

Social Justice through Shakespeare: A critical asset

HASSANA MOOSA

REVIEW:

David Ruitter (ed.), *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice is a rich and comprehensive resource which aims to “establish a *field of play*” for the social justice work enacted via Shakespeare.¹ As editor David Ruitter explains in his Introduction, the book draws on a “diversity of experience and expertise” from scholars as well as theatre and public engagement practitioners in order to move across the “borders” that exist between arenas of “Shakespeare study, performance, and theory”. As Ruitter makes clear from the outset, the collection does not use Shakespeare to redefine theories of social justice, but instead advocates for social justice “globally” and explores how this can be achieved through localised engagements with Shakespeare.² The book presents interesting case studies of moments where Shakespeare has been used in pursuit of social justice in various times and geographies. At the same time, the essays delineate strategies for continuing this work in the future. The combination of critical insights and practical takeaways makes this Arden resource a must-read for all who are interested in how Shakespeare can be meaningfully used in service of social justice projects.

Following his opening to the collection, where Ruitter unexpectedly brings together references to Jay-Z, Beyoncé and *Hamlet* to map out the goals and underlying claims of the book, the editor presents a detailed outline of its organisation. The essays are grouped into four sections, with Part One consisting of a series of interviews with Shakespeare critics and practitioners, while the remaining three parts are made up of essays that focus on “Practice”, “Performance” and “Economies” of Shakespeare and social justice. The five interviews in Part One make for an accessible entry into the collection, as they informally guide the reader into its subject while simultaneously exemplifying the diversity of approaches and collaborations that Ruitter marks as pivotal to enacting the work of social justice through Shakespeare, and which is accordingly central to the book. The interviews are preceded by a brief foreword from journalist and scholar Erin Coulehan who enticingly describes the conversations as “rich with the stuff that makes our academic, political, and poetic hearts beat”.³ The interviews themselves draw on the experiences of Shakespeare experts to showcase social justice initiatives in practice. Interviewees discuss the use of Shakespeare in community youth programmes (Chris Anthony); cultures of (un)just casting and performance in major Shakespearean theatres (Erica Whyman, Farah Karim-Cooper); understandings of Shakespeare through early modern race studies (Arthur L. Little, Jr); the role of cities as backdrops for carrying out Shakespeare-based social justice projects (Ewan Fernie); as well as the social and ethical shortcomings and responsibilities of research institutions and academic departments where Shakespeare is learnt and taught (Farah Karim-Cooper).

1 Ruitter (ed.), *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice*, p.1.

2 *Ibid.*, p.2

3 *Ibid.*, p.26.

The interviews importantly illustrate the inextricable links between educating, performing and researching Shakespeare. Such links are evident, for example, in Ruiters's interview with Chris Anthony on the Los Angeles-based "Will Power to Youth" programme – a holiday employment programme for young adults (ages fourteen to twenty one) who are paid to perform Shakespeare over the summer. Anthony's overview of "Will Power to Youth" reveals that the performances serve as a productive platform for empowering young people from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds, while also inviting theatre practitioners to recognise the unique ways that Shakespeare's narratives can become personal, and thus known, to these student-aged actors. Similarly, the interview with Farah Karim-Cooper on the treatment of underrepresented groups (especially persons of colour) on stage at Shakespeare's Globe and in the UK academy highlights how academic and cultural institutions can become closely connected in the pursuit of social justice. By reflecting on ties between acting and teaching, these interviews emphasise that while Shakespeare-based social justice activities might seem to be siloed into separate categories, in practice the intellectual and activist zones in the "field of play" are not so distinct from one another.

