

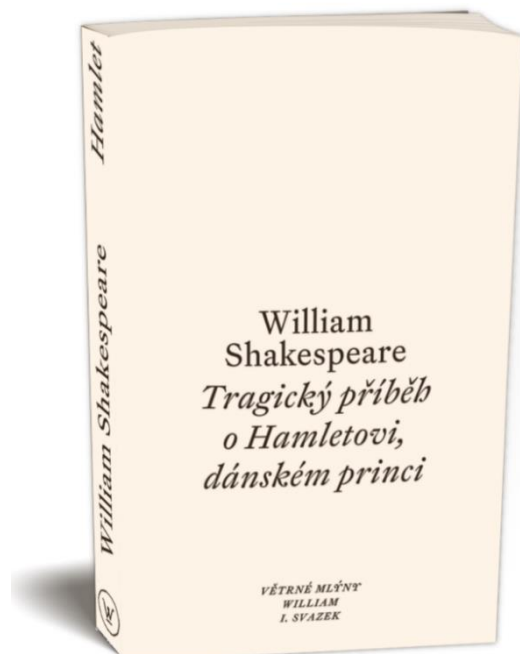
BOOK REVIEW:
HAMLET – THE NEXT DANISH IDOL

William SHAKESPEARE: *Tragický příběh o Hamletovi, dánském princí*, translated by Filip Krajník. Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2022.

Eva Kyselová

FEW national cultures know as much as the Czech one does that a new translation of a play by Shakespeare is a social, cultural and, in a way, political event. This is even more the case with *Hamlet*. Translations of this supreme revenge tragedy have been a staple of Czech literature, translation tradition, theatre, as well as the sphere of literary criticism, for more than two centuries. This has created the impetus to challenge the boundaries of its interpretation, to challenge a dramatic piece that has an infinite number of semantic layers.

Czech theatre of the last two decades has been impacted by translations of *Hamlet* by two authors – Martin Hilský and Jiří Josek (both premiered in 1999 and were subsequently published as books). They both still enjoy great popularity; indeed, Martin Hilský's life-long effort (or even mission) to record, translate, educate on Shakespeare – indeed, continually to make the work, life and time of the English Renaissance playwright present – has elevated him from the position of a translator to one of a respected and praised celebrity. Progress, however, cannot be stopped and the renditions of Josek and Hilský no longer represent the most up-to-date trends in translation for the theatre. It is praiseworthy that the long and rich tradition of translating Shakespeare into Czech continues and that the first in a series of new Shakespearean translations is *Hamlet*, especially when the translation was not done with only the printed form in mind.



The goal of the new edition of Shakespeare's works, entitled *William* and published by Větrné mlýny publishers, of which the translator and literary scholar Filip Krajník is the general editor, is to revise and present Shakespeare's drama in new renditions, liberated from the conventions and interpretations of the past. It seeks to be attracting the attention of theatre practitioners who might be interested in staging them, but also of general readers, inviting them to give a chance to old but still exciting dramatic texts.

Krajník's translation, bearing the quarto title *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (it is perhaps the first Czech translation of *Hamlet* based on the 1604/5 quarto of the play rather than the 1623 folio version), is accompanied by several studies, examining the work from diverse perspectives. Even the introductory note, written by the translator himself in collaboration with the preeminent expert on Shakespeare's work Pavel Drábek, presents a manifesto of a kind (although explicitly rejecting this designation), an artistic programme that not only covers the current Shakespeare edition, but also establishes new goals and ambitions for translating *Hamlet* into Czech.

The text defines Krajník's translation against the two most recent renditions of *Hamlet* into Czech (that is, Josek and Hlinský's), suggesting they are not communicative enough and are growing obsolete, without, however, drawing attention to its own self-confident interpretational – or generational – form of translation. *Hamlet* always embodies the sensibilities of the present generation, regardless of the translator or the director's age. Hamlet is simply an archetype of an angry individual, his attitude springing from life experience. This is why Krajník's translation can be considered generational, not just ongoing: the translator himself represents a certain research method, following and defining himself against his models, pushing the boundaries of the research, while taking into consideration his own individuality, as well as his own generation. Hamlet is not just an "anonymous fellow" – and neither should his translator be.

Krajník's competence is not in doubt: the translator is an enthusiastic and learned Anglicist and historian. His translation superbly employs the language to the extent that it does not shy away from going against the established routine or tradition (which is most obvious in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy); at the same time, it respects the literary value of the text, since in its infinite multi-layeredness lies the play's (im)perfection and timelessness. This translation does not speak with the splendour or pomp of Hlinský's wordplays that please the ear, nor does it opt for the sharpness and poignancy of Jiří Josek, who never hesitated to get to the point. In Krajník's *Hamlet*, each of the characters has his or her own place and the audience is frequently invited to stop and think, "So what did he mean by that?" This itself is no

small achievement. Although this *Hamlet* is not essentially political, it is engaged in terms of the level of the liberalisation of the text (which the translator comments on in detail in the footnotes), as well as of the liberty which he thus gives the potential producers (a liberty that they have already made use of – see the review of Jakub Čermák’s recent production of Krajník’s translation in the present issue of *THEPES*).

