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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

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“aesthetic immediacy” (viii) of the reader’s personal experience of Shakespeare’s works. It is not inapposite though, for *Hamlet's Dreams* tells the story of many individual encounters with Shakespeare, whose character, given the time and space in which they took place, was indeed unavoidably political, but was also uniquely personal. What do the signatures of the prisoners who put their names next to selected passages from Shakespeare’s *Complete Works*, which presumably gave expressions to their “desires, preoccupations or circumstances” (21), represent if not the mark of their singular presence as it is signified by the words from the text they signed? Yet the signature, as Schalkwyk reminds us, mediates the signee’s presence through the impersonal system of language. It is an inscription whose simultaneous evocation and distancing of individual presence is in this case redoubled by the fact that what is undersigned are words written by someone else four hundred years before; not to mention that in the dramatic world they inhabit, these words in fact belong to the individual characters that populate the plays.

But there is more to this play of presence and absence, of ghostly appearances lurking behind the inscriptions of someone else’s words. For in *Hamlet's Dreams* the signatures are reinscribed with yet another “I”, which is the one of the critic who subjects them to critical interpretation. Schalkwyk, who foregrounds these complexities right from the outset, turns them into an opportunity for reading Venkatrathnam’s copy of the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare* as a palimpsestic text through which he can enter into a dialog with the words on the page, the individuals who signed them, and the circumstances surrounding the inscription. He activates this conversation by inserting his own biography into the text. The story he tells thus starts with his own discovery of the Robben Island Shakespeare, which in turn prompts memories of his earlier encounters with Shakespeare, first in rural Orange Free State, where he grew up, and then as a university student and literature professor. This is so that the circumstances of the final inscription—that of the Shakespearean scholar interpreting the signed lines and wondering about the kind of textual readings that prompted the choice of the unsurprising as well as the less obvious passages—are properly accounted for.

It was news, he notes, that prisoners most avidly read when they managed to get any, not Shakespeare or Dickens. And even when Shakespeare was read, it was not necessarily in the way professional Shakespeareans would like him to be read: not “for the dialogical complexity of situated interactions, but rather cherry picked for isolated instances of folk wisdom” (17). Think of Macbeth’s monologue —“Out, out brief candle/Life’s but a walking shadow”—as a reminder that life is short and one must seize the day when it comes. As Schalkwyk notes on a number of occasions (including his comments on Nelson Mandela’s choice of Caesar’s words “Cowards die many times before their deaths/The valiant never taste of death but once”), the inmates’ choices of lines often seem to indicate that little or no attention was paid to the dramatic context of the signed speeches (in Mandela’s case suggested by the selection of words spoken by a “would-be tyrant” (65)). Elsewhere, though, as with inmate Billy Nair’s signing of Caliban’s claim to the island of which he had been dispossessed (“This island’s mine, by Sycorax my

mother,/Which thou tak'st from me"), the signature lends itself to interpretation as a prescient anticipation of the political readings that would later come to play a crucial role in revolutionizing the landscape of Shakespeare criticism.

Schalkwyk's own choice of title, *Hamlet's Dreams*, as well as the personal reminiscences scattered throughout the book, are meant to expand the immediate circumstances recalled by the Robben Island Shakespeare and to highlight the broader context from which it emerged: the prison that the whole of South Africa, like Hamlet's Denmark, had become under apartheid. Schalkwyk has many insightful and often moving things to say about the constitution and erasure of the self under conditions of imprisonment and its relation to the formation of a collective subjectivity rooted in political desires and commitments. But as I have no space here to do justice to the whole book, I want to end with Schalkwyk's fast-forwarding to the present in the last chapter. Titled "Friendship and Struggle", it zooms in on the "generally corrupt relationship," in the words of Justice Hilary Squires, between current South African President and former Robben Island prisoner Jacob Zuma and Schabir Shaik. This is a manifestation—one of many—of the corruption that has become one of the most unpalatable traits of the country's ruling elite. The friendship is read through the lens of the *Henry IV* plays, where Zuma and Shaik stand in for Prince Hal and Falstaff—or the other way round, for it is Zuma, with his "pseudo-youthful lifestyle of untrammelled sexuality and charming roguishness" (138), who is the more Falstaffian of the two.

Comparing his book with *Reading Revolution* in the author's preface, Schalkwyk announces that his will also end with "the question of South Africa's future" (xvii). But, like Godot, the future never comes. Schalkwyk is too subtle and cautious a reader of Shakespeare to extrapolate directly from his works political lessons for the present. Not so Ashwin Desai, who has no qualms about putting Shakespeare's words into the service of the political narrative that closes his account ("The Sixth Act?"). This is a narrative that starts in epic mode, with "much anticipation among the masses that the leaders of the new social order would devote themselves to redressing the evil of apartheid and the reconstruction and development of a New South Africa" ("So that distribution should undo excess/And each man have enough", to quote one of Desai's chosen passages), and culminates with tragedy and betrayal.<sup>5</sup> National liberation and redistribution give way to the diktats of big business, transnational economic forces, and neoliberal ideology, which have been translated into policy by revolutionaries turned technocrats and state functionaries caught in "Shakespearean plots for power." The future here lies in the inevitable pending implosion, "because the present arrangements are unsustainable and the memories of what was promised are still raw."<sup>6</sup> This is all true, I believe, but in this case it would have been good to have a more nuanced discussion of the relationship between literature and politics or the complexities of tragedy as a political genre.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Desai, *Reading Revolution*, 116.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 118, 120.

<sup>7</sup>See for instance Toscano's recent article "Politics in a Tragic Key".

*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.