of the humane. And we need only look back some 50 years, to shortly after the war to find *King Lear*

being perceived and staged as the apotheosis of Christian humanism. Nowadays, we regard such a notion as ridiculous. On the other hand, if a play like *The Tempest* appears to us to reflect colonial or rather post-colonial situations and themes this view would have seemed strange to post-war theatre-goers. Shakespeare does not present us with a cohesive picture of the world; instead, he confronts us with a whole series of questions, all of which are still relevant to us.

**Döring:** Statements about Shakespeare's concept of man are always assertions about the individuals who make them. Shakespeare is the touchstone for whatever happens to be the scientifically or philosophically based conception of humans and human life that is currently *en vogue*. The best example of this is psychoanalysis. I don't think that Freud contributed very much to a new interpretation of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare certainly did a great deal to establish Freud as a modern cultural hero. Thanks to *Hamlet* we have a clearer picture of Freud's role in the construction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's concept of the world. The current of influence flowed the other way round.

One of the dominant themes in Shakespeare's works is the nature of power and the workings of politics. Is this a pre-echo of the modern *conditio humana*?

**Döring:** In my view the quintessential element is not necessarily power as such. I see the histories more in terms of characters trying out a variety of roles. Richard III and the other leading protagonists come to power by making the best use of the chances the game offers them. In *Richard III* there is an early scene which is quite breathtaking in its perfidiousness. Whether by means of seduction – or rape – Richard manages so to restrict the options open to Lady Anne that she, in the end, agrees to marry him – even

though he has murdered her husband and father-in-law and she has just been in mourning for them. That's what makes these works so exciting: They are meta-dramatic. Shakespeare is not the only exemplar of this, but his plays brilliantly take advantage of all the possibilities of virtuoso role-playing.

**Höfele:** It is during this period that a much greater awareness of such possibilities emerges, not only in the theatre. Both Elizabeth I and her successor James I explicitly referred to the idea: We monarchs are like players on the stage, and we too must play our role before the world. At this point, the State in our modern sense does not yet exist, and monarchies function by means of pageantry and spectacle, so the theater is political in a very real sense. Think of Elizabeth's famous remark: "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" Prior to Essex's rebellion, the conspirators had actually commissioned a performance of *Richard II*, which was staged by Shakespeare's company the day before the coup attempt.

The history of spectacle is also a history of technology. Baroque theatres employed an array of mechanical devices to create effects that astounded audiences. In comparison, Shakespeare is very Protestant: *sola parola*. He conjures up whole battlefields by means of rhetoric alone. Is that the real secret of his impact?

**Döring:** That is obviously the central element in the plays of his early and middle periods, where the spoken word paints the scene and creates the context. This is most clearly and self-consciously the case for the role of the Chorus in *Henry V*. The late plays of the Jacobean period – *Cymbeline* or *The Tempest*, for example – make more use of stage effects and pomp, and more strongly reflect the taste of the court. Not everything was written for the Globe alone, and indoor theatres like the Blackfriars worked with

a very different range of theatrical tricks.

**Höfele:** It is a striking fact that the theatres of Catholic Spain's *Siglo de Oro* also dispensed with sets.

**Döring:** So it's not all Protestant.

**Höfele:** Protestant emphasis on the word, Catholic addiction to images. – It's a tempting but not altogether convincing analogy. When the Elizabethans went to the theater, they said "Let's go hear a play" or "Let's go and see a play". It's not as if there was nothing to see there. The actors, who often wore cast-off but still gorgeous court costumes, were a spectacle in themselves.

**Döring:** And it certainly wasn't all declamation.

Let's leave the theatre of words and turn to the opulent imagery of the cinema. What does cinema add to Shakespeare? Has the medium revealed aspects of his work that were previously overlooked?

**Döring:** Shakespeare's texts are full of vivid word-pictures. His use of language creates a continuous succession of images. The cinema can translate this imagery into a specific pictorial form. I think Akira Kurosawa's Shakespeare adaptations are terrific because they succeed in projecting the dramatist's metaphors – think of the cloud sequences in *Ran*, onto the screen. Here's where I think film versions have added value.

**Höfele:** I thought Baz Luhrmann's 1995 version of *Romeo and Juliet* von 1995 was wonderful because of the undertone of irony in it. Many of my students, on the other hand, were impressed by Ethan Hawke's Hamlet in Michael Almereyda's (2000) film. But again and again this melancholy Hamlet tries *faithfully* to reproduce certain elements of the play – and I found that boring. For me, the best Shakespeare film is still Peter Brook's *King Lear*, in black-and-white and with lots of close-ups – marvellous.

**Döring:** My favourite Shakespeare film



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was also made in black and white. It's Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be*. There is so much Shakespeare in it, and it is so perfectly realized. I also find the notion "If Shakespeare had been a Hollywood scriptwriter, he would have ..." quite plausible. One must remember that in 1600 the theatre was a new medium, just as digital media are today and cinema was for the 20th century. Then there are the early silent film versions of Shakespeare: the seeming paradox of Shakespeare without words, and yet these films actually work.

