

South Africa in Shakespeare's "wide and universal theatre"

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Ashwin Desai. *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island*. Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2012.

David Schalkwyk. *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare*. London: Arden/Bloomsbury, 2013.

Chris Thurman (ed). *South African Essays on 'Universal' Shakespeare*. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.

Sonny Venkatrathnam (jailed on Robben Island for his membership of the African People's Democratic Union of South Africa) held on to a complete Shakespeare, once claiming it was his 'Bible' and covering it in Diwali greeting cards. Sonny circulated this book through the cells and had it signed by 32 other prisoners in the margins next to their choice of lines. The book, a 1971 printing of the Alexander edition, has now come to be called The Robben Island Shakespeare (also The Robben Island Bible). It featured in a British Museum exhibition, *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, in 2012. At a service in Westminster Abbey on 3 March 2014 celebrating Nelson Mandela's life and work, Mandela's chosen lines, from *Julius Caesar*, were read by Jonty Driver:

Cowards die many times before their deaths:
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

(*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.32-37)

The inside back-cover of the order of service is illustrated with a photograph of "The Robben Island 'Bible', signed by Nelson Mandela", open at this spot. Sonny Venkatrathnam has given a powerful South African talisman to the global imaginary.

The title of Ashwin Desai's *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* is ambiguous, even equivocal, apart from the many meanings of 'Shakespeare'. Is the implication that to read Shakespeare on Robben Island is to study (as at university) revolution? Would Shakespeare be sympathetic to the revolutionaries imprisoned on Robben Island? *Reading Revolution* tells one story of the books, the debates and the lessons of the 'University of Makana'.¹ This account of a courageous and humane effort which continued South Africa's struggle in conditions of deprivation and isolation, sustaining a vision of an alternative to apartheid, is based on a series of interviews conducted in 2011 with eight graduates of Robben

1. Some of the material on *Reading Revolution* in the following paragraphs first appeared in a review by the same author in *African Studies Quarterly* 13.4 (2013): 103-104. I also wish to thank Brian Pearce and Matthew Hahn for their help with this essay.

Island, chosen to cut across political divides and the prison hierarchy of ‘single’ and ‘general’ sections: Sonny Venkatrathnam himself, Mzwandile Mdingi (African National Congress), Ahmed Kathrada (Indian Congress / ANC alliance), Marcus Solomon (National Liberation Front / Non-European Unity Movement), Sizakele Thomson Gazo (Pan African Congress and its military wing, Poqo), Monde Colin Mkunqwane (ANC and its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe), Sedick Isaacs (NEUM / PAC), Stone Phumulele Sizani (South African Student Movement – Sizani was a post-1976 prisoner) and Neville Edward Alexander (Teachers’ League of South Africa / NEUM / Yu Chi Chan Club) who, sadly, passed away last year. This sequence of names – not all recognisable, perhaps, or with the ring of Tambo, Mandela and Sisulu – gives the work its structure, with a chapter being devoted to the Island experience of each of these eight prisoners.

Desai’s central research approach relies “on open-ended questions focused on developing life-histories”.² The interviewees’ answers are woven into a narrative and we are not given all the questions, but each of the central chapters achieves a convincing character portrait and political trajectory, enlivened by personal anecdote, cultural variety and individual idiom, ingenuity and inventiveness. Professor Desai’s preface gives an account of the prisoners’ struggle for books and newspapers, stationery and study time, to organise what Sedick Isaacs called the “mutual teaching community”, and to continue their formal studies. The centrepiece of the book, as it may have been of Desai’s questions, is Shakespeare; but we encounter a wide range of authors, from the spectrum of the Western canon, engaged with by powerful imaginations seeking to overthrow one of European colonialism’s (last?) outposts: Tolstoy, Dickens, Zola, Jack London. And there are explicit documents of resistance: Marx, Trotsky, Fanon. Engels is allowed in by a warder because *Engels* in Afrikaans means “English”. But there are gentler and more intimate moments: for example, in the correspondence between Ahmed Kathrada and Zuleika Mayat, author of *Nanima’s Chest* (a book on Indian antique costume) and *Indian Delights* (a book of recipes). The prisoners recall their debates over books, over politics and over the relationship between the two.

