

The Prisoners' Palimpsest: On David Schalkwyk's Hamlet's Dreams

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gets left behind in the final chapter as Schalkwyk turns to the South Africa of Jacob Zuma, erstwhile Robben Island prisoner.

Zuma is clearly not one of the ANC militants from Robben Island whose distress Schalkwyk records at the enthusiastic embrace of capitalism by former colleagues and by the epidemic of public pillaging that ensued. In the case of Zuma and Schabir Shaik, however, a new, supposedly indigenous, legal rationale began to be produced for what Justice Squires called “a generally corrupt relationship” (127), namely that pay-offs constituted a legitimate form of public activity to which the term “bribery” did not apply. Here, subjectivities are no longer at issue as they are in prison writing, and the template to which Schalkwyk turns is that of *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2. In these plays “reciprocal altruism” is endemic, but it becomes the task of Prince Hal to establish an impersonal public standard as king (in this picture, Zuma becomes the charming Falstaffian rogue). Indigenous claims notwithstanding, Schalkwyk’s point is that “reciprocal altruism” has a long history, while its revival represents a fundamental threat to legality and the orderly public sphere in South Africa. If the newness—or new newness—of South Africa entails a relapse into this oldness, the South African future lies, as Schalkwyk evidently fears, in the past. Or is it legality that is now “old,” everywhere?

III

THE PRISONERS’ PALIMPSEST: ON DAVID SCHALKWYK’S *HAMLET’S DREAMS*

Anston Bosman

In Pretoria Central Prison in 1965, my mother read *Madame Bovary* in Afrikaans. Shortly before her detention, the South African government had been forced to expand the reading material allowed to inmates, and when the warders presented my mother with the newly available options, she picked Flaubert’s novel from the list. An odd choice, one would think, for an activist lawyer whose furthest intention was to lose herself, like Emma, in daydreams of provincial balls and beaux. Except that the choice had little to do with Flaubert’s plot and much more to do with his translator’s language. In fact, van der Merwe’s *Mevrou Bovary* (1948) offered my mother a refresher course in Afrikaans, which she rightly suspected she would need under interrogation. The Special Branch would look to interrogate an Anglophone detainee in Afrikaans, believing that this gave them the upper hand. But since my mother’s knowledge of that language, aided by her prison reading, was far better than she let on, the switch gave her a secret advantage: convincing an adversary of his superiority is the first step toward undermining it. Far from a

solipsistic indulgence, then, choosing *Mevrou Bovary* was urgent and tactical. The text served less as a means to literary pleasure than as a tool of political strategy. There are more uses of books and reading, it turns out, than are dreamt of in a jailer's philosophy.

Can the same be said of the disguised copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* that was inscribed by thirty-four political prisoners on Robben Island in the 1970s? How does it matter that what the inmates signed was a volume of Shakespeare's poems and plays? Would some other tome—perhaps a dictionary of quotations—have done the job as well? How revealing are the signed passages anyway? Were not the signatures themselves the point? These are among the questions raised by Schalkwyk's *Hamlet's Dreams: the Robben Island Shakespeare*, a study whose title aptly juxtaposes the private fantasy of an imagined character with the public function of a material text. In one sense, Schalkwyk has written a modest book; in line with Arden's "Shakespeare Now!" series, *Hamlet's Dreams* extends what began as an inaugural lecture to around 160 pages plus notes. Yet, it presents such complex issues as to contain the making of several other studies. At its core is an immense question: How should we measure the social effects of reading? To which Schalkwyk gives an answer worthy of Sir Philip Sidney: by mediating between philosophy and history, between dreams and books, between Hamlet and the Island. In this account, moreover, prisons turn out to be compelling environments for such mediation. Rather as my mother's reading of *Mevrou Bovary* yielded to her Flaubert's ironies on freedom and confinement as much as van der Merwe's useful turns of phrase, Schalkwyk draws out of a unique copy of Shakespeare's *Works*—a former prisoner's property later exhibited in Stratford-upon-Avon—both a reflection on abstract principles and an intervention in the controversies of a specific place and time.

