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Political Shakespeare, the first half of my title, is of course borrowed from Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's well known 1985 collection, a title which was originally meant to proclaim that, as we read on the back cover, "Shakespeare is, and always was, political." Almost thirty years down the line, *Hamlet's Dreams* and *Reading Revolution*, with their different emphases, registers, and agendas, remind us that what's controversial today, in South Africa and elsewhere, is not so much whether Shakespeare is political, but rather the status of the political itself and what role literature can still play in it—a topic for another time.

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VI

LOVE AND POLITICS

Natasha Distiller

Hamlet's Dreams marks a milestone. It is the kind of book that can only be written at a specific point in someone's career: when the writer's personal investment is interesting to its audience. And this is indeed part of the book's *raison d'être*. Published by Arden, *Hamlet's Dreams* is part of a series based on each writer's "passion" (General Editor's Preface, xiii); David Schalkwyk's professional *gravitas* informs his selection as one of the writers for this series. In his preface, he recounts his first encounter with the Robben Island Shakespeare that eventually enabled *Hamlet's Dreams*. He is able to access the book, he writes, because, "after years of waiting," he has been invited to attend the prestigious International Shakespeare Conference. This book, which marks the many ways he has "arrived," begins with a moment made possible by his "arrival." *Hamlet's Dreams* is also, in some way, a milestone book for South African Shakespeareans. It marks the first time one of us has achieved this level of international recognition. It is an important book, then, for many reasons.

If the book affords the opportunity to share something personal, Schalkwyk takes a risk, and does exactly that. He tells us something about himself, and also seeks to tell us something about Shakespeare, about language, about South Africa, and about how these might all be connected. Schalkwyk takes the familiar idea of Shakespearean appropriation and inflects it differently: with South African subjects, with how “the political nature of even the most private relations” (116) plays out in the mechanisms of language. He adds to how we understand the workings of language and subjectivity, and South African prison writing. And yet, minus the link that is Schalkwyk’s own self, the use of Shakespeare to make these fine points raises in me a familiar discomfort. *Hamlet’s Dreams* is a complex book. It develops the relationship between South Africa’s painful journey, and Shakespeare. In addition, together with a couple of other recent texts discussed by Schalkwyk,⁸ *Hamlet’s Dreams* makes new parts of South Africa available to the Shakespeare archive. It does this even as it also, in its initial chapters, interrogates the meaning of that archive today. And at the same time, in this very complexity, this accurate contradiction, *Hamlet’s Dreams* embodies the problem it articulates. This is less a failure of the book than an inevitable consequence of the subject matter.

To be the book it is, *Hamlet’s Dreams* has to love Shakespeare. David Schalkwyk, like Solomon Plaatje, like Bloke Modisane, and the other South Africans who used Shakespeare to build selves,⁹ is spoken to by the texts, as texts – not as colonial or otherwise coercive constructions. Schalkwyk lays careful groundwork for his method, pointing out the multiple meanings in all inscriptions, and the inevitable contingency of the meaning of signatures, of Shakespeare, and of these South African signatures next to this Shakespeare in the “Robben Island Bible.” Nevertheless, *Hamlet’s Dreams* bespeaks for me that curious double bind we are all in as postcolonial, postmodern Shakespeareans. In order to hold the historical truths that have made us, we must know, as Schalkwyk does, that Shakespeare does not live up to the meaning of his name. The Robben Island Shakespeare, by definition, encodes several oppressive political contexts, including the Eurocentric historical meanings of culture and worth, of self and other, on which the putative universal Bard depends. Add to this Schalkwyk’s fine grasp of the eternal slipperiness of language, and we have a book that perfectly engages with the contingency of Shakespeare’s meaning and of the meaning of Shakespeare. And at the same time, in its ultimate reliance on the texts as the source of resonances for South African life, the traditional power of Shakespeare is inevitably invoked and, on some level, reinscribed. What, in other words, can it mean to be a South African Shakespearean? Where is the place of that name in our country, particularly now? How can one hold what, as I have argued in the past, are examples of how Shakespeare has been owned and remade, and what I am now suggesting feels increasingly like an elite and irrelevant indulgence?

⁸Desai, *Reading Revolution* and Hahn, *The Robben Island Bible*.

⁹Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture*.

One answer is this: Schalkwyk's book offers readings of Shakespeare that also bring to print the lives of men and women otherwise largely unacknowledged by the metropolitan world. This is the technique of a Plaatje: use what is valued to value what is not being seen on other terms. Schalkwyk quotes Plaatje quoting Lear to express the horrors of the 1913 Land Act, to respond to the vignette of a family burying their child, dead of exposure, on the side of a public road. Like Plaatje, however, as *Hamlet's Dreams* makes clear, Schalkwyk's intention is not instrumentalist: "[W]hat Plaatje's turn to Shakespeare at this moment of outrage signals...[is] King Lear's extraordinary combination of the anatomy of a specific political (dis)order and the metaphysics of basic human need" (59). *Hamlet's Dreams* is a labor of love and personal meaning as much as, even before it is, a work of political import.

Schalkwyk concludes by speaking to the difficulty of the task he has undertaken: linking memory, dreams, human suffering, and textual inscriptions, in the ways available to him as a South African man and an English professor. His final words claim the unconscious he has been exploring as his own (159). This framing is one reason *Hamlet's Dreams* is so personal, and one way Schalkwyk enacts its point about the imbrication of personal and political structures.

Since I understand this book as profoundly personal, offered by a scholar who has taken a risk, I want to conclude with another piece of personal perspective. If *Hamlet's Dreams* reveals a David Schalkwyk who comes from somewhere very different to where he is now, who knows from the inside about building a self from Shakespeare's language, who uses what he does best to speak to his moment in history, then it inevitably also leaves something out. What the book cannot capture is David's presence as, and commitment to being, a teacher. As generations of UCT students know, he is as much an actor as an academic, which he writes about in *Hamlet's Dreams*. He brought Shakespeare to thousands of mostly young South Africans, in his dramatic readings, and through his ability to make the historically necessary material come to life. *Hamlet's Dreams* shows us the way he thinks, the way he feels, and the way he writes. I would like to conclude by also paying tribute to the way he teaches.

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