

SHAKESPEARE'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Abstract

400 hundred years of Shakespeare's presence in world-wide theatres, schools, literature, film, and even languages must give us pause. It is worth reflecting on what there is in the texts that have come down to us that answers this great and obviously most diversified horizon of reception. The paper will try to present Shakespearean plots, characters and themes and examine them for their potential to become appropriated into the very centres of multiple cultural polysystems.

Keywords: *Shakespeare language, history, human nature, translation, dissemination, cultural diversity*

There are more things in Heaven and Earth...

1. My Language! Heavens! I Am the Best of Them That Speak This Speech. Were I but Where 'Tis Spoken.

If we are to seriously discuss cultural aspects of the dissemination of English language and culture, we must put Shakespeare and his plays right in the centre of the problem. He is the great “maker” of the English language, and even though the majority of English speakers do not recognize the fact, they still use the endless catalogue of linguistic treasures Shakespeare left to them and operate easily within what we all would call ‘the culture of the English speaking countries’. Language is one of the pillars of culture, or perhaps I should say the foundation of life in a community who would not be able to produce the rich and varied repertory of culture if language did not bind its members together.

Language is a historical animal. By this I mean that it exists in time and, because it is alive, it keeps changing. The English spoken (and written) in the time of Shakespeare is a very far cry from the language now used in London.

Each animal is territorial, and so is language. English, because the language had become the cultural medium of the empire known as the British Empire and later the Commonwealth, developed in many different ways across the world; a Londoner and an Aussie, a Texan and a Scot may even have problems in adapting themselves fully to the sound, syntax and vocabulary of one another. Yet, they would never have doubts that they speak the same language and share – in spite of the differences – some core of cultural history, and therefore of identity.

That core is constituted, among others, by the contribution of great poets and writers to the development of the language. Thus, I shall begin by turning to Shakespeare's language and what it has done for English.

I will not be here terribly technical – it is not the time and place for the history of the English language – neither shall I be strikingly original. I shall simply turn to a British journalist and writer, Bernard Levin, who in 1984 produced a volume of essays titled *Enthusiasms*. One of his enthusiasms was Shakespeare. Here is a short extract from his famous page-long sentence [1]:

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me", you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger; if your wish is farther to the thought; if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise -why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then - to give the devil his due - if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then - by Jove! O Lord! Tut tut! For goodness' sake! What the dickens! But me no buts! - it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.

One of the eminent Shakespeare specialists, Gary Taylor, criticised Levin for bringing forward not so much Shakespeare's original contribution to the enrichment of the English language, but a set of 16th-17th centuries clichés, not strikingly original and new to Shakespeare's audiences. [2]

He is right, of course, but would all those wonderful sayings actually stay in the English language and ensure the cultural quality of the English idiom if it were not for Shakespeare's plays? Gary Taylor also points out that Shakespeare was a poet and inscribed all those sayings into verse, the rhythm, rhyme and rhetorical structure of which make some lines eminently memorable and easy to repeat. Shakespeare's verse rolls on the natural rhythm of the English language, on the repetition of unstressed-stressed units called iambs, thus all those marvellous phrases, even taken out of context, roll on the tongue in a most natural way:

to be or not to be that is a question
truth will out
the long and short of it
without rhyme or reason
give the devil his due

Some of these saying have an additional natural feature of English – head rhyming, more popularly known as alliteration. English loves playing with the initial sounds of words, as in *rhyme and reason* or *devil and his due*.