It may have been Krajník’s rich experience with the translation of fantasy literature (above all, of Philip K. Dick) that helped him find and summon up the courage for his innovative approach to what is perhaps the most canonical play, one that is to some extent known by everyone with any education.

The volume includes the aforementioned contextual studies that follow the story of *Hamlet* from several points of view. The essay by Anna Mikyšková provides a survey of the stage history of the play in the Renaissance, the Restoration and eighteenth century England. Mikyšková charts in detail not only the chief performers of the play’s protagonist, but also describes the theatrical conventions of the time, elucidating the shifts that took place on English stages after the re-opening of the theatres in 1660. The author is an Anglicist and presents the historical context in an engaging way; however, uncertainty and simplification take place when she moves to the sphere of theatre history. It is too general to argue that we live in the times of post-Freudian psychologisation of dramatic characters. The author’s work with the Czech term “klaun” (the equivalent to the English “clown”) is somewhat awkward – even in Czech theatre discourse, the English phrase “clowns and fools” is commonly used, with their clear differentiation in the context of Elizabethan theatre. The thirty-page study includes generous notes and works with a number of sources; it is therefore somewhat surprising that, after such laborious research, the author does not come up with a stronger statement regarding the staging history of the play as opposed to finishing her text with a laconic observation about the diversity of the various past forms of *Hamlet*.

As a loose sequel to Mikyšková’s essay, the theatre scholar and Anglicist Klára Škrobánková charts the stage history of *Hamlet* from Edmund Kean’s iconic treatment of Hamlet at the beginning of the nineteenth century up until the most recent experimental interpretations in the new millennium, including the crucial film adaptations. The author does not attempt to cover the topic completely (that would require a whole volume); instead, she presents a collection of the most interesting (and most radical) Hamletian productions thus far. A large space is devoted to females who have enacted Hamlet, referring to the well-known proposition about the Prince’s ambiguous non-masculinity and, in contrast, the female features of the character. It is noteworthy that these gender experiments were the domain of the last century, while the current theatre practice seems reluctant to entertain them. Škrobánková’s

essay is a gateway of a kind to *Hamlet* as a pop-cultural phenomenon, an iteration of the play and the character that the audience might encounter before even seeing or reading the piece as a whole.

Any edition of a new Czech translation of *Hamlet* would be incomplete without a reflection on the staging tradition in Czech theatres. In his essay, David Drozd comments on selected Czech productions of the play done after 2000. Drozd's text is also very "picky," focusing on the interpretations of the play by the directors Jan Nebeský, Jan Mikulášek, Miroslav Krobot and Daniel (today Daniela) Špinar. He also briefly mentions the so-called transitional productions, that is, those that immediately preceded the year 2000. Drozd's survey is not all that systematised. The author subjectively and selfishly chose productions that he himself considered noteworthy – which he is absolutely entitled to. Thanks to Drozd's selection, readers are given the opportunity to follow the trend of the recent years of ever-younger Hamlets on Czech stages. While Jan Nebeský's production (that premiered in 1994 and was staged until 2002) featured an already middle-aged David Prachař in the eponymous role, Patrik Děrgel in Švanda Theatre in Prague moved the role more toward the young generation.¹ The two current Hamlets, Tomáš Havlínek in Prague City Theatres and Dan Kranich in South Bohemian Theatre, can indeed speak to their peers about their issues, such as boredom, indifference, depression, the desire to go one's own way and the clash with authorities.

The first volume of *William* by a collective of authors enters the Czech Shakespearean space confidently; however, it looks as if it does not yet fully know whom it seeks to address. On the one hand, there is a precise translation with detailed explanatory notes, while on the other, there is a (in places too) light-hearted and emotional style of acknowledgement at the volume's beginning. Perhaps Hamlet's speech to the players about modesty of expression would have been apposite here. The edition seeks to cover a number of spheres – English studies, theatre studies, history, linguistics, as well as theatre practice (the last one being testified to by what is called "dramaturgical translation," a new method and term coined by the *William* collective). This is only natural and understandable. This, however, also appears to be the reason why the volume struggles with imbalance, at places even inaccessibility, both in terms of form (switching between the author plural and singular; rather impractically translating well-known English names, such as The Globe, The Swan, etc., into Czech) and the nature of the contributions of the individual authors.

¹ In this context, I would add one of the most interesting adaptations of the play for young audiences, *Hamleteen*, by Tomáš Jarkovský and Jakub Vašíček which premiered in 2012 in Alfa Theatre in Pilsen, West Bohemia.

Eva Kyselová

Hamlet is a play of passion, reason, dilemma and rebellion, and reading the first volume of *William* evokes precisely these emotions. God save Hamlet!

Eva Kyselová, Academy of Performing Arts
eva.kyselova@damu.cz



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