THOMAS MANN AND SHAKESPEARE: SOMETHING RICH AND STRANGE EDITED BY TOBIAS DÖRING AND EWAN FERNIE

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Writing literary history from a strictly national perspective can produce remarkable blindness and distort the ways in which literature is encountered and appreciated by readers all over the world. The connection between Thomas Mann and Shakespeare is a case in point. While hundreds of studies have been devoted to the influence that Goethe's works had had on Mann, very few scholars have commented on Shakespeare's legacy within Mann's oeuvre, despite the explicit evocation of one of Shakespeare's early comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*, at the heart of *Doktor Faustus*, Mann's iconic novel about the Second World War. In Mann's time, Shakespeare's works had become such an inseparable element of German culture that every educated German knew their Shakespeare just as well as their Goethe and Schiller, albeit in translation. *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare: Something Rich and Strange*, a volume edited by Tobias Döring and Ewan Fernie after a conference held in 2013 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, aims to fill in the remarkable gap in the criticism on the two authors. Twelve contributors from the UK, the US, Germany and Switzerland argue that Shakespeare's oeuvre should be seen as a largely unexplored subtext to most of Mann's works, and, moreover, that Mann's novels and stories shed new light on Shakespeare's texts and open up new avenues of meaning in his plays and sonnets.

Ambitious statements of purpose of that kind have become something of a cliché in the contemporary comparative study of literary texts. The days of the so-called 'French School' of Comparative Literature are long gone, of course: we are no longer content with positivist studies whose sole purpose is to demonstrate on the basis of thorough archival research that author X had indeed read author Y. *Comparaison n'est pas raison*: in the late 1950s, René Étiemble used this French proverb as a title of his polemic against the narrowly historicist approach to the comparative study of literature, suggesting that the mere existence of some kind of connection between two texts is not a good enough reason to undertake an academic comparison. In other words, the goal of Comparative Literature should be to teach us something new and exciting about both parts of a literary comparison, to produce a kind of knowledge about literary texts that wouldn't be possible to attain otherwise. But since the 1950s, when the likes of René Étiemble and René Wellek announced that the discipline is in crisis, and urged for new models of comparative enquiry in the field of literary studies, scholars still grapple with the question of how to make literary comparisons work.

The contributions to *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare: Something Rich and Strange* represent a range of approaches to the task of comparison, and perhaps the volume as a whole is the most interesting when analysed from a methodological point of view. The title of the volume uses a famous phrase from *The Tempest* to posit that the pairing of Mann and Shakespeare yields some *rich*—important—and *strange*—unexpected—conclusions. All contributors suggest that their specific pairings of Mann's and Shakespeare's texts reveal something crucial and surprising about both writers. Tobias Döring, for instance, describes his essay as an exploration of the processes of 'mutual ghosting' of *The Tempest* and the séance chapter in *Der Zauberberg* (96). John Hamilton uses the language of commerce associated with *The Merchant of Venice* to talk about Mann's most famous novella, *Der Tod in Venedig*, as well as to describe the very act of comparison: 'the meagre evidence of a relation between William Shakespeare's play and Thomas Mann's story is adduced as a

deposit, which contracts the reading to pay off the loan and even to generate interest' (134). In the afterword to the volume, Elisabeth Bronfen describes the preceding contributions as a 'crossmapping' of Shakespeare and Mann (246). She says:

> On the one hand, one can claim that Mann maps certain constellations he finds in Shakespeare onto contemporary cultural and philosophical concerns in his novellas and novels. On the other hand, one can also claim that […] it is equally fruitful and perhaps more revelatory to map onto a set of Shakespeare's plays the ways in which Mann's novels responded to their own contemporary cultural crises. *(246)*

Perhaps most interestingly, Ewan Fernie suggests in the introduction to the volume that when faced with such literary giants as Shakespeare and Mann, a reader '*needs* to approach them from an odd angle in order to rediscover the inimitable power on which their elevated reputations depend, and which alone can justify them' (13). But this ambitious postulate seems to be only realised in Fernie's own contribution to the volume, where he reads *As You Like It* alongside *Joseph und seine Brüder*—perhaps Mann's most ambitious novelistic enterprise, a four-volume retelling of the biblical story of Jacob and Joseph—eloquently arguing that both texts present a similar life-affirming ideology as a potential response to the deep nihilism that Fernie detects in both Shakespeare and Mann.

In many other essays in the volume, however, the contributors discuss some general feature of great literature—like self-reflexivity in Tobias Döring's essay, or the subversive portrayal of sexual desire in a number of contributions—using Shakespeare and Mann merely as illustrative examples. In many cases, it seems likely that other pairings—Shakespeare and Proust, for example, or Mann and Virginia Woolf—would have been equally revealing, and there is little to suggest that a given stylistic or thematic motif is uniquely specific to Mann and Shakespeare. This means that, often, nothing in particular seems to be gained from the comparison. Some of the connections between Mann and Shakespeare posited in the volume seem to be deeply personal in nature: Mann and Shakespeare emerge as two canonical writers who clearly heavily impacted the contributors' thinking, but in ways that do not amount to a generalised argument. For instance, David Fuller shows that the music chapter in *Der Zauberberg* suggests 'a model for [a] kind of literary-critical thinking' which is 'professionally *amateur*' (207), and then describes how that model helped him approach performances of Shakespeare's plays afresh. But no intrinsic connection between Mann and Shakespeare seems to be presented in his essay, other than Fuller's personal experience of those two authors.

The introduction and the afterword to the volume, as well as the first three contributions (by Jonathan Dollimore, Richard Wilson and Alexander Honold) all focus on the significance of *Love's Labour's Lost* within *Doktor Faustus*. None of those contributions, however, surpasses Ewan Fernie's—one of the volume's editors—earlier treatment of the topic in his 2013 book *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*. Fernie's starting point in *The Demonic* is the startling observation that Adrian Leverkühn, as much a genius as a demonic composer, who is the protagonist of Mann's novel—his 'Faustus'—'makes a pact with the Devil in return for nothing less than the dark powers needed to inaugurate aesthetic modernity while writing an operatic version of *Love's Labour's Lost*' (119). Fernie's great discussion in *The Demonic* is echoed in his contribution to *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare*, where he offers a detailed and persuasive analysis of 'gravity's revolt to wantonness' (172)—a phrase from *Love's Labour's Lost* which becomes the central concept in Adrian's treatment of Shakespeare's play.

It is great to see a concerted effort to uncover the connections between Mann and Shakespeare, which for the most part had so far remained unexplored. The courage to go beyond one's specialism in early modern English theatre or German modernism in order to

explore the kinds of links that go beyond the boundaries of time, place and genre is highly commendable. Of course, not all the comparisons undertaken in *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare* are equally persuasive. But at least in some cases, like Ewan Fernie's essay about *As You Like It* and *Joseph und seine Brüder*, one can see the exciting promise of Comparative Literature: an opportunity to use literature as an instrument of thought, where each great book provides us a with a new strong voice, and some combinations of those voices turn into truly meaningful conversations.