

Endings and (New) Beginnings: Shakespeare against apartheid, Shakespeare post-apartheid and Shakespeare beyond South Africa

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To begin at the end: Volume 34 of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* concludes with Denise Newfield's obituary for Martin Orkin, an important but contested figure in South African Shakespeare studies. Newfield's reflections on Orkin's career include the assertion that he was "not afraid to be controversial and to upset the (white) Shakespeare scholarly community in apartheid South Africa" and the observation that his first book, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (1987), "sought to politicise the teaching and learning of Shakespeare":

Orkin argued that the traditional text-centred and character-centred approaches of the day reinforced the dominant order's hegemony in South Africa, instead of enabling critical awareness of issues of power and justice in South African society. He protested against the "narrowness" of South African criticism, which in his view constrained the meanings and relevance of the plays.

Orkin's passing prompted me to revisit the early volumes of this journal, the first of which was published in the same year as *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* and carried a review of the book by Laurence Wright. The review is not laudatory. Wright found Orkin too prescriptive and finger-wagging, imposing a template for the teaching of Shakespeare rather than being oriented towards the needs of learner-citizens in apartheid South Africa:

The educational consequence of this kind of literary training is likely to be an intellectual habit of mind which rests in a cloud of loose analogies working at a high level of abstraction. The complex cultural specificity of Shakespeare (which Orkin is careful to insist on) must be effectively eviscerated in order to arrive at skeletal parameters of domination and subordination, hegemony and disruption, stereotype and individual which can be applied to our South Africa. This is not Orkin's intention, but the entire thrust of the book implies that here is the real point of reading literature. Ironically, the result may be a student who is rather more useful to the apartheid network: one who has small conception of historical and linguistic change, whose intellectual horizons are constrained by the cranky paradigms of apartheid and the struggle against it and who, like Horatio, is unprepared to view "heaven and earth" in terms other than those proposed by his own age and clime.¹

Wright's review inaugurated a debate that would play out in subsequent volumes of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, echoing similar discussions at conferences and in English Department corridors, in classrooms and in lecture halls. This was formally staged in the second volume of the journal (1988) as

1 Laurence Wright, "Martin Orkin: *Shakespeare Against Apartheid*" (Review), *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 1 (1987): 74.

“a column which the Editors hope may become a regular feature” – it did not, although the crux of the debate would return in different forms over the years. Colin Gardner, who was at times on the receiving end of Orkin’s criticism, offered a response that was generally in agreement with Orkin’s views on the relationship between literature and politics. Despite worrying that Orkin “applies his perceptions rather crudely – too single-mindedly”, Gardner affirmed that “he seems to me to be right in his central suggestion”:

[I]f we are to take ourselves seriously both as alert and humane South Africans and as fully committed readers, critics and teachers of Shakespeare, we must somehow switch our political awareness and our response to Shakespeare on to the same broad wavelength. And when Orkin makes this point he is thinking not only of the urgencies of the South African political situation, he is also thinking of Shakespeare and the study of Shakespeare. If in a country facing frightening socio-political injustices and conflicts – injustices and conflicts quite as momentous as those which disturbed Germany in the 1930s or England in the 1640s – if in this situation the study of Shakespeare yields no specially pressing or relevant insights, then whether we like it or not Shakespeare is on the way out.

...

Similarly, I understand and sympathise with [Orkin’s] desire (and the desire of all the critics of his school) to emphasise the social and the political, and the sense in which human and social evils are caused by human action and can be opposed by human action. And from this follows, I realise, a determination to encourage (in Brechtian fashion) an active attitude in the reader or audience, and to discourage a passive or even a contemplative attitude; and from this it is a small step to the view (which Orkin articulates frequently) that any response which is not specifically active or political – whether it be induced by a sense of the tragic or by a view of human nature as having certain fairly permanent tendencies – any such view “subtly encourages a passive acceptance of the apartheid system”.²

Nevertheless, Gardner stopped short of fully endorsing *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* because he felt that it did not allow for other “modes of response” beyond the political and the local: “I favour a stress on immediate social realities, and I salute Martin Orkin’s book; but I think one must at the same time resist a tendency to reduce the range of Shakespeare’s perceptions – or, to use a different vocabulary, one must try not to limit the productiveness of Shakespearean texts.”

