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To cite this article: Jonathan Crewe (2014) “Hamlet” in Purgatory, *Safundi*, 15:1, 126-130, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2013.865414](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865414)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865414>



Published online: 21 Feb 2014.



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II

"HAMLET" IN PURGATORY

Jonathan Crewe

Since readers of this article will likely have read David Schalkwyk's *Hamlet's Dreams*, I will keep summary to a minimum while trying to convey my sense of what is important about this book. Briefly, it records the transformation of the Robben Island Shakespeare, aka the Robben Island Bible,¹ into one of the prized relics, alongside the First Folios, of the world Shakespeare establishment. As Schalkwyk explains, the Robben Island Shakespeare is the copy of the Alexander edition owned and circulated in the prison during the 1970s by Sonny Venkatrathnam, with passages marked and signed by many of the political prisoners in the prison's Section B, including Nelson Mandela. Although the Robben Island Shakespeare evidently left Robben Island among Venkatrathnam's personal belongings, it is still a long way from there to Nash House in Stratford-Upon-Avon, and later the British Library. Schalkwyk credits Matthew Hahn as an interviewer and playwright of *The Robben Island Bible* with a large role in publicizing the Robben Island Shakespeare; David Cameron presented signed copies of the play to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. While Schalkwyk does not record the exact details of the transfer of the Robben Island Shakespeare into the keeping of the world Shakespeare community, the book evidently got caught up in the kitsch patriotic extravaganza of Britain's Olympic Games opening ceremony, as part of a concurrent British Library exhibit of precious Shakespearean relics titled "Shakespeare Stages the World."

This apotheosis, so to speak, of the Robben Island Shakespeare is surely not what any Robben Island inmate would have anticipated or necessarily have wanted. Indeed, Schalkwyk scrupulously records denials by former Robben Island prisoners that the Robben Island Shakespeare in particular, or Shakespeare in general, had any special significance for them as ANC militants. Their dissent is noted, but has not been enough to impede the entry of the Robben Island Shakespeare into the halls of fame, a process to which, of course, Schalkwyk contributes in his capacity as the Research Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in

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¹"Bible" since Venkatrathnam was allowed to keep the book in prison by passing it off to the authorities as a volume of Hindu scriptures.

Washington, in a book published under the Arden imprint. Schalkwyk is aware, however, that the heart-warming story of the prison reading, and subsequent retrieval and display of the Robben Island Shakespeare, is too fraught with historical ironies to tell as a triumphalist one.

The book blends, not altogether seamlessly, a number of modes: autobiography; theory de rigueur (Foucault, Derrida, Scarry); speculative interpretation of what, including a hunt for “universal” commonplaces, might have drawn particular Robben Island readers (Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Mac Maharaj, Ahmed Kathrada, Wilton Mkwayi, Elia Motsoaledi, Sandi Sijake, et al.) to the Shakespearean passages they marked (some choices being more intriguing than others, like Govan Mbeki’s apparent fondness for Orsino’s opening monologue); readings of *Hamlet* as a play representing the prototypical condition of the self “imprisoned” in Denmark; prison writing by former Robben Island inmates and South African political prisoners, especially women, of the 1970s; and an account (in the final chapter) of Robben Island as the formative setting for male “friendships”—not of intimacy, but of mutual support and “reciprocal altruism” that had their seriocomic sequel in Jacob Zuma’s “corrupt” dealings (as Justice Hilary Squires judged them to be) with Schabir Shaik.

In Schalkwyk’s narrative, the Robben Island Shakespeare belongs to what may be called the Robben Island legend: roughly speaking, a legend of long-term endurance in the face of hardship and abuse,

a narrative of solidarity and comradeship—of the gradual political education of the common-law prisoners ... and of self-discovery and a grand project of universal education, so that by the time Mandela was released, Robben Island had become celebrated as “the University,” where a new, politically and generally literate citizenship for South Africa had been forged and internal differences overcome. (30)

This history, enshrined in the Robben Island Museum, Cape Town’s most visited tourist destination, has justly become the stuff of legend. Schalkwyk pays due tribute to the men “who saved my country” (xii).

