

Method or Madness? The Vicissitudes of “Global Shakespeare”

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To cite this article: Sandra Young (2014) Method or Madness? The Vicissitudes of “Global Shakespeare”, *Safundi*, 15:1, 133-137, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2013.865420](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865420)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865420>



Published online: 21 Feb 2014.



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On the one hand, the prisoners seem to have treated the text as a repository of inspiring quotations. Schalkwyk likens this usage to early modern commonplace, but the analogy is imperfect, since commonplace books typically served as references for individual compilers, whereas the circulation of Venkatrathnam's copy turned its selections and annotations into a kind of coded interaction among the incarcerated. On the other hand, Schalkwyk offers his own contrasting readings of the quotations, and these readings signal the nuances, and frequently the ironies, not just of their original dramatic context but also of their twentieth-century political deployment. The imperative to keep this rhetorical advantage in check underlies a striking anecdote from Schalkwyk's classroom experience, in which his shrewd analysis of a poem about death row inmates is overridden by a student named in that very poem. The survivors of Robben Island in the 1970s are neither unchanged nor immortal, but *Hamlet's Dreams* does them honor by fastening their legacy, and that of readers and writers like them, to ethical and aesthetic debates that continue under the name of Shakespeare—"Full character'd," as Sonnet 122 puts it, "with lasting memory."

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IV

METHOD OR MADNESS? THE VICISSITUDES OF "GLOBAL SHAKESPEARE"

Sandra Young

David Schalkwyk's exploration of the imaginative place of Shakespeare in prison and of imprisonment in Shakespeare is more than a venture into global Shakespeare, though at first it might seem to be exactly that. In fact, Schalkwyk's "musings" (as he puts it) on the resonances of the "Robben Island Shakespeare" confront a new generation of Shakespearean scholars with a mode of inquiry that is surprising, almost to the point of irreverence, but penetrating, even so. Under Schalkwyk's pen, the Robben Island prison becomes as much a site for imagining a richly diverse, contemporary Shakespeare as the other way round, though in truth his study privileges neither and goes beyond both.

Schalkwyk's *mélange* of thoughtful investigations into the apartheid prison, into the perplexities of coming of age under apartheid, and into Hamlet's discomfiting

reflections on how to be, is far-reaching. It confronts us with the potentialities and the duplicities of the language of the self more startlingly than might have been possible either in scholarship that celebrates a localized Shakespeare, where “home” is readily distinguishable from “elsewhere,” or a supposedly “universal” Shakespeare, which reduces all difference to what is most familiar. His methodological innovations are disarming: Schalkwyk invites us to imagine a conversation between contexts that are wildly diverse in respect of history, geography, and cultural politics, only to find new possibilities in each context for conceptualizing the struggle to find an “I” with which to articulate most truly. Whether method or madness, these innovations grant us empathic insight into aspects of the human, without making unjustified claims or silent assumptions in respect of the “universal.” Whether or not it was Schalkwyk’s endeavor, *Hamlet's Dreams* presents a new set of methodological possibilities for global Shakespeare.

Hamlet's Dreams is perfectly located within the Arden *Shakespeare Now!* series, which refreshingly claims the latitude of the “now” to engage with Shakespeare’s work in contexts well beyond what Shakespeare himself could have imagined, and even beyond the ways more mainstream scholarship tends to treat his cultural legacy. As the general editors explain, the informing rubric privileges the experience of “encounter,” with its “often surprising contextualizing imperatives” (viii). The idea that Shakespeare’s value was felt even in the space of the Robben Island prison among inmates now celebrated as figures of liberty and personal courage, and by Nelson Mandela himself, is compelling: Shakespeare seems to gain a new prescience. But Schalkwyk does not make a claim here for Shakespeare’s extraordinariness in being able to speak into even this dry land. He describes himself as “a Shakespearean averse to the exaggeration of Shakespeare’s influence or importance” (14) and it is immediately evident that the thrill he describes on first paging through the volume has to do with the feeling of connecting, across time, with “the people who had saved my country,” people whose presence is felt in the signatures themselves and in the still fragrant Eucalyptus leaves. And yet, Shakespeare is a key element within this imaginative mix, allowing Schalkwyk to probe aspects of the human that have a far-reaching resonance.