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David Schalkwyk’s project is “to make some sense of the Robben Island Shakespeare and its signatures”. It is hard to imagine a scholar better fitted for the task. Having been for twenty years a student of both Shakespeare and South African prison writing, he had always kept these two interests apart until in 2006 he came across Venkatrathnam’s ‘Bible’ in Stratford-on-Avon, where it was the last display in an exhibition called *Shakespeare – The Complete Works*. That he was attending the Stratford International Shakespeare Conference enabled Schalkwyk to take a closer look, and a helpful museum guard gave him “a list of all the gentlemen who signed the book”. This “conjunction of Shakespeare and the South African prison at an exhibition in England” inspired Schalkwyk’s inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town and eventually, with the help of colleagues who are generously acknowledged, led to this fascinating book.

Unlike Desai, Schalkwyk did not himself interview Robben Island graduates (the two writers also “diverge in analytical perspective”), but he was given access to the extensive interviews conducted by Matthew Hahn, a dramatist and theatre artist whose play *The Robben Island Bible* celebrates and memorialises the prisoners’ Shakespeare. *Hamlet’s Dreams* takes its structure not from a sequence of individual biographies but from the Shakespeare choices of the 34 prisoners who signed the Bible, raising a range of philosophical and ethical questions and calling on the experience and memoirs of a number of South African political prisoners besides the signatories. The argument is underwritten by a sub-plot which gives an account on the one hand of Schalkwyk’s South African history – his awareness of, implication in and resistance to apartheid – and, on the other, the history of his acquaintance with Shakespeare, at home, at school, on the stage, at the lectern and in the seminar room. Both strands of the story testify to the writer as an observer and a scholar on the *qui vive*.

2. Unacknowledged quotations are from the works under review.

Recalling his first encounter with the theatre (*Twelfth Night* at boarding school when he was nine), Schalkwyk ponders, in a moment rich with implication for the prisoners whose lives he is exploring, that the concept of home “has very little secure place in the plays”. It seems that this sense of the *Heimlich* came with a growing absorption of Shakespeare. There is an engaging account of study and performance as a student at Stellenbosch, which led to involvement in an absurdist political demonstration in the streets of Cape Town. The unpredictable crowd reactions seem to suggest the essential sense and goodness of ordinary people in everyday life. Schalkwyk knew sooner about Shakespeare than about Robben Island, but growing political awareness leads him to ask what part Shakespeare played in the process that led South Africa “to free elections and non-racial democracy”.

There are reasons to question grand claims for Shakespeare as a ‘common text’ for the prisoners: such claims may simply be an automatic acceptance of Shakespearean universality. Some evidence suggests rather that the works were a rhetorical resource, applied poetry, and a signature a gesture of solidarity; the Robben Island Bible may be evidence of “cherry-picking” quotations rather than deep engagement with a play as re-interpreted within the prison walls. Looked back on in the published memoirs, from many of which it is absent, Sonny’s Shakespeare is “something of a blank ... a represented presence that has been forgotten, transformed, removed and now returned in unpredictable ways”: to be, one might add, exploited, marketed, displayed. For many memoirists their embodiments as signatories are “shadows” of their post-apartheid selves and their signatures have become, Schalkwyk suggests, “a form of collective and individual unconscious”. Robben Island, now a World Heritage Site, has undergone a similar regression, its post-Sharpeville history having displaced the longer story of its imprisonment of slaves and kings (by the VOC), of Makana (the British), predation on whales, the detention of animals in quarantine and coastal defence. For some of the detainees, the Island itself is today unrecognisable.