**Shakespeare's language is, on the one hand, full of bawdy jokes and, on the other, it can string puns and witticisms together into rapid staccato exchanges. Is Shakespeare's ability to speak in so many registers part of his success?**

**Döring:** Of course!

**Höfele:** Quite literally, "As You Like It". – And that was certainly a useful maxim for success in a theatre that was organized as an early form of joint-stock company devoted to commercial entertainment. Shakespeare presents characters of all classes, he gives them their characteristic idioms, and hopes to appeal to everyone. The prices for admission were graduated, so that everyone, from the lowest to the highest, could go to the theatre – and you had to give them what they wanted.

**Our idea of Shakespeare in Germany owes a lot to Goethe. Do we have an excessively idealistic picture of the great dramatist?**

**Döring:** Every generation gets the Shakespeare it deserves. Shortly before Goethe's famous oration on Shakespeare's birthday in 1771, David Garrick, the leading tragic actor of his day, celebrated the first big Shakespeare Jubilee in England. Referring to him as "the god of our idolatry", he erected a temple to him and established his status as a genius. Many people still worship at this shrine,

including the members of the German Shakespeare Society, but nowadays this attitude has a rather antiquarian charm. I thought it would be interesting to celebrate the poet's 450th birthday in a way that takes account of the fact that we now regard the genius cult as either quaint or downright embarrassing. But how should one go about it?

**And how did you?**

**Döring:** We chose to do it in self-reflective fashion and organized an academic discussion on Shakespeare celebrations as such. We continued the tradition by commenting on it. And of course we included a little hero-worship. But by reflecting on the phenomenon, we introduced a playful note, and role-playing is where Shakespeare himself started.

**Höfele:** Goethe has naturally had an enduring impact on the German image of Shakespeare: "Nature! Nature! Nothing is as natural as Shakespeare's characters." Here two basic aspects of Goethe's own age are invoked: Shakespeare as a newly discovered continent and the emphasis on nature – in opposition to French "artificiality". A century later the rallying cry would have been "Life!" not "Nature". And of course Shakespeare is the highest expression of this notion of life, which was a highly politicized term around 1900. Indeed, he is always the star witness, as every era finds in Shakespeare whatever happens to interest it most.

**One of the most remarkable aspects of the cult of genius that surrounds Shakespeare is the endless controversy over the true authorship of the plays. More than 50 candidates have been proposed, from Marlowe to the Earl of Oxford to Queen Elizabeth herself. Who then was Shakespeare?**

**Höfele:** As George Bernard Shaw said: "The works of Shakespeare were written not by Shakespeare, but by another poet

of the same name." This is a direct consequence of the genius cult. Those who believe that a distinguished aristocrat wrote the plays under the Shakespeare pseudonym assume that such a masterly oeuvre could not have been produced by an uninteresting, middle-class author. The assumption is based on the false premiss that an author can only write about things he has experienced. I still think that the best counterargument is: *Cui bono?* Who gained from the deception? It is never clear why anyone should have had to conceal his authorship. And I find it inconceivable that such a state secret could have remained secret for so long.

**Döring:** It was not then regarded as dishonorable to write for the theatre. And the Earl of Oxford was known to have written plays. All the conspiracy theories are full of inconsistencies and simply ahistorical. But they have taken on a life of their own and become a kind of parlor game.

**Every era discovers its own Shakespeare. And yet Shakespeare is actually quite forbidding. Take *Hamlet*, the Shakespeare play par excellence. Why is it that everyone knows Hamlet's famous, but actually highly enigmatic soliloquy?**

**Döring:** It is often said that Hamlet is the literary equivalent of the Mona Lisa. The remark was made by T.S. Eliot, but it is a very dubious comparison. After all, the Mona Lisa never says anything, and Hamlet never stops talking. His part makes up 40% of the play. Yet the more he says about himself, the more puzzling he seems to us. He is constantly trying out new roles and invites us to adopt roles too. And apart from that, which Hamlet are we talking about here? Hamlet is a construct, very often an editor's construct. Some of the soliloquies are not found in some of the contemporary editions.

**Höfele:** The play probably wouldn't pass muster with an editor of TV drama today.



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It lacks a clearly motivated plot, and there are lots of inconsistencies. The most obvious is: Why does Hamlet hesitate for so long? The question is not answered – precisely because Hamlet talks about it all the time – although there comes a point when we would really like to know the answer. But these gaps have kept the play alive, they mirror real life. Normal life doesn't follow a coherent plot either. I believe our inability ever to grasp, to be sure of, the reasons for Hamlet's behaviour accounts in large part for the play's continuing success.

**Döring:** For me the crux of *Hamlet* does not lie in the big soliloquies. It is the question with which the play begins: "Who's there?" Peter Brook made a fulllength theatrical event out of this very question: "Qui est là? Who's there? Wer da?" It's the question that theatre always poses and the one Hamlet asks, and it is the question we all ask ourselves, the question about our own situation and the lights we live by. The response to the question "Who's there?" is not an answer, it is "Nay, answer me." In this exchange of unanswered questions, we already have the sense of: "To be or not to be?" It is not the philosophical import of the opening question that is important, it is the attempt to define a standpoint. And we never get a definitive answer, because the question continues to turn up in ever-changing contexts.