The difficulty with studies of what has come to be called “global Shakespeare” is that, for all the apparent openness thematically to the ways Shakespeare has come to be owned and appropriated in a myriad of diverse contexts across the globe, the field has yet to produce the kinds of innovations, methodologically, that allow for transformative cultural politics. A global Shakespeare, who has traveled far across time and place to engage historical and cultural contexts the playwright himself could not have imagined, is arguably still wrapped up in an affirmation of the privileged partner, rather than the qualifying descriptor, in “global Shakespeare,” whether “global Shakespeare” is imagined as a totality or as multiply

local. The towering figure of the playwright gains texture, interest, and an uncanny relevance as he travels, but he is also potentially unhinged and complicated by his encounters.³ Celebration of a more global Shakespeare is not necessarily as radical a move as it might appear at first blush, as some uncompromising postcolonial scholars have recognized. For example, Ania Loomba dismisses the “simplistic ‘all is hybrid and multicultural’ argument” as having little merit for a new cultural politics.⁴ If postcolonial Shakespeareans are to explore the imaginative place of Shakespeare (in South Africa and elsewhere) more meaningfully, we would need to do more than celebrate a more diverse and wider dissemination of Shakespeare and the transformations this dissemination has produced for Stratford and its “elsewhere.” But what kind of methodology might this call for? A new set of orthodoxies would not be of much use.

For the idea of a “Robben Island Shakespeare” not to be misread simply as reaffirming Shakespeare’s uncanny immortality, or the cultural politics of the forward-thinking critic, it needs to do something quite different, methodologically. What Schalkwyk offers us is an opportunity to think our way into lives and struggles of the imprisoned anti-apartheid activists and, simultaneously, to deepen our encounter with Shakespeare’s texts, but without the complacency that comes with scholarly certainty. To begin with, he does this by imagining the prisoners’ readings and their (probable) investments in the plays. This attempted link is inevitably speculative, as Schalkwyk is well aware. Shakespeare, it turns out, is a device for imagining our way in. But can we credit it? The pairings work well, at times, as opportunities to reflect on the preoccupations and inner convictions of the signatories. At other times the speculative nature of the exercise is too conspicuous to allow oneself to be swept along without catching oneself at play.

Certainly, one may attribute a sense of identification on the basis of Mandela’s choice of Julius Caesar, or perceive an acknowledgement of longing from even so uncompromising a revolutionary as Govan Mbeki in his choice of Orsino’s opening to *Twelfth Night*. But in some cases the pairings have to be conjured from ideas about how a prisoner “might have responded” to an unmarked passage or speculations about which passage might have been chosen by a prisoner who was not present at the time Sonny Venkatrathnam was gathering signatures. There were moments when the discussion seemed intrusively speculative and unrecognizable as ‘scholarship’.

Schalkwyk’s endeavor to extend the conversation between Shakespeare and the Robben Island prisoners does not constitute orthodox or at least predictable scholarship. Instead of obtuse academic prose or impersonal exegesis, readers might encounter a sense of play in these conjectures and spoken intuitions. Schalkwyk is able to find compelling affinities between a deeply felt Shakespeare and narratives of detention under apartheid, regardless of the prisoners’ own sensibilities and knowledge of Shakespeare: “I would like to think that Isaac might have sympathized with Edgar as Poor Tom” in *King Lear* (55) and, later, “Isaac’s account of the body as the

³I have made a similar argument more fully in Young, “Shakespeare without Borders.”

⁴Loomba, *Review*, 269–70.

passive measure of time in isolation is comparable to Richard's meditation on the same phenomenon" in *Richard II* (63). These are conjectures for, indeed, as Schalkwyk acknowledges, "how can we know how these readers viewed the play[s]?" (43).