Within this picture, the Robben Island Shakespeare attests to, among other things, the cultural literacy and educational aspiration of the prisoners, in marked contrast to their captors. A number of the prisoners had already encountered Shakespeare in their school curricula, and Schalkwyk plausibly suggests that the Robben Island Shakespeare could serve, with whatever reservations on the part of prisoners, as a shared medium of self-expression and self-realization. Schalkwyk’s autobiographical narrative (with which I can certainly “identify” on the basis of comparable experiences) highlights the difference between the significance and access of Shakespeare to a relatively privileged young white Anglo-Afrikaner man and his black counterparts.

As Schalkwyk additionally notes, and as Mandela noted in *A Long Walk to Freedom*, the transformation of Robben Island into “the University” depended to a significant degree on the authorities’ limited observance of prison regulations to which the prisoners, notably Mandela as lawyer, could appeal for the amelioration

of their conditions. Despite severe restrictions, the prisoners were eventually permitted to read and study, many gaining literacy and advanced educations while incarcerated. One struggles to imagine a Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib University.

The legend of Robben Island is inevitably selective, however, characterized by exclusion as well as inclusion, by forgetting, repression, and erasure as well as recall. (Schalkwyk gestures towards psychoanalytic reading but ultimately concludes only that “the unconscious I have been trying to discern ... has, I fear, largely been my own” (159)). Because of the passage of time, the proceedings of the TRC, and the continuing publication of memoirs, many of the most interesting aspects of Schalkwyk’s book, and of his readings of prison writing in it, are those that do not discredit but nevertheless deviate from the Robben Island legend. I do not know how this feature of the book will strike current readers in South Africa, but, to my mind, Schalkwyk’s fair and sober reckoning with the legend is his study’s single most important contribution. Schalkwyk declares his own orientation towards the future rather than the past, and no desirable political future, inside or outside South Africa, can be grounded only in legend. In the context of the final chapter, Jacob Zuma’s reputed view that it is the task of South African artists to celebrate the heroes of the struggle is both hilarious and ominous.

Schalkwyk’s topics include the insufficiently acknowledged role of South African women as activists, prisoners, and memoirists (Ruth First, Caesarina Makhoere, Emma Mashinini), typically subject to solitary confinement without the supporting community of the Robben Island prison, and exposed to persistent, insidious interaction with male interrogators. (A counterpart to this focus on the women prisoners is Schalkwyk’s markedly sympathetic attention to Ophelia as distinct from Hamlet in his reading of the play: “If Denmark is a prison for Hamlet, it is a torture chamber for Ophelia” (31)).

Other deviations from the legend include attention to the traumatic residues of imprisonment on Robben Island in the guise of nightmares and flashbacks; these long-term residues pose a question arising elsewhere in the book about whether imprisonment on Robben Island ever really ended for those who experienced it and had even internalized its conditions. Mostly airbrushed out of the legend, including by Nelson Mandela, are the unspeakable histories of solitary experience under torture; the “feminizing” horror of prison rape, deliberately fomented by the captors; the experience of betrayal or individual breakdown; the horrors of ANC prison camps like Quatro in Angola, the record of which Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, wished to suppress. (Although not a Robben Island prisoner himself and thus not a signatory of the Robben Island Shakespeare, the younger Mbeki makes an in-character appearance in the book as a fan of Shakespeare’s great solitary authoritarians, Coriolanus and Prospero).

Considered as a valuable study of prison writing in South Africa all the way back to Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* (1949), *Hamlet's Dreams* sometimes seems, more than anything else, like a book about pronouns: “I,” “you” “we,” “they (them)”. Prison writing can be plotted on this pronoun grid, marked positions being constituted by a solitary, subjective “I” whose condition is at once

literalized and threatened with dissolution in the prison cell, or, in contrast, by the collective “we” of prisoner solidarity and collective identity: the “we” of Robben Island as distinct from the “I” of women prisoners held in solitary confinement. “We” can also mark a position of antagonism to “them,” as in Hugh Lewin’s recall of the student political world of his youth, yet this difference erodes when Lewin much later meets the informer Adrian Leftwich who turned him in, and perceives Leftwich as an alter ego. Like the poet Jeremy Cronin, Schalkwyk consistently emphasizes the value of the collective, and of forms of communication including music, for prison survival, yet he notes that in some women’s memoirs the sustaining community is also a trial. In Schalkwyk’s account, what Shakespeare’s “imprisoned” Hamlet crucially lacks—or is denied—is access to any collective: there is no “we” in which he can participate.