In Schalkwyk’s account Robben Island tells two stories: one of “brutality, hardship and indignity”, in which the very presence of communal-cell prisoners was manipulated to horrify the politicals (apartheid, a system based on race, exploiting class to demean its opponents); the other of “solidarity and comradeship”, of “a grand project of universal education” for political and non-political alike. While all seem to testify to the truth of the first narrative, there are dissenting voices on the second: “There is no single Robben Island.” Nor is there a single Shakespeare. For Sonny Venkathratnam, the first to sign his own book, Shakespeare “uniquely represents the universal man”. Kwedi Mkalipi of the PAC signed up for Puck’s epilogue, but after his release rejected that choice and went for Lady Macbeth’s “All the perfumes of Arabia...”, glossing the lines to say that “nothing could ever purify this system of apartheid”. Eddie Daniels, who came in illiterate and left with two degrees, later embraced “the beating emptiness of nihilism” in Macbeth’s “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...”.

Reading the prisoners’ choices from Shakespeare in the light of their history on the island and their post-release interviews and memoirs, Schalkwyk brings out the range of personalities and codes involved. His argument moves partly associatively and partly schematically. Three prisoners signed for *As You Like It*. Sandi Sijake chose Orlando’s opening complaint to Adam, a choice that highlights the comedy’s treatment of exile, arbitrary exercise of power, familial obligation and access to land – all vivid in both Shakespeare’s England and apartheid South Africa. Mobbs Gqirana chose the Duke’s “Sweet are the uses of adversity”, evoking the struggle solidarity of the Island exiles. J.B. Vusani chose Jacques’s “The Seven Ages of Man”, the conclusion of which recalls the nihilism of Macbeth.

The shadowed pastoral of Arden leads pointedly to the dark anti-pastoral of the heath. Three Islanders signed for *King Lear*: two of them, Justice Mpanza and Mohamad Essop, chose Edgar’s closing speech, in which the legacy of tragedy seems to be emotional honesty rather than customary obligation. (Mpanza’s experience of the tactical violence of guerrilla warfare leads Schalkwyk to ask what a member of MK would make of Henry V’s order “Then every soldier kill his prisoners”.) Later the argument returns to *Lear*. Speculating on what Sadiq Isaacs – who did not sign the Bible – may have chosen, Schalkwyk asks if he might have

sympathised with Kent in the stocks, or Edgar as Poor Tom, or with Lear's recognition that "our basest beggars are in poorest things superfluous", which leads to the question "What might this mean in what we call real life?" The answer comes in the writer's account of how he answered a request for help in the segregated suburbs of Johannesburg in the 1980s.

Chapter One ends with a rich answer to another question: "To whom did Robben Island belong?" By marking Caliban's claim "This Island's mine, by Sycorax my mother", Billy Nair spoke for his fellow-prisoners and all South Africans. As Schalkwyk goes on to say, he also "anticipated a generation of Shakespearean criticism and scholarship".

At UCT in the early 1990s Schalkwyk discovered that one of the condemned prisoners celebrated in Jeremy Cronin's poem "Death Row", David Moise, was a member of the class. This confirmation of the veracity of the poet, a near-miraculous epiphany of survival and continuity, leads into a complex discussion of the ideas of identity and community in prison and at large. Evelina de Bruin, one of the Upington 14, also spent months in a condemned cell, but alone, denied all community. Here Schalkwyk contrasts the lyrical *I* with the dramatic *We* and calls on the poetry and prison memoirs of Dennis Brutus, James Matthews, Hugh Lewin and Breyten Breytenbach – non-Island political prisoners – works which are richly read alongside *Hamlet*, whose "Denmark's a prison". Apartheid made imprisonment "the lived condition of the majority of South Africans" and Robben Island was an iconic embodiment of a socio-political sadism which "is designed to punish the soul or the mind as much as it does the body". Hamlet, in Schalkwyk's account, could speak for many prisoners, as he "stands ... exposed to himself, stripped of the very interiority that he wants to preserve as his true being". While any sense of identity relies on community, the I on the We, there is also a *burden* of We, a "complacent solidarity" to beware of. Schalkwyk cites women prisoners – Jean Middleton, Ruth First, Emma Mashinini and Cesarena Kona Makhoere – whose isolation involved intense deprivation of identity. Makhoere was of the 1976 generation and mounted a determined campaign of non-cooperation, denying even the community assumed by her captors. These women's experiences suggest the historical privileging of Robben Island and male incarceration. Amongst the men in the common cells, the status of "wyfie" embodies the masculinist assumption "that submissiveness and dependence [brutally] enforced by sexual violation" come naturally to women.