Schalkwyk's acknowledgement of this impossibility, however, permits his readers a view into his own fallible subject position, as a researcher whose inquiry cannot produce a definitive conclusion and as a reader whose personal investments are apparent. Ethically alert but not quite heroic, the "I" of this text is a fellow traveler, one who grants the reader a glimpse into his own failures and yearnings, even as he investigates his subjects' attempts at self-representation and contemplates what this means for an understanding of the language of the self. As it turns out, the idiosyncratic coupling of these very different scenes of articulation is what enables penetrating observations.

Hamlet leads us to contemplate where "the true self" lies hid (90). However, through Schalkwyk's study we begin to recognize that Hamlet's inner being is not necessarily "a real essence" or even "a refuge;" it can amount to a kind of "prison" (92). We see this the more clearly because we have just been contemplating the painful "instability and intractability of selfhood" in Breyten Breytenbach's prison writing and the vicissitudes of communality in the accounts of Hugh Lewin, Moses Dlamini, and Michael Dingake (85).

Schalkwyk's innovation in reading the apartheid prison in tandem with Hamlet's Denmark exposes the treachery of the interior life and the paradox of the self-in-community. Both scenes of articulation, Denmark and South Africa, are tested as a result of being considered together: Hamlet's celebrated interiority and the communality of democratic South Africa are rendered all the more complex. This "global" conversation achieves significantly more than a celebration of Shakespeare's dissemination and even his transformation could have done. Hamlet's turn inward is the result of "a corrosive set of social relations" (95). Schalkwyk's reading of Hugh Lewin's prison memoir takes us well beyond the "platitude" of the new nation, which affirms that "I" am brought into being through my relationship with the "you" of my community. Lewin's memoir, Schalkwyk argues, confronts us with the fragility of a "we" constituted under the pressure of an embattled society's impositions: "the ethical security offered by a relatively stable communality—we—is always endangered" (146).

The signatures thus become an occasion for meditations on the nature of being human in society, meditations that are distilled from conditions that place the self under intolerable pressure. We are left with a deeper sense of the difficulty of finding a position from which to speak, whether living in prison under apartheid or in political and psychic isolation within the perverse polity of Hamlet's Denmark, or after having emerged from the confusion of a South African childhood, privileged but perturbed by apartheid's inhumanity.

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V

POLITICAL SHAKESPEARE IN THE ANTIPODES

Pier Paolo Frassinelli

Shakespeare has made something of a comeback in South Africa of late. Perhaps not in the theater, where his presence continues to be negligible, marginalized by the need to find new voices and stories that speak more immediately to the challenges and uncertainties of the present. Probably also not in education, where the Twitter and Mxit generation is bound to find his long, sustained attention-requiring speeches puzzling and unapproachable. But the three books on Shakespeare and South Africa that have recently appeared in quick succession represent a minor event for local literary studies. In 2012, we had Distiller's *Shakespeare and the Coconuts: On Post-apartheid South African Culture*, which claims for Shakespeare an enduring if (as the title suggests) unflattering presence in the construction of South African cultural identities and formations. In 2013, it was the turn of Desai's *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare in Robben Island*, a series of profiles of the detainees of apartheid's most famous prison, focusing on the transformative role played by reading and literature during their imprisonment; and most recently of Schalkwyk's *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare*. Both Desai's and Schalkwyk's books focus on the so-called Robben Island Shakespeare, also known as the Robben Island Bible, the copy of *The Alexander Text of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare* that inmate Sonny Venkatrathnam managed to pass on to fellow political prisoners, who signed their favorite passages from the text, and that would eventually make its way to major Shakespeare exhibitions in Stratford-upon-Avon and at the British Library.

Hamlet's Dreams is part of a series, *Shakespeare Now!*, whose précis invites contributors to explore the singularity of the aesthetic experience embodied by the critic's encounter with Shakespeare: "We begin with the passions of the critic as they are forged and explored in Shakespeare" (viii). And it is interesting that an eminently politicized scene of reading, such as the one explored by Schalkwyk, should appear in a volume prefaced by the editors' appeal to give voice to the