Why do I mention all this? The reason is obvious: a foreigner who learns English does not have ready access to the language. The beginnings are marked by handbooks, usually oriented towards a quick way of enabling communication even with limited vocabulary and structures. An intermediate student may have access to simplified readings and filmed dialogues often enlarging his/her vocabulary within the limits of contemporary colloquial range; an advanced student will be encouraged to read original texts. It is in this last instance that he may eventually look at such purple passages as Hamlet's "to be or not be". Not all native speakers can identify quotations from Shakespeare, at least not many of them. And yet they share those idiomatic expressions in the most natural way. If you do not know them, you will not be able to say you share their culture. And to know them, you have to learn to identify them, because they do not come to you with your mother's milk. A still wider gap will appear if you find yourself among those more carefully educated speakers who do read and share their knowledge by thin allusions; on such occasions you become immediately an outsider, somebody lost between cultures. As Gary Taylor [2] has put it:

A rat-catcher interviewed in New York or a Congressman orating in Washington can quote or parody the same rusty speech from "Hamlet" ("B-2, or

not B-2"), and everyone in the audience will recognize the game and know how to play it.

The only remedy is to read more, to read the best of English poetry and prose; to read, above all, Shakespeare. As a foreigner, one is never able to participate in the culture of another nation without knowing the great cultural store (which embraces history in all its aspects!) of the Other's language.

2. There Is a History in All Men's Lives

Let us consider for a while history as an element of cultural diversity. Learning a foreign language we also have to learn, at least in a brief outline, something about the history of the nation(s) who speak(s) that language. As has been said at the beginning, language is a historical animal: it grows with history and gets entangled in the complexity of cultural identity. How can we become conversant with English, American or Australian cultures if we know nothing of the diverse historical paths behind them? All of us can instantly think of those events in the past of our own country, region, or even of the town, which are constitutive elements of our identity. Well, in order to enter other cultures via their languages we must also try to understand them by history. And here Shakespeare can help us as a great teacher of history.

Shakespeare lived at the time of great changes and transformations. The Medieval past of England was still very vividly remembered, the dynastic change from the ancient line of the Plantagenets to the new one of the Tudors was connected with the experience past and present of wars and internal tensions; the transformation from a Catholic country into a Protestant one was far from smooth and brought even more political unrest and social divisions which all culminated in the mid-17th century in the Civil War. Shakespeare wrote many plays which are referred to as chronicles or history plays in which he created dramatic (i.e., meant for the stage) representations of some of the most tragic developments in the 15th century history of England; from the forced abdication of Richard II at the end of the 14th century, through the War of the Roses (the 2 parts of *Henry IV*, the 3 parts of *Henry V*), the 100 Years War with France (*Henry V*), to the portrait of an evil usurper Richard III whose defeat brought Henry VII, the first Tudor, to power. He took his material in most cases from a historian, his contemporary, Raphael Holinshed. Holinshed wrote his definite history of England, Scotland and Ireland for the Tudors. This means the narrative was set right in the centre of the English point of view endorsing the newly ascended dynasty of the Tudors, and stressing the heroic past in order to give the Englishmen of the 16th century a feeling of stable identity and a sense of national pride. At the same time, after a century of endless wars, internal and

external, Holinshed's Chronicle worked on the idea of loyalty to the anointed king and the need of social order in order to avoid further upheavals and unrests. The greatest value of Shakespeare's history plays is in the fact that none of them endorses the one and only right vantage point in looking at the political events and human decisions which together were responsible for the past. As a true playwright who understands the essence of dramatic representation, Shakespeare builds in his chronicles images of great heroism and utter cowardice, high sense of political responsibility together with political recklessness; wise political thinking together with cynical and irresponsible political game; belief in the divine right of the anointed kings mingled with the recognition that anointed does not mean an able and wise monarch; war, which is in the centre of all these plays, is portrayed as an opportunity to show chivalric valour, but also as a senseless bloodshed and a vicious circle of hatred and destruction. Shakespeare's historical plays, to use modern terminology, deconstruct history into an ambiguous, many-sided narrative dependent on the conceptualizer's values and aims. Thus, they teach us not only the history of England. They offer us, which is perhaps more valid, more culturally central, the insight that historical judgement, a sense of the historical truth, is a suspicious and dangerous thing which may lead to a narrow understanding of the past, inevitably at the service of the current power. That is why Shakespeare's historical sagas are still frequently staged and filmed: they are a great lesson in understanding our own historical position and our own sense of identity. Perfect examples at hand are the filmed versions of *Henry V* in which the character appears to be a great hero and ideal monarch in the vision of Laurence Olivier and that of Kenneth Branagh; the films are an instructive lesson in how diverse are the ways in which we use history to build our sense of cultural identity, and how easily we fall into the trap of self-righteousness. They are also a complex lesson of English patriotism.