Hamlet is again central to Schalkwyk's closing chapter, "Friendship and Struggle". Saths Cooper, a controversial young Black Consciousness activist, chose the prince's lines on the drunkenness of his uncle and his countrymen, reflecting later in his interview with Matthew Hahn on the decline of struggle values in post-apartheid South Africa that Hamlet's lines speak to the "crass power, personalized aggrandisement and everything that is corrupt in human nature that makes us part of the rest of the world". Cooper's memory is that imprisonment "brought out [more] often the worst in us than the best"; Barbara Hogan's that it created community of commitment and solidarity, but a closed community, bound by a kind of seizure. Schalkwyk remarks that none of the signatories marked a reference to or image of friendship, a topic which he explores in *Hamlet*, positing two ideas of friendship: the Aristotelian, the basis of the polis, and the early modern idea of friendship as credit. Despite Hamlet's protestation, the former is impossible for the imprisoned prince, as it seems to have become for Mandela: the latter, argued for in *Henry IV* by the rebels, the king's erstwhile comrades, as it is by Falstaff, Shallow and Davy, re-emerges in the Zuma-Schaik connection ("a generally corrupt relationship" or "reciprocal altruism"?) and may be endemic in post-apartheid South Africa. Schalkwyk draws a distinction between Zuma, educated from illiteracy in prison but not one of the elite asked to sign the Bible, and Thabo Mbeki, the Sussex graduate and connoisseur, not imprisoned and therefore not a signatory either, but a ready quoter and eccentric reader of Shakespeare, strangely identifying himself with both Prospero and Coriolanus. South Africa's three elected post-apartheid presidents are thus brought under the Shakespearean glass.

"Solidarity is not friendship", nor does friendship necessarily guarantee solidarity, as Schalkwyk shows in his final (just and sympathetic) focus on the experience of Hugh Lewin, convicted and jailed on the testimony of his friends. The desperate erosion of identity by

imprisonment, torture and deprivation is compounded even in the conciliatory processes of post-apartheid South Africa. In the course of sittings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, on which he served, when Lewin met up with the security agent who had tortured him in prison, the policeman managed to insinuate – contrary to Lewin’s memory – that he, Lewin, had betrayed his betrayer. As Lewin said, “It is not a question of forgiveness, it is a question of knowing.” No wonder he advises his reader “treat it as fiction”.

Early on Schalkwyk asks the question “What does it mean to sign one’s name? What does it mean to mark the words of another with ... a name that is indubitably one’s own?” He closes his book with a meditation on the sonnet choices of Neville Alexander and Theo Cholo, where he seems to find an answer to those questions in the strange faculty on which Shakespeare dwells: memory. Schalkwyk’s *Hamlet’s Dreams* seems to me a ringing endorsement of the series’ general editors’ claim for the “abiding presence” of Shakespeare.