Part two of the book turns to language, as critics consider cases where Shakespeare's play-texts have been used to confront problems of inequality in contexts of race, gender and disability. Some essays in this section look backwards to examine how Shakespeare's words have been harnessed in noteworthy moments in political history to challenge or contemplate racial injustice. Arthur Little Jr. does this in his convincing reading of Jewish psychologist Wulf Sachs' use of racial blackness in his *Black Hamlet* as a site for negotiating his own Jewish otherness in the context of apartheid South Africa. (Little's essay is an essential read for South African critics interested in how Shakespeare filters into the discourses of racial formation which are being shaped in the early stages of apartheid organisation.) Other essays, such as Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi's "Active Shakespeare: A social justice framework", have their interests fixed forward – Thompson and Turchi call on educators to rethink how Shakespeare is used to practice social justice in classrooms. Surveying colour-blindness or the treatment of "bodies as racially neutral" in college classrooms in the US and UK, the critics advocate for "active" or "performance-based approaches" to Shakespeare and social justice, where the "student's identity" is accounted for in their study of Shakespeare's plays.⁴

The essays in this section display a valuable range of research methodologies for critically assessing social justice models through Shakespeare and language. For instance, Peter Erickson's "Bending towards justice: From Shakespeare's Black Mediterranean to August Wilson's Black Atlantic" exhibits the potential in "cross-historical ... comparative analysis" of dramatic texts,⁵ while Adelle Hulsmeier's "Shakespeare's Disabled, Disabled Shakespeare" proposes the benefits of conducting contemporary studies of disability in Shakespeare's plays with an understanding of early modern English views on disability. In contrast, by assessing the allusions to Shakespeare's works in the political rhetoric employed during the civil rights movement, Jason Demeter indicates that studies of Shakespeare and social justice can move outside of the theatre to the realm of political non-fiction. Because of its dynamic representation of these various means of exploring Shakespeare and social justice via texts, this section of the collection stands out as an excellent resource for scholars and educators alike.

The "Performance of Shakespeare and Social Justice" essays refreshingly shift attention away from the North American and European engagements with Shakespeare that are prevalent in the first two sections of the book, to examine how Shakespeare productions in the Global South have and have not worked to address ideas of social justice. Specifically, critics explore productions in Mexico, India, South Africa and China. The two essays in this section that would be of particular interest to researchers and educators in southern Africa are those by Malcolm Cocks and Kevin A. Quarmby, which take performances in this region as their focus. In "Re-Enacting *Hamlet* in Southern Africa", Cocks shows that it is the influence of Shakespeare's cultural capital, especially in international communities and amongst former colonisers, which drives much of Shakespeare's continued prevalence in countries in southern Africa, such as South Africa and Mozambique. In his exploration of actors and performances of the "Johannesburg Awakening Minds (JAM)" for instance, Cocks demonstrates that, given Shakespeare's

4 *Ibid.*, pp.52–55.

5 *Ibid.*, p.61.

cultural prestige, performing works by the playwright gives actors in the JAM group a sense of “legitimation and acceptance” and has “helped transform the company from a largely unknown group of homeless actors to an amateur Shakespeare repertory company”.⁶ This has had positive cultural and economic implications for members of the JAM ensemble, though it necessarily means that performers are still operating under Western forms of cultural authority. However, through his assessment of JAM’s 2014 *Hamlet* adaptation, *I Ophelia*, as well as a “Portuguese-language adaptation” (185) of *Hamlet* performed in 2015 by Mozambican theatre company Mutumbea Gogo – a company which has similarly benefited culturally and economically by working with Shakespeare – Cocks contends that “re-enactment” in Shakespearean adaptations can still serve as a productive channel through which to engage with social justice concerns in the region (Cocks defines “re-enactment” as “a complex affective and cognitive space” where “performers and audiences” can work through the ineffable realities specific to their local environments).⁷

