

**David Ruiter, ed. 2022. *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice*.
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The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice, edited by David Ruiter, is a valuable and necessary introduction to a variety of ongoing convergences between Shakespeare studies and the discussion and practices of social justice. It is a fascinating and groundbreaking collection of interviews and essays by noted scholars, writers and practitioners of the arts that explores the significance of Shakespeare's *oeuvre* in the contexts of specific social issues. Two basic questions are posed in the Introduction to the book. The first one is "what can Shakespeare (considered in its multiplicity: in pedagogy, performance, scholarship, etc.) say or do that could truly impact social justice in its contextual specificity, either in his time, ours, the time in between or the time to come?" The second one is: "How could the plays and poetry be used—by teachers, actors, directors, scholars, etc.—to support social justice?" (Ruiter 2022, 2).

The handbook offers many answers and is neatly structured into four parts: "The Shakespeare and Social Justice Interviews," "The Practice of Shakespeare and Social Justice," "The Performance of Shakespeare and Social Justice," and "The Economies of Shakespeare and Social Justice." Perhaps one of the book's greatest virtues is the polyhedral perspective of the contributors, as most of them have supported—and support—social justice through double involvement in political projects: In academia and beyond the academic wall. In the first part, Erin Coulehan provides a brief introduction to the conversations between David Ruiter and Chris Anthony—Director of the Will Power to Youth program in L.A—, Erica Whyman—Deputy Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company known for her radically inclusive (and controversial) castings—, Arthur L. Little Jr—leading critical race scholar—, Ewan Fernie—who here discusses the role of cities in relation to Shakespearean humanism—, and the anti-racist feminist scholar Farah Karim-Cooper, from Shakespeare's

Globe. As highlighted by Coulehan, the interviewees share the idea that social hierarchies are being (and should be) deconstructed at present and that Shakespeare provides the ideal field of play to accomplish such a task.

The second section of the book entitled “The Practice of Shakespeare and Social Justice” encompasses six chapters, four of which are focused on antiracism, one of them on the question of disability, and the last one on women in academia. Interestingly, in their essay “Active Shakespeare: A social justice framework” Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi state that, in the classroom context, “placing Shakespeare within a social justice framework is necessary in the twenty-first century to keep Shakespeare alive” (47). In consequence, they advocate in particular for an “active approach to Shakespeare” that promotes the value of diversity among students in terms of race. The following chapter, “Bending toward justice: From Shakespeare’s Black Mediterranean to August Wilson’s Black Atlantic” by Peter Erickson, is in line with the reflections of Thompson and Turchi. Erickson discusses Shakespeare’s *Othello* in relation to August Wilson’s *Herald Loomis* to promote a multicultural, transcultural, and expanded conceptual framework for students and scholars who want to engage in anti-racist reflection and activism. Accordingly, in “Black Hamlet, social justice and the minds of apartheid,” Arthur L. Little Jr discusses the work of Wulf Sachs and issues of race. In the following chapter, “Shakespeare and civil rights: Rhetorical universalism,” Jason Demeter expands the discussion on race and identity to larger social movements, specifically to the civil rights movement. According to Demeter, Shakespeare’s

ultimate value lies not in his perpetuation of a universalist fantasy in which all humans are essentially the same, but rather in the diversity of interpretations and meanings to which his work, in all of its glorious ambiguity, provides us access. (105)

In the same vein, but turning to disability activism and discussing the historical differences in the meaning of that concept, Adelle Hulsmeier, in “Shakespeare’s Disabled, Disabled Shakespeare,” explores the figures of Richard (*Richard III*) and Gloucester (*Henry VI Parts II and III*). The final chapter of this section is also extremely interesting. In “Social justice in the academy: Reflecting on Shakespeare’s royal women,” Christie Carson talks about her own teaching experience at

Royal Holloway, where she was “able to create a space for an open discussion of the fundamental principles of social justice” (123). The analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters helped her create that space where a better future for women is envisaged.