Readers of Schalkwyk's work in early modern studies will recognize this dialectic from his earlier monographs: *Shakespeare, Love, and Service* (2008), for instance, setup and promptly deconstructed the opposition of love, "ostensibly a universal aspect of the human condition," versus service, "a historically specific form of social organization." That book also briefly disclosed an unusual context for its canonical inquiry, citing its author's experience of "the preservation, in late-twentieth-century South Africa, of the grounding framework of Elizabethan master-servant relations".² To some extent, *Hamlet's Dreams* reverses this relation of figure and ground. Now, by contrast, Schalkwyk approaches South Africa as a Shakespearean—a metropolitan expert on works first read in a rural childhood—and examining the Robben Island *Complete Works* enjoins him to confront his birthplace, from apartheid through independence, in its thicket of particulars. Since the task exceeds what a slim book can achieve, the result displays less clear-cutting than the kind of trailblazing Schalkwyk's fellow Free Staters would have called a bundu bash. There are patches of memoir here, and stretches of philo-

²Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love, and Service*, 1, 18.

sophical argument; there is literary analysis of texts from Lady Mary Wroth to Caesarina Kona Makhoere, but also a thrust of up-to-the-minute political commentary. Each of these strands might have turned into a polished study of the type Schalkwyk has already mastered. Yet weaving them together—at times more neatly, at others less so—has two advantages: first, it promises to connect the different audiences of his work on early modern English poetry and drama, literary theory and the philosophy of language, and late-twentieth-century South African prison writing; second, it should inspire more scholarship of a similarly comparative or synthetic nature.

Let us return to the extraordinary artifact at the project's source. It is a pity that *Hamlet's Dreams* reproduces no pages from the Robben Island Shakespeare. This omission makes an essential companion volume of Desai's *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island*, whose publication only months before his own book Schalkwyk graciously acknowledges. Desai provides a complementary focus on how nine inmates of Robben Island struggled to obtain formal and informal education. First among these is Sonny Venkatrathnam, who acquired the copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* in 1972 and kept it throughout his incarceration by covering it in Diwali cards and claiming that it was his Bible. The photographs Desai includes of the disguised book jacket and the pages annotated by South Africa's future leaders now command a kind of exalted attention. (The inscriptions can also be inadvertently chilling: on the volume's title page, between his name and an acquisition date, Venkatrathnam neatly writes the prison's standard abbreviation, but it is hard to read "R.I.P." without thinking of the inmates who died on the Island and were never recovered).

Under scrutiny, what fascinates is not merely *which* passage each inmate has chosen, but *how* each choice is indicated, and even whether *choice* is always the right term. The gold standard is Mandela's annotation: he meticulously brackets six lines from *Julius Caesar*—a gem of stoicism well analyzed by Desai and Schalkwyk—then writes his name in the margin alongside and adds the date. Like Caesar's words on facing death, Mandela's very inscription expresses lucid insight and firm resolve. Other cases, however, are cloudier. Where Saths Cooper and Michael Dingake sign opposite pages of *Hamlet*, might not their endorsement of lines from the same play have been influenced by a desire to indicate solidarity with a comrade? And what of the signatures of Elia Motsoaledi and Kwedi Mkalipi, which appear together right at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Without the usual marginal asterisks, the reader cannot know which extract, if any, they have chosen; in fact, Schalkwyk and Desai each connect Mkalipi with a different passage, effectively making his choice for him. The idiosyncrasies of each reproduced page bear out an indeterminacy Schalkwyk often concedes: that "there is no way of telling how each of these readers viewed the play as a whole—or even whether they read the whole play" (43).

To acknowledge this is not to make a nonsense of interpreting the Robben Island Shakespeare. It does, however, underscore a necessary distinction between the two modes of reading Shakespeare that *Hamlet's Dreams* repeatedly invokes.

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