

Reading Hamlet's Dreams as Theory

Daniel Roux

To cite this article: Daniel Roux (2014) Reading Hamlet's Dreams as Theory, *Safundi*, 15:1, 123-126, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2013.865413](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865413)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2013.865413>



Published online: 21 Feb 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 42



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A Roundtable on David Schalkwyk's *Hamlet's Dreams*

Daniel Roux, Jonathan Crewe, Anston Bosman, Sandra Young, Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Natasha Distiller

Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare

David Schalkwyk

London, Bloomsbury, 2013, xvi + 191 pp. (pbk) 978-1441129284 I

I

READING *HAMLET'S DREAMS* AS THEORY

Daniel Roux

David Schalkwyk's recently published *Hamlet's Dreams* is one of two recent book-length responses to the so-called Robben Island Shakespeare; the other is Desai's *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* (2012). The materialization of the copy of *The Alexander Text of the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, complete with the signatures of thirty-four high-profile apartheid-era political prisoners next to their favorite passages, was something like an academic version of a miracle for South African Shakespeare scholars, forever haunted by the prospect of devoting their time and energy to an elitist and somewhat remote English literary canon while their country threatens to erupt in flames around them. Here was an extraordinary document that yoked the names of our key freedom fighters to Shakespeare's collected works, suggesting rich new avenues for thinking about the ways in which Shakespeare has become entangled with a history of resistance against colonial and apartheid oppression, and to extend our understanding of what a "postcolonial Shakespeare" might look like. The Robben Island Shakespeare extended a beguiling invitation, perhaps even an overwhelming one, to think again about the anthropology of literary circulation, about the peculiar power of reading, and about what the name Shakespeare means—and does—in the modern world.

Schalkwyk's book responds to this invitation in an almost autobiographical way: we follow Schalkwyk from his childhood in the mine belt of the Orange Free State, to his life as a student, to his first teaching position, to Nash House in

Correspondence to: Daniel Roux, Department of English, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. Email: droux@sun.ac.za

Stratford-upon-Avon, to the Folger Library in Washington. It is a profoundly personal, deceptively informal book by one of the most interesting Early Modern scholars working in the field today, and it departs from certain scholarly conventions in ways that turn out to be richly rewarding. It also offers, in a low-key way, a beguiling theory of literature and a meditation on the production of literary value that is much larger than its subject matter, and expands and refines aspects of Schalkwyk's earlier scholarly critique of the neo-Saussurean paradigm in his book *Literature and the Touch of the Real* (2004). I would like to focus in a systematic way on what I find the most interesting theoretical insights offered by *Hamlet's Dreams*: insights that do not announce themselves in any schematic way, because they are simply put to work in the argument without amplification.

First of all, Schalkwyk thinks very carefully about the ways in which literary texts enter lives, resonate with and reflect experience, and become reappropriated and altered in the service of a wide range of social practices. The book stands out for the way it refuses to generalize about the value and use of "the literary," regarding it instead as a form of social energy that expresses itself in unpredictable, messy, and contingent ways. For a boy growing up in a rural Afrikaans Calvinist town under apartheid, Shakespeare offers an alternative world: not just the world created by the plays, but also the global world of letters that they synecdochally represent as objects on a bookshelf. For a generation of African intellectuals coming through mission schools like Healdtown in the Eastern Cape, Shakespeare presents a reservoir of quotations that can be used almost formulaically to decorate and clinch a debate. On Robben Island, Shakespeare becomes important because there are so few books in prison: its value derives at least partially from a penal logic of scarcity and deprivation. For Thabo Mbeki, *Coriolanus* represents the values of a revolutionary not only because Mbeki sees a reflection of his own character in the play's eponymous hero, but also because of trends in Shakespeare scholarship in the Soviet Union, where Mbeki was a student in the 1970s. Many prisoners forget that they ever signed their name in the book, or dismiss it as irrelevant. The Robben Island Shakespeare stands at the center of these radically conditional and profoundly different ways of thinking about and using literature.