The chapters gathered within the third section, “The performance of Shakespeare and social justice,” are also very illuminating. Of particular interest is the first chapter of this section, “William Shakespeare’s *Enrique IV*, primera parte: Common [battle]grounds between medieval England and Mexico’s present” by Alfredo Modenessi and Paulina Morales. In their discussion of *1 Henry IV*, produced by the National Theatre of Mexico, Modenessi and Morales examine the critical, political, and inspirational implications of this production when performed both locally and globally. The following chapter, “King Lear and gender justice in India,” by the novelist Preti Taneja, shows the complexity of reading Shakespeare from a critical perspective when his works have been imposed on Indians through the educational programs of the colonizers. Remarkably, as pointed out by Taneja, there are postmodern appropriations of Shakespeare’s works (for instance, *King Lear*) that deconstruct political identities and assist in the subaltern’s speech. The third chapter of this section, “Re-enacting *Hamlet* in South Africa,” was written by Malcom Cocks, and demonstrates that Shakespeare may serve as a bridge between the subjective imagination of local practitioners and a wider global community. A different perspective on the cultural role of Shakespeare in South Africa is provided by Kevin Quarmby, who explores (and challenges) the validity of introducing “Shakespeare in prison” initiatives in his chapter “‘Shakespeare in prison’: a South African social justice alternative.” Equally stimulating, Julie Sanders and Li Jun’s essay “Romeo and Juliet with Chinese characteristics” deals with two different productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in China. The conclusion is thought-provoking indeed, as they consider “small-time” productions of Shakespeare a more appropriate vehicle for discussion about social justice than big-time productions today (at least in China). The closing chapter of this section, “Social justice, social order and political power in NTCC’s adaptation of *Richard III*” by Keng Lee, is less optimistic than the contributions previously mentioned, as Lee comes to the conclusion that “the general populace appears to accept a certain amount of the suspension of social justice

in political power struggles, as long as a certain level of social order is maintained" (231).

The fourth and final section of the handbook, "The economies of Shakespeare and social justice," is perhaps the most committed to specific theoretical notions regarding power and social justice. In "The empathetic imagination and the dream of equality: Shakespeare's poetical justice," Kiernan Ryan describes Shakespeare's notion of justice as "poetical," a term that he specifically differentiates from "poetic." For Ryan, Shakespeare "poetical justice" has to do with subjectivity, fiction, imagination, and potentiality. This is a truly useful and inspiring idea. The next two chapters, "The idea of communism in Shakespeare" by Peter Holbrook, and "'Leftward, ho!': Shakespeare and Lenin in the tempest of class politics" by Jeffrey Butcher, launch a critic against capitalism and remind us of the fact that Marxism cannot be reduced to either some specific historical events or a simplified theory. Butcher maintains that the Marxist perspective is paramount in literary analysis because it provides a fundamental perspective: that of the working class. The last chapter of this section, "Social justice and the reign of Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" by Geraldo de Sousa, provides a beautiful conclusion to the volume by revealing the ways in which *King Lear* presents social justice as an opportunity to make "visible the invisible" (292), an opportunity for opening the doors and seeing.

Curiously enough, this book starts with David Ruiter referring to Hamlet and the question of time: How the actors directed by Hamlet hold the mirror up to the time, and how their play within the play is a way of both reflecting the present and addressing the future; in other words, a venue at which to think, change, and do justice. The book finishes with a chapter on *King Lear* and the question of sight, because visibilization is also a way of doing justice. The volume's strength resides precisely in the variety of questions, approaches, philosophical articulations, and acts of visibilization it contains. Yet, as Ruiter himself points out in the first pages of this handbook: This is "a partial framework, an intentional but always unfinished collection" (2). Indeed, perhaps its only weakness is that it is only 330 pages long, and, consequently, there are many other angles and experiences related to Shakespeare, social justice, and activism that had no room here (environmental activism, transfeminism, or slow movement, to

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mention but a few). Hopefully, more books and handbooks like this one will be published in the imminent future. We will need them to cope with “the weight of this sad time.”

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