Wright’s reply to Gardner, in turn, cautions against adopting a method of teaching Shakespeare in South Africa that is effectively Leavisian – insofar as F.R. Leavis’ approach to texts meant that “the object of study was not Dickens or George Eliot, but these writers as interpreted, ‘managed’, by Leavis”:

The problem with Orkin is similar: he wants to ‘manage’ Shakespeare so as to substantiate his own reading of South Africa. But where Leavis’s “criticism of life” proffered relatively few tangible reference points in the haze of his moral vision, Orkin asks for explicit and detailed comparison over large areas of political and social life. If there is one lesson that the advances in twentieth-century historiography make clear, it is that fundamental presuppositions about the nature and possibilities of human experience change, and change drastically, over time. Hence the extraordinary difficulty of accurate cross-cultural comparisons and my worry that, in unskillful hands, the method will simply degenerate into sloppy analogies aimed at generating a moral ‘buzz’ in the students.³

2 Colin Gardner, “Teaching Shakespeare in South African Universities: A Response to Martin Orkin’s *Shakespeare Against Apartheid*”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 2 (1988): 80.

3 Laurence Wright, “Shakespeare and the Bomber Pilot – A Reply to Colin Gardner”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 2 (1988): 85–86.

For Wright, the distance between Shakespeare's time and place and South Africa in the 1980s should be sustained and not collapsed, because doing so does a disservice both to students' understanding of Shakespeare and to their understanding of South Africa:

Orkin's approach may open a few dozy eyes to realities they were unwilling to confront, though I have my doubts about the durability of such 'conversions'. My concern is that, in the attempt, he may impair the intellectual capacity of literature graduates to the detriment of the contribution they could make to the country's future. It is not possible to use Shakespeare as a really adequate illustration of the plight of this country. The two are incommensurate and the attempt must result, for the student, in an impoverished encounter with Shakespeare, a sketchy and uncontested reading of South African politics and an ingrained habit of thinking in loose analogies.

I find this debate endlessly fascinating, perhaps because it speaks to my own uncertainty about the if, why and how of teaching Shakespeare in a post-apartheid context. That fascination and that uncertainty are shared by many colleagues in higher education – and, indeed, in secondary schools. Yet it is also fair to say that this perennial debate risks falling into the “How many angels on a pinhead?” category, with academics going round and round in circles (lecturing to smaller and smaller groups of undergraduate students) while high school teachers are left with the job of actually tackling Shakespeare in the classroom. This is a situation that Gina Bloom and Lauren Bates set out to remedy in the article that opens the present volume.

Citing Natasha Distiller, Bloom and Bates remind the reader that “there is a chasm between scholarly work on Shakespeare and the teaching of Shakespeare in secondary schools”: “University-based scholars are wrestling with Shakespeare's postcolonial and post-apartheid legacy by producing complex political, historical and theoretical work, but they are largely out of touch with high school teachers.” Bloom and Bates demonstrate how this chasm may be closed, and go on to show how their project, “Blood will have Blood”, makes use of digital (gaming) and performance strategies to bring Shakespeare closer to high school learners. While it remains vital for scholars to critique the politics of Shakespeare's presence on educational curricula, the question that was central to the debate in the 1980s (“The extent to which literature can be relied on to change, in desirable ways, the individual's ideological bias”)⁴ has morphed into a different set of considerations about “decolonial praxis” in the South African classroom today. For Bloom and Bates, this means giving students “a chance to enter into playful dialogue with Shakespeare, speaking back to dramas that symbolise and, if left unexamined, perpetuate legacies of colonial violence”.