Both *Reading Revolution* and *Hamlet’s Dreams* are lively and timely books, glimpses at our recent past with deep implications for the present. Desai seems to be reaching out to a popular audience: the book’s layout is modest coffee-table and the illustrations are nostalgically formatted (editing and proofreading are somewhat disappointing). Schalkwyk covers comparable territory, but his is an academic work, more philosophically nuanced than Desai’s, and concerned to interpret as well as to recount: his net is cast far wider. Nonetheless, both *Reading Revolution* and *Hamlet’s Dreams* seem to me accessible to the general reader, the latter as it tells its author’s personal story: his academic encounters with Shakespeare and South African prison writing, as well as his realisation of the implications of, and his personal resistance to, apartheid. Schalkwyk brings a South African sensibility to bear on Shakespeare studies.³

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Chris Thurman’s *South African Essays on ‘Universal’ Shakespeare* both asks and argues for a South African hold on Shakespeare studies as a global field. “Universal” remains a contested term: “global” is an observable fact. In his Foreword, David Schalkwyk recalls as a young temporary lecturer in the 1970s how “unthinkable” it was then “to try to relate *Twelfth Night* to South Africa”, while “at a roughly parallel moment” Govan Mbeki was signing up for Orsino’s opening speech from that play in the Robben Island Bible. This raises in one way the question suggested by the writing and the reading of all the essays in the collection: “Why Shakespeare?” Considering how changing academic fashion has kept the Shakespeare thesis pot boiling, Schalkwyk returns us to “the question of the value and influence of Shakespeare in our social and political context”. Can one localise the “social and political” and maintain one’s sense of the universal in a global context? This is crucial to the enterprise of Thurman’s book.

Shakespeare does not use the word “global”: his primary sense of “globe” is “sphere”, although the sense of planet or heavenly body sometimes follows. Dromio of Syracuse describes the kitchen wench to whom he is due as “spherical, like a globe; I could find out countries in her” (*Comedy of Errors*, 3.2.114-15), and Hal calls Falstaff “thou globe of sinful continents” (*2 Henry IV*, 2.4.285).⁴ Hamlet’s “distracted globe” (*Hamlet* 1.5.97) hints at the amnesiac dispensation of Claudius’s Denmark, and the globe of Queen Margaret’s eye will find Suffolk “where soe’er thou art in this world’s globe” (*2 Henry VI*, 3.2.406). The sense of planet earth in one of a system of globes recurs⁵ until Prospero’s vision of the dissolution of “the great globe itself” (*The Tempest*, 4.1.153) offers a theatrical instant of mortality, imagination and perhaps

3. I think this emerges also from Schalkwyk’s *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Schalkwyk is one of the three South Africans cited in *The Oxford Handbook to Shakespeare*, ed. Andrew F. Kinney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); the others are Welcome Msomi and Cedric Messina.

4. These quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare *Complete Works* (revised edition), ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001).

5. See *King Lear*, 2.2.164; *Othello*, 5.2.100; *Richard II*, 3.2.38; *Titus Andronicus*, 5.2.49.

world-historical moment. Shakespeare's primary sense of "universal" as "comprehending, or including the whole of something, specified or implied"⁶ has a similar range, from a "universal shout" (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.45, *Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.143) to Fluellen's "universal world" (*Henry V*, 4.1.67, 4.8.10). For Juliet, Romeo's brow is "a throne where honour may be crown'd/Sole monarch of the universal earth" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.93-94). In "the weary and all-watched night", Fluellen's monarch dispenses "a largesse universal like the sun" (*Henry V*, 4.Chorus.43). Of the reception of the false news of Pauline's death, the Third Gentleman reports "if all the world could have seen't, the woe had been universal" (*The Winter's Tale*, 5.2.92-93). Malcolm, pretending to be unfit for kingship, would "uproar the universal peace" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.99). Identified by his follower Thidias as the imperial "universal landlord" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.13.76), just as Richard II in Gaunt's eyes has become national "Landlord of England ... not king" (*Richard II*, 2.1.113), Octavius ironically anticipates "universal peace" (4.6.5) on the eve of the Christian era.⁷ In *As You Like It*, Duke Senior anticipates Prospero's "great globe itself" with his "wide and universal theatre" (2.7.137).⁸

Thurman's "Introduction" reminds us that *our* global context is not uniform. The "global south" may have an advantage over the "global north" in its experience, understanding and articulation of "the workings of the world at large".⁹ What are the implications of this putative privilege for Shakespeare studies? "In a country like South Africa," Thurman writes, "Shakespeare is both a marginal concern and a prominent presence" – as in other countries of the "global south". The purpose of this book, however, is not to extend the real but circumscribed field of "Shakespeare in/and South Africa", but to explore the ways in which "Shakespeare" has been and continues to be transported across time and space". The essays thus raise important issues: "multilingualism and the hegemony of English"; education and the canon; text and/in performance; empire, race and ethnicity.