In a similar vein, Quarmby examines Shakespeare’s perceived universality and his role as a cultural and educational icon in the context of “Shakespeare in prison” projects throughout the “English-speaking” world.⁸ As Quarmby notes, such projects see Shakespeare as having the “psycho-spiritual power” to rehabilitate, transform, and ‘normalise’ prison inmates. Despite the good intentions of organisers, Quarmby argues that since there is “limited hard evidence” that Shakespeare has this effect on prison inmates, by insisting on such beliefs ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes ultimately work to perpetuate ideas of the “Eurocentric supremacy of Shakespeare”, which makes them counterproductive to social justice imperatives. Yet Quarmby identifies Tauriq Jenkins’ Cape Town-based ‘Shakespeare in Prison’ project as a successful reconfiguration of ‘traditional’ prison programmes. Crucially, instead of idealising Shakespeare’s emotive power, Jenkins draws on the “fear” that “powerless” inmates have of Shakespeare and his foreignness.⁹ Like Cocks, then, Quarmby observes how a southern African ‘adaptation’ or “alternative” can productively support the pursuit of social justice. The essays by Cocks and Quarmby are exciting, at least to this reviewer, because they challenge the often unsatisfying arguments about the ‘universality’ of Shakespeare’s plays which, as Cocks notes, “persist as the dominant narratives through which audiences and practitioners articulate Africans’ relationship to Shakespeare”.¹⁰ 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 reimaginings 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.

Kiernan Ryan’s “The empathetic imagination and the dream of equality: Shakespeare’s ‘poetical justice’” offers a theoretical framing of Shakespeare’s literary relationship to justice that supports much of the analysis undertaken throughout the book. It is accordingly a fitting essay to begin the concluding section of the collection, on “The Economies of Shakespeare and Social Justice”. Ryan argues that Shakespeare’s criticism of justice in his plays is “poetical” insofar as the playwright seems to perceive the very notion of justice as “*as yet* imaginary” or rooted in “fiction”.¹¹ In turn, Ryan asserts that Shakespeare’s scrutiny of just ideals makes his works well-suited to contemporary negotiations of social justice. The value of Ryan’s arguments for all who work in Shakespeare and social justice is confirmed by the number of times his essay is cited by others throughout the collection. The three essays which follow Ryan’s evoke ideas of ‘economies’ in social and practical, rather than theoretical, senses of the term. Peter Holbrook explores communist tropes and ideas of social inequality that appear across a range of Shakespeare’s plays. Jeffrey Butcher considers the creative use of Shakespeare, and notably

6 *Ibid.*, pp.177–78.

7 *Ibid.*, pp.185–87.

8 *Ibid.*, pp.190–94.

9 *Ibid.*, p.199.

10 *Ibid.*, p.175.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.244–45.

his Caliban, in twentieth-century expressions of working-class identity by Lenin and “Leftist writers”.¹² Gerald U. de Sousa provides an analysis of poverty, tyranny and social order in *King Lear*, focussing notably on the “Reign of Reagan” and the social implications this has for other characters in the play. These compelling essays point academics and practitioners of Shakespeare and social justice towards class, policy and governance as new areas for interrogation. Butcher is perhaps most explicit about this in his insistence that academics should bring working-class politics into critical focus, as he argues that studies should be more attentive to class differences as systems of social injustice.

Overall, the handbook is a critical asset which is instructive for teachers, researchers, students, critics, theatre practitioners and others who are interested in continuing the work of seeking and producing social justice through Shakespeare. Though there are some essays that are especially pertinent to readers interested in social justice and Shakespeare in southern Africa, their arguments are certainly illuminated when read alongside the rest of the collection. The book will undoubtedly continue to influence the way we think about Shakespeare’s purpose in social justice initiatives for years to come.

Hassana Moosa (hassana.moosa@kcl.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate at King’s College London. Her doctoral research is funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. She completed her MA at the University of Cape Town. Her research explores early modern English literary and dramatic representations of race, religion and slavery in the Mediterranean Basin. She is also interested in pre-modern English encounters with Muslims from the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb. Moosa is on the steering committee of the Early Modern Scholars of Colour UK Network and is News Editor of *Medieval and Early Modern Orient* (MEMOs).

¹² *Ibid.*, p.276.