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The second article in Volume 34 facilitates a different kind of ‘looking back’ at South African Shakespearean pasts but also prompts readers to think both creatively and critically about the implications for current and future practice. The annual Shakespeare productions at the Maynardville Open Air Theatre in Cape Town are a common point of reference when it comes to accounts of Shakespearean performance in South Africa. As Sheila Chisholm and Temple Hauptfleisch remind us, however, Maynardville's history has also been subjected to some mythologising – and it is thus necessary to correct “the popularly accepted notion that the Maynardville Open Air Theatre in Cape Town was founded in 1955, and first used in 1956, as the brainchild of [Cecilia] Sonnenberg and [René] Ahrenson”, the redoubtable duo who initiated the tradition of staging Shakespeare at Maynardville. In fact, the venue's performing arts history dates back to 1950, when Margaret Molteno and her colleagues on the Athlone Committee collaborated with the University of Cape Town Ballet Company to raise funds – for education projects supporting communities on the Cape Flats – by staging a balletic triple bill. “Dances in the park” over the next few years laid the groundwork for what would become the Shakespearean institution at Maynardville, but these early ballets, like “the connection of the Maynardville project with the Cape Flats (and with Athlone in particular)”, have been obscured. Chisholm and Hauptfleisch also note that the idea of Maynardville

⁴ *Ibid.*: 85.

as a place that has been “open to all” and that managed to bypass apartheid-era racial segregation “is probably far more accurate in theory and intention than it turned out to be in practice”.

Ballet returned to complement Shakespeare in a rejuvenated Maynardville Festival a few years ago, but – even before Covid-19 struck South Africa – it was announced that the 2020 Festival would be cancelled due to funding difficulties. 2021 has, of course, passed without Shakespeare, ballet or anything else on the Maynardville stage. There are no prospects for 2022. If Maynardville is to be revived in a post-Covid context, it can only benefit from an awareness of the roots of the Open Air Theatre, and from addressing a directly related question: for whom do performances at Maynardville take place, and to what ultimate end?

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The third and fourth articles in this volume take us beyond South Africa into other African contexts. Angela Ramsoondur and Sheila Wong Kong Luong adopt a two-prong strategy for introducing the global and local dynamics that impact the production and reception (via adaptation in either instance) of Shakespeare in Mauritius. The first “Mauritian Shakespeare” they present may be a familiar one to a number of readers: Dev Virahsawmy’s process of Shakespearean tradaptation and appropriation. The second is more obscure – albeit easily accessible: a set of YouTube videos used in, or emerging from, teaching Shakespeare at the University of Mauritius over the past decade.

Mauritius is far removed (separated by over 2000 kilometres of Indian Ocean and by the landmass of Madagascar) from the African mainland, but it is still technically part of southern Africa, and thus falls self-evidently within the scope of a journal called *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. The same cannot be said for Nigeria, which is the focus of Odirin Abonyi’s article on *Hamlet for Pidgin (Oga Pikin)*. This *Hamlet* is one of a handful of works translated into Naija – formerly Nigerian Pidgin – by Bernard Ogini, and is yet another example of Naija’s status as “the language of the media, the language of entertainment, the language of religion and the language of literature” in many parts of Nigeria. Abonyi analyses the “peculiar lexico-semantic choices” that may be discerned in the text of the translation and considers the contextual and co-textual knowledge required in order for readers / audience members to extract meaning from Ogini’s work. In the process, *Hamlet* shifts from tragedy to comedy – or, at least, *Hamlet* operates less in a tragic mode than in a comic one.

Comparable articles and essays on Shakespeare in (eastern, western, central, northern) Africa have been published in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* over the years, but it does seem necessary to acknowledge that the inclusion of an article on Shakespeare in Nigeria by a Nigerian scholar jars with the implied ambit of a journal that specifies southern Africa in its title. Hopefully, this awkwardness is overcome – indeed, overwhelmed – by the claim that such an inclusion makes about the need for pan-African solidarity and its implications for Shakespearean researchers, teachers and practitioners across the continent: recognising our significant national and regional differences, we also recognise our shared histories and our shared interests. For *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* to publish articles about Shakespeare across Africa is not an imperial/expansionist or appropriative gesture. On the contrary, titular clumsiness aside, it may even be understood as part of the journal’s remit precisely because there are so few regular publications dedicated to supporting scholarship and practice relating to Shakespeares in, on and from the African continent. Perhaps this is a role that the journal should undertake in earnest in future volumes.

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Finally, then, we come to the reviews section of Volume 34, which covers territory both ‘local’ and ‘international’ – or, rather, which shows the many ways in which South(ern) African Shakespeares are inserted into global scholarly discourses and creative practices, and vice-versa.