All of which brings us to the place of *Hamlet* in the book, or to Hamlet in the purgatory of apartheid-era imprisonment. If *Hamlet* is Schalkwyk’s master text, it is so in the first instance because of the Shakespeare-as-inventor-of-modern-subjectivity thesis, familiarly associated with critics like Joel Fineman and Harold Bloom, which Schalkwyk knows to be problematic. Hamlet in particular becomes the prototype of the solitary, “inward” modern subject. Strongly positing and enacting this subjectivity, Hamlet nevertheless finds it void: it proves neither sustaining in the absence of a collective “we” nor can it transcend its confinement. Such is Hamlet’s tragedy. Nevertheless, as Schalkwyk argues, *Hamlet* launches a discourse of subjectivity and of the “I” that becomes canonical in first-person writing, including prison memoirs. It was not necessary, for example, for the educated women writing memoirs of solitary confinement to have been conscious of *Hamlet* for them to have internalized its script of subjectivity and its discontents. Not all prison writing is, however, *Hamlet*-descended: Jeremy Cronin pointedly favors collective pronouns over the lyric “I,” while Caesarina Makhoere “impersonalizes” her confinement to the greatest possible degree, thereby breaking convention and garnering some critical disapproval. Perhaps it is indicative of the collective consciousness of the Robben Island prisoners that only three chose *Hamlet* passages, and not passages in which Hamlet’s subjectivity is strongly articulated.

The title of Schalkwyk’s book draws attention to one curious lacuna in the prison writing discussed, namely the experience and possible significance of dreams (except as post-traumatic nightmares). Something similar applies to Hamlet’s dreams, about which we know nothing except that “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” (3.2.1354), and “what dreams may come” (3.1.1759) give Hamlet pause as he contemplates suicide. (Think, in contrast, of the imprisoned Caliban’s dreams.) The reference to dreaming thus creates an expectation on which the book does not deliver except in the form of a cryptic declaration by Schalkwyk that “we are Hamlet’s dreams” (119). We must make of this what we can, yet even without dreams and the interpretation of dreams, *Hamlet* serves Schalkwyk well as a heuristic for the interpretation of prison writing. Significantly, however, *Hamlet*

gets left behind in the final chapter as Schalkwyk turns to the South Africa of Jacob Zuma, erstwhile Robben Island prisoner.

Zuma is clearly not one of the ANC militants from Robben Island whose distress Schalkwyk records at the enthusiastic embrace of capitalism by former colleagues and by the epidemic of public pillaging that ensued. In the case of Zuma and Schabir Shaik, however, a new, supposedly indigenous, legal rationale began to be produced for what Justice Squires called “a generally corrupt relationship” (127), namely that pay-offs constituted a legitimate form of public activity to which the term “bribery” did not apply. Here, subjectivities are no longer at issue as they are in prison writing, and the template to which Schalkwyk turns is that of *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2. In these plays “reciprocal altruism” is endemic, but it becomes the task of Prince Hal to establish an impersonal public standard as king (in this picture, Zuma becomes the charming Falstaffian rogue). Indigenous claims notwithstanding, Schalkwyk’s point is that “reciprocal altruism” has a long history, while its revival represents a fundamental threat to legality and the orderly public sphere in South Africa. If the newness—or new newness—of South Africa entails a relapse into this oldness, the South African future lies, as Schalkwyk evidently fears, in the past. Or is it legality that is now “old,” everywhere?

III

THE PRISONERS’ PALIMPSEST: ON DAVID SCHALKWYK’S *HAMLET’S DREAMS*

Anston Bosman

In Pretoria Central Prison in 1965, my mother read *Madame Bovary* in Afrikaans. Shortly before her detention, the South African government had been forced to expand the reading material allowed to inmates, and when the warders presented my mother with the newly available options, she picked Flaubert’s novel from the list. An odd choice, one would think, for an activist lawyer whose furthest intention was to lose herself, like Emma, in daydreams of provincial balls and beaux. Except that the choice had little to do with Flaubert’s plot and much more to do with his translator’s language. In fact, van der Merwe’s *Mevrou Bovary* (1948) offered my mother a refresher course in Afrikaans, which she rightly suspected she would need under interrogation. The Special Branch would look to interrogate an Anglophone detainee in Afrikaans, believing that this gave them the upper hand. But since my mother’s knowledge of that language, aided by her prison reading, was far better than she let on, the switch gave her a secret advantage: convincing an adversary of his superiority is the first step toward undermining it. Far from a