Each of the three essays in Part 1, under the heading "Universal Will", seeks both to describe and explain the wide appeal and grasp of Shakespeare. Natasha Distiller, in an essay challengingly titled "On Being Human", seeks unambiguously to link Shakespeare and "a notion of the human". The notion is broadly and securely based in "literary structure, linguistic structure and biological structure". Rather than polarise and stratify languages and literatures, the argument seeks to explore how Shakespeare achieves not "the universal voice of humanity" but "a voice that captures something which might be universally human". This recalls Schalkwyk's invocation of Alain Badiou's negation of difference and extolling of "the event" in which new forms of subjectivity and humanity (individual and species) are manifested. Distiller (to my mind comparably) argues that Shakespeare transforms, in fact reforms, what he inherits (his language, his culture, his narrative sources): *The Sonnets* and *Titus Andronicus*, for example, "cannot be contained within the parameters of traditional English literature and the kind of humanist individual it assumes, the kind which is inevitably classed, raced and gendered. And which is in control of its own fate." Our recognition of this "embodied and imperative experience of form could be constituted as the mark of the human". As her title "Shakespeare without Borders" suggests, Sandra Young's focus is geopolitical. "Universal Shakespeare" is not a standard by which local manifestations are to be judged, but an order continually shaped and re-shaped by global interpretations, adaptations and performances. For Pier Paolo Frassinelli in "Many in One: On Shakespeare, Language and Translation", Shakespeare's works are in themselves translations, continually re-translated by time and history before reaching languages other than English and all corners of the globe. Shakespeare's words (both *langue* and *parole*) are "multilingual and creolised", apt for the multicultural transformations they have been through.

6. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

7. Octavius as "universal landlord" may allude to the Pope as "universal bishop" (see *OED*, "universal" 2).

8. The Duke's is a spectator's and sympathetic view of the theatre of the world; Jacques follows with his self-centred performer's view, which ends in embittered futility.

9. Here Thurman is quoting Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (London: Paradigm, 2012), p.1.

There is a corollary to the metaphor and mindset of translation. Frassinelli quotes Ton Hoenselaars: “For the English-speaking world Shakespeare’s works are also written in what is ‘really a foreign language, in need, like all other languages, of translation’.”¹⁰ That, surely, is only one way of looking at (or hearing) it. We can learn that language, as we can learn each other’s languages: we can translate ourselves (as Robben Island Bible signatory Neville Alexander argued all his working life).

The theme of Part 2 is the variety of mediation rather than translation. Victor Houlston gives a detailed and nuanced account of “the composition, performance and censorship of *I Henry IV* in 1596”. The context of religious conflict, the question of the royal succession and the Oldcastle controversy contribute to a reading of the play as a plea for religious toleration, which is not to depoliticise but to rediscover the primary meaning of “‘political’ ... consideration of life in community”. The human being is a political animal and both universal and global Shakespeare only signify in community. In his own entertaining and pointed contribution, Thurman approaches the question of universal or global Shakespeare through an account of Al Pacino’s film *Looking for Richard* (1996), a mockumentary account of the actor’s research into, production of and performance in *Richard III*. Calling up the patriotic anxieties of international sport, the essay explores the tension between British and American claims to the Bard’s heritage. The implications for South Africa are neatly drawn. Brian Pearce’s essay offers an account of the critical and theatrical rehabilitation of Shakespeare’s last plays in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The focus is on metropolitan (British) critical and dramatic practice, and is particularly interesting on the relationship between actors and producers and the variety of critical approaches promoted: biographical, realist, formalist, symbolic and historicist. There is an implicit argument here for criticism and scholarship to recognise the interpretive power of performance.