Second, Schalkwyk is interested in books as *things*. On Robben Island, Shakespeare was a shared resource because there was literally only one copy belonging to Sonny Venkatratham, who persuaded the warders that it was a religious Hindu text. The fact that it had to be shared changed the way it was read. The actual 1970 copy of the Collected Works with its signatures becomes an enchanted and protected object in the British Library exhibition in 2012, where it plays its own role in the ideologically charged business of "universalizing" Shakespeare. For the young Schalkwyk, Shakespeare comes alive through the long-playing records of a friend's mother: the tactility of the red, blue, and yellow inner sleeves is inseparable from playing at being grown-up and worldly. The Venkatratham Shakespeare is displayed open on the page with Nelson Mandela's signature: it takes Schalkwyk years to get permission to look through the whole book. The

physical signatures in the book belie the claim of some former Robben Island inmates that they never signed their name to the text: the signatures become a curious material trace of a past that has been forgotten or remade. For Schalkwyk, to ask questions about literature is also to pay attention to the quotidian history of literature as an object that passes from hand to hand: the literary object is defined and altered by the signatures that it accrues, the spaces that it inhabits, what is on display and what is hidden.

Third—and this is Schalkwyk’s most risky and speculative move—*Hamlet’s Dreams* offers a sustained comparison between life under apartheid and the Early Modern world of Shakespeare’s plays. It does this in two ways: it suggests that Shakespeare offers a literary architecture for building interior worlds—indeed, the same logic that culminated in the idea of a Benthamite penitentiary and eventually Robben Island in twentieth-century South Africa subtends the notion of a self as it emerged in Shakespeare’s time. Here Schalkwyk moves beyond biographizing the political prisoners through the window of the passages that they selected to a more ambitious attempt to demonstrate how the apparently widely separated world of the South African prison and Elizabethan England are genealogically intertwined. Schalkwyk’s keen historicist eye also recuperates something of the specificity of Shakespeare’s world that a great deal of modern Shakespeare criticism tends to overlook or generalize under terms such as “desire,” “Othering,” and so on. Schalkwyk is attentive to the complex taxonomies of service, patronage, and friendship that defined day-to-day life in Elizabethan England. *Hamlet’s Dreams* revives these structures, with the particular obligations, desires, frustrations, and advantages that they engender and reflect, in order to suggest that they retain explanatory power in a context where Western modernity enjoys an ambiguous and contested status. In other words, Schalkwyk takes what is *strange* about Shakespeare’s world in order to understand what is strange about ours.

Fourth, while scrupulously avoiding any idea of Shakespeare as a writer of universal truths, Schalkwyk suggests that the study of literature is not merely about *critique*—the anxious search for contradictions, symptoms, contextual markers, intertexts, and discursive sleights of hand that dominates literary studies at the current time. *Hamlet’s Dreams* proceeds from the simple but controversial idea that it is possible to learn something from Shakespeare—indeed that Shakespeare was an important and vibrant thinker who had something valuable to share. Schalkwyk does not bracket off the capacity of a literary work to enchant and enrich its readers, but understands this capacity as fundamental to any work of art.

There is no doubt that *Hamlet’s Dreams* tells us a lot about the particular history of Shakespeare in South Africa, about life under apartheid, about prisons, and about Elizabethan England. But for me its principal value lies in the powerful model that Schalkwyk establishes in this book for considering the nature of “the literary” itself.

REFERENCES

- Desai, Ashwin. *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island*. Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2012.
- Schalkwyk, David. *Literature and the Touch of the Real*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004.

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

Correspondence to: Jonathan Crewe, Leon Black Professor of Shakespearean Studies, Departments of English and Comparative Literature, Dartmouth College, USA. Email: Jonathan.V.Crewe@dartmouth.edu

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.