Marguerite de Waal reviews what might be considered South Africa’s contribution to the worldwide canon of pandemic-era Zoom Shakespeares: *Hamlet*, directed by Neil Coppin (with Buhle Ngaba and Bianca Amato as Associate Directors) and produced by Daniel Galloway in partnership with various

organisations. This production/reading, however, has a more complicated history – and, De Waal hopes, a future – than that taxonomy allows.

Hassana Moosa’s review of *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice* (2020) includes a discussion of two essays in the book that address South African case studies. Malcolm Cocks and Kevin A. Quarmby suggest “alternative” Shakespeares – the Johannesburg Awakening Minds ensemble and Tauriq Jenkins’ project based in a Cape Town prison – that “support the pursuit of social justice”. Moosa observes that both Cocks and Quarmby

acknowledge the complex position Shakespeare holds in southern African history, as a figure who is attached to legacies of oppression but also still holds a notable cultural position in the region. At the same time, the critics illustrate that notwithstanding Shakespeare’s nebulous position in southern Africa, local reimaginations of Shakespeare in this region create new scope for enacting social justice through Shakespearean performance. The essays powerfully support a key premise that underlies the collection: that social justice can be aspired to globally through localised interactions with Shakespeare.

Jyotsna Singh’s *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* (2019), reviewed by Amrita Dhar, also has frequent recourse to South African Shakespeares in surveying and assessing its broad terrain. The “Shakespeare | Postcoloniality | Johannesburg” conference that Martin Orkin convened in 1996 (and which Singh attended) looms large here, not just for the collection that issued from it – *Postcolonial Shakespeares* (1998), co-edited by Orkin and Ania Loomba – but also for the South-South connections it enabled. For instance, Singh brings to prominence the largely forgotten work of a South African scholar like Nicholas Visser, whose essays remain provocative in their analysis of Shakespeare’s plays through key postcolonial concerns like land, displacement and restitution. Dhar describes how Singh’s book makes use of such scholarship to discuss plays that may have “no obvious postcolonial affiliations” – such as *King Lear* – but that “grow newly illuminated” when placed under “postcolonial scrutiny”.

The trio of books reviewed by Tony Voss take us into very different, ‘pre-Shakespearean’ territory. Cathryn Ennis and Glyn Parry’s *Shakespeare Before Shakespeare* (2020) elucidates the Stratford milieu into which Shakespeare was born – and details the Elizabethan persecution experienced by members of his family. Eric Harber’s *Shakespeare, Christianity and Italian Paganism* (2020) and R. Allen Shoaf’s *Lucretius and Shakespeare on the Nature of Things* (2014) yield unexpected insights into what is often taken to be a familiar sub-field: Shakespeare and the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The purview of the books reviewed by Voss prevent me from being too parochial in my emphasis. Yet – if I might be allowed to dwell on one final South African connection – it may be noted that while Harber’s scholarly interests did not appear to be especially bound to his South African identity, his political commitments certainly were; his anti-apartheid activities led to him becoming a ‘banned person’ in 1963 and he fled the country in 1964 (he would only be able to return three decades later).⁵ Harber died at the age of 87 a few months ago, the year after he had the satisfaction of his seeing his *magnum opus* – some forty years in the making – published.

The passing of Martin Orkin and Eric Harber in 2021 is thus recognised in different ways in the pages of this volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, but it would be remiss of me not to mention here two other names. Antony Sher and Michael Williams died within a few days of each other, just before the volume went to print. At the time of writing, Sher has already been the subject of many prominent tributes and obituaries, and rightly so. His acting career left an indelible mark on the British theatre industry and on its Shakespearean stage history in particular. His complicated relationship with South Africa was a creative spur, a source of both invigoration and frustration – both for Sher and for audiences in the country of his birth. It is to be hoped that Williams’ work as a scholar, editor and teacher will also, in time, be suitably celebrated *in memoriam*. This is not the place to do so; instead, it must suffice to affirm that he was a friend to this journal, as both contributor and reader, and to express gratitude for that friendship.

5 See Mary Harber, “Eric Harber Obituary”, *The Guardian*, 13 August 2021. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/13/eric-harber-obituary>

Thanks are due, too, to all those who have made the present volume possible as authors, editorial advisers and peer reviewers, and to Liz Gowans for her typesetter-designer's flair and finesse. In my essay's end, then, is Volume 34's beginning. Reader, enjoy!

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