Guy Butler, for many years doyen of South African academic Shakespeareans, was nurtured in the critical tradition evoked by Pearce. This collection closes with two contributions by Butler and an account by Laurence Wright of “Butler’s *Lear*”, a distillation of “two bulky companion typescript volumes” otherwise lying unread at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown. The liveliness of Wright’s work – as Butler’s former student, colleague and successor – will surely encourage some readers to make their way to the NELM shelves for the original. Butler’s contributions (both derive from lectures) cover two aspects of his Shakespearean interests. “Shakespeare’s Dramatic Vision” claims first that Shakespeare held to “a vision of the universe and the destiny of man which derives directly from the medieval Christian civilisation of which he and Milton were perhaps the last great literary exponents”. Butler nails his colours to the mast, arguing that in our “fragmenting universe” we have not been able to replace Shakespeare’s great medieval mythic synthesis or its Renaissance improvements and amplifications. On the other hand the essay offers an account of some aspects of the Elizabethan theatre and “the opportunities and limitations it offered to a dramatist attempting to express this vision”. Characteristically the lecture ends with an invocation of Yeats and advice to actors. Butler seems to accept without question the universality of proto-global Shakespeare, but what he saw twentieth-century society as *needing* was the playwright’s “supernatural authority”.

“Shakespeare, Daniel and Augustus Caesar: Kingdoms in *Antony and Cleopatra*” shows Butler’s scholarly side, the careful sketching of historical context and detailed interpretation of cruxes. Butler takes as his epigraph, perhaps as a marker, a verse from Luke: “In those days the Emperor Augustus decreed that the whole world should be enrolled.” (2:1) In the context of the iconology, symbology and emblemology of kingship from biblical and classical sources, Shakespeare’s Octavius emerges as “a study in merely political man – whose triumph [Shakespeare] uncannily divined ... he saw the hollow heartlessness of such men”. The rupture here again is between a wholesome past and a ruthless present. Butler’s Shakespearean criticism, the work of a poet, playwright and director, is both restorative and recreative, stressing as much what is decided and assuring about Shakespeare, as what is questioning and unsettled.

10. The quotation is from Hoenselaars’ Introduction to *Shakespeare and the Languages of Translation* (London: Thomson, 2004).

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On the evidence of the books under review here, and the “South African Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century” essays gathered by Laurence Wright for the 2009 issue of *The Shakespearean International Year Book*, ‘South African Shakespeare’ is a fertile field, maintained by a co-operative band of teachers, scholars, directors and actors, aware of both their local situation and their global connections. This collocation of texts stands at the intersection of the political history behind Desai’s and Schalkwyk’s books, and the theme of universality which both prompts and haunts Thurman’s.

I engaged with these books during a particular political and historical moment (after Marikana, in the wake of the Nkandla scandal, and following the controversy of Jacob Zuma’s 2015 State of the Nation Address). Desai’s last chapter, with Shakespeare’s five-act structure in mind, is called “The Sixth Act?” and asks how successful South Africa’s transformation under ANC hegemony has been. The prisoners, to a man, remember their Island education with intense emotion, but they are divided in their judgements of their country today. Generally, the ANC-, MK- and SASM-aligned (Mdingi, Kathrada, Mkunqwane, Sizani) are happy, or at least non-committal, whereas the others are deeply critical and disappointed, especially about education. Gazo has withdrawn from politics, and is now active in the Presbyterian Church. In effect, the ANC has become the right, and, as Desai points out, for these Robben Islanders of the new left, critique of “the neo-liberal turn” has been easier than contributing to the continuance of revolution. Schalkwyk quotes and comments on the disappointment and bitterness of some Robben Islanders.