To be or not to be?" ... Perhaps one can say that Shakespeare neither psychologizes nor historicizes. His characters are existentially at the mercy of the elements, like King Lear on the blasted heath. Is that what moves us? This sense of being cast to the winds?

**Höfele:** Yes, of course. The confrontation with elemental situations, with distressing situations, explains why *King Lear* became a drama for our time after the Second World War. – Not for nothing did you just

invoke Heidegger's term "das Geworfensein". These are all existentialist terms. Never before were notions like border, exposure, displacement so acutely real. And a lunar landscape as a back-drop for anarchy, in which a couple of ragged figures appears, is a vision that readily suggests itself in the shadow of the atomic bomb, and was in tune with the times. Just as Othello became emblematic for the turn of the new millennium.

**In what sense?**

**Höfele:** Insofar as colonialism and subsequent post-colonial critiques have naturally found in the figure of the Moor and his Venetian context a situation to which they can easily relate.

The Merchant of Venice, with the figure of Shylock the Jew, is a play that has become problematic in light of recent history, the operative word being anti-Semitism. To every age its Merchant too?

**Döring:** I certainly don't believe the play should be declared taboo. So much went up in flames at Auschwitz, why should this piece by Shakespeare be spared, writes Georg Hensel in his book "Spielplan". It is not an argument that can be easily dismissed, but others have taken a different position. In Munich in 1978 George Tabori confronted the figure of Shylock and this legacy from the standpoint that to censor or prohibit the play would be to reinforce its baleful legacy. The only way to deal with Shylock after the Shoah is to engage with the character. There is no question that *The Merchant of Venice*, the comedy first presented in 1596, only rarely seems funny to us now. That was already true in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, we have had the empathetic interpretation of Shylock, as an unfortunate creature who has been ill-used. I don't think one does the role any favours if the character is presented purely as a victim. Shylock is also an agent; that's

what makes the case so contentious. England in the 1590s had taken a decidedly anti-Semitic line, pogroms were in the air. But here again, out of the material that he found around him and absorbed like a sponge, Shakespeare constructed a tormented and exciting figure and an imposing piece of theatre, in which other types of outsider also play an important role. The play raises the whole issue of the Other, which is very much with us today. And Shylock, a marginal character who appears in only five scenes, is such a powerful creation – and not just since the Shoah – that one never forgets him

Shakespeare's world is also a world of magic. Do we not find here the traces of an irrational, premodern mode of thought, which has become entirely alien to us?

**Döring:** I wouldn't rate the success of the Enlightenment quite so highly. In these plays, magic has to do with the power of the theatre. In the figure of the magus, the theatre evokes its own creative power. This is particularly obvious in the case of Prospero in *The Tempest*. He is the director, he is responsible for the *mis-en-scène*. The Ghost in *Hamlet* is another one of these metatheatrical figures. Magic is an ordering system, it was the science of its day. And our modern science is not quite free of magical practices either.

In the end, *The Tempest* sends the spectator out into the light of an open future. It is not clear whether the cycle of intrigue, violence and retribution has really been broken. Where do we go from here?

**Döring:** The cycle of violence has clearly been broken. That is the pious fiction which the play leaves behind. Prospero has been wronged, and he seeks retribution for this wrong, in the form of revenge. Here he is like Titus and a whole slew of vengeful and avenging figures. But he finally rejects the vicious round of violence, retaliation and revenge. But this



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utopia has always been met with scepticism, because there are obviously other skeletons in Prospero's cupboard, and one has little reason to believe *everything* he says. Here again we have those contradictions that make the play so multifaceted. Prospero can be seen as a dictator, a tyrant, a colonizer and an exterminator – and all these perspectives place the apparently harmonious ending in a dif-

ferent light, not least because the whole master-servant conflict has not really been resolved. Apart from *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* is the play that has most frequently inspired new readings by contemporary directors.

#### So no reconciliation after all?

**Höfele:** I don't think one can put it that way. I would stand by that first statement:

the cycle of violence has definitely been broken. But no generally accepted interpretation of Shakespeare is ever immune to attack from the diametrically opposite position. That is how the history of reception works.

*Translation: Paul Hardy*



Prof. Dr. Tobias Döring

Holds a Chair in English Literature at LMU. Born in 1965, Döring studied at the University of Kent in Canterbury (UK) and at the Free University (FU) of Berlin, where he obtained his doctorate and completed his *Habilitation*. He taught at the FU and at the University of Münster before moving to Munich in 2005. Until recently, Döring was President of the German Shakespeare Society.



Prof. Dr. Andreas Höfele

Has held a Chair in English Literature at LMU since 2000. Born in 1950, he studied at Frankfurt University and LMU, and earned his doctorate in Munich. After completing his *Habilitation* at the University of Würzburg, he was Professor of Theatre Studies at LMU and held a chair in English Literature at Heidelberg University. Höfele served as President of the German Shakespeare Society from 2002 until 2011.