In a recent essay also eloquently critical of the ANC’s South Africa, Desai himself shows a strain of anarchism: “The government’s economic policy, which entrenches private property, entrenches theft ... What we need is a movement that illuminates a path to make common and to de-commodify.”¹¹ This strain recurs in the Robben Island non-conformists. Solomon copied Shelley into his *Complete Shakespeare*. The lines are subscribed “L.T.”, which may ascribe them to Leon Trotsky, but they come from *Prometheus Unbound*. Sobukwe read Howard Fast’s *Spartacus*, and Sizani argues that in power you can be “an agent of change ... without being an anarchist”, while Neville Alexander recommends John Holloway’s *Changing the World without Taking Power*.

The post-apartheid history of Robben Island (as of South Africa itself) is muddled. It has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but has also been implicated in public corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement. For some it seems completely to have lost its glow. In a *Sunday Sun* column after the February “parlemonium” of the 2015 State of the Nation Address, Robert Mazambane (Mr. Potatoes) reported that Gedleyihlekisa – referring to Jacob Zuma by his second given name, which according to Ndumiso Ngcobo means “one who grinds you while laughing with you” –

used to play a fine game of soccer. That was on Robben Island in the good old days when men were men and there were no cheeky boys in berets behaving badly. If there were any, you took them into the corner of the prison cell and explained the facts of life without any ‘democracy’ nonsense.¹²

11. Ashwin Desai, “‘Ways of (Sight) Seeing’ in Kwazulu-Natal” in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 1 and 2 (June and September 2006). Online via: www.CNS.Journal.Org.

12. Robert Mazambane, “Lady Democracy could pull her panty back up” in *Sunday Sun*, 15 February 2015 (online: <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=960387&sn=Detail&pid=71619>) and Ndumiso Ngcobo, “What’s in a name?” in *Sunday Times*, 21 August 2012 (online: <http://www.zanews.co.za/columnists/2012/08/21/whats-in-a-name>). “Parlemonium” was one of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* ‘hot’ Afrikaans words for 2014. See Willem Botha, “Woorde van 2014” on *LitNet*, 16 December 2014 (online: <http://www.litnet.co.za/Article/woorde-van-2014>).

Any attempt to identify our moment other than by place and date and time must be subjective and interpretive, but my sense is that South Africa is now in a post-Marikana phase. Continuity and change from 1994 are clear: the bourgeoisie have adapted, by means of Black Economic Empowerment and other adjustments; the rich are richer; the poor are poorer and more numerous, and more dependent on the state. As Thurman reminds us, for all its claims to exceptionalism, South Africa “is no less immersed in the effects of globalisation than any other country”. The particular South African experience is in the individuals who have exploited and those who have been exploited by the transition. The global dimension of South African politics is capitalism: the transition of 1994 has perhaps made the country more like the rest of the world than it ever has been.

My impression is that the books before us here concentrate more on morality, psychology, community, than on politics. If Shakespeare’s is a universal imagination, does his work and vision offer us a way of figuring our particular political moment (as clearly as we can focus on it) in its global context, a moment at which among our non-metaphysical universals are ‘capitalism’ and ‘class’, both of which have intensified in post-apartheid South Africa? Shakespeare’s politics is elusive enough but the interrogation of (English) monarchy in the histories and tragedies is continued in the Roman plays, which raise further the promise of republicanism and the spectre of empire and despotism.¹³ Adam Habib’s report on twenty post-apartheid years is titled *South Africa’s Suspended Revolution*. Where for a parallel in the past would Shakespeare turn to from South Africa in 2015? Perhaps to 1917. South Africa is in the post-Lenin and -Trotsky, pre-Stalin period of its transition: compromised by capitalism, which continues to betray and exploit the working class, while it pursues wars of greed and aggrandisement wherever it can. Shakespeare’s Ulysses captures our world-historical moment:

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite:
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey
And last eat up himself.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.119-24)

13. See Andrew Hadfield, “Republicanism” and Cathy Schrank, “The Formation of Nationhood” in *The Oxford Handbook to Shakespeare*, pp.587-603 and 571-86.