3. Human Nature: *We Know What We Are, but Know not What We May Be*

At the centre of each culture stands man. And man stands at the very centre of Shakespeare's plays. The great Shakespearean characters have become part and parcel of Western cultures, but not only: great interest in Shakespeare in Japan ever since mid-19th century and the post-colonial appropriations of Shakespeare in African cultures prove the essential and universal value of Shakespeare's insights into human nature. There are three people in yourself – who people think you are, who you think you are, and who you really are. This threefold division makes us aware that we exist as social beings, that we have ideas about ourselves, and last, but not least, that the truth about ourselves is unfathomable. In an age when psychological sciences had not yet developed, when Freud and

his followers had not yet tried to argue that it was possible to understand human nature, Shakespeare offers us a reading of man which allows us to accept his men and women as true mirror reflections of ourselves, not as definite truths once and forever, but as truths relative to the societies, values and construals of human subjectivity that different epochs and different cultures accepted as their own. For 400 years Hamlets, Macbeths, Lears, Angelos or Shylocks have appealed to readers and audiences in diverse shapes and revealed diverse truths as to who we really are. It is precisely because Shakespeare gives his characters both social and individual modes of existence, with a deep conviction about the mutability of human nature, that his art, for more than 400 years now, keeps opening our eyes to the endless complexity of the human being.

One of the main Shakespearean themes is the conflict identified in the past as that between appearance and reality. Putting aside the problem of the definition of what reality is and how we know that we deal with appearance, let us for a moment consider Shakespearean comedy. Comedy thrives on the concept of man as part of society, which means that the problematics of plot and characterisation turn around the recognition of who people think you are and what you think you are. The famous Shakespearean heroines, Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, to take these two examples only, both act on the presumption that people think who you are by the way you dress and behave. This, of course, is possible by the Elizabethan theatrical convention where a change of clothes makes one proof against recognition. But Shakespeare does not exploit the convention to entertain us with a farce. The painful way in which Viola discovers that disguise is a trap which does not allow for true human relations is a serious and almost tragic experience for her, and food for thought for us who masquerade in daily life to persuade others that we are who we are not. Both Rosalind and Viola are resourceful, energetic individuals – or so they think about themselves when they don male clothes in order to survive particularly distressing, inimical or difficult circumstances. Both, by suffering, no matter how comically this is exposed for us, have to discover some truth about their own nature.

Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness!

Pray God defend me! A little thing would
make me tell them how much I lack of a man. (Viola in *Twelfth Night*)

O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou didst
know how many fathom deep I am in love! But it cannot be sounded;
my affection hath an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal. (Rosalind in *As
You Like It*)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the magical, impossible adventures in the Athenian woods are not only hilarious, but, perhaps more importantly, a great lesson in discovering our illusions: we think we love, we think we are pretty or ugly, wise or stupid, and the great lesson of the play is that this is not who we really are.

O, how I love thee! how I dote on thee!
 My Oberon! what visions have I seen!
 Methought I was enamour'd of an ass.
 How came these things to pass?
 O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!
 (Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)¹

Shakespeare's comedies are great and serious lessons for each subsequent generation opening different ways "to set the mirror up to nature".

The great dilemma of discovering who we really are is the axis of the great tragedies. I would risk a statement here that the most tragic experience of man, as portrayed in Shakespeare's tragedies, is the recognition that we think we know while in truth we do not know who we are. *Hamlet* is perhaps the most teasing of all Shakespeare's plays exactly because we cannot pinpoint Hamlet. Critical and theatrical reception of this tragedy demonstrates clearly that Hamlet is what he thinks he is, but also what we think he is. Therefore, he discovers a different self at every turn of the action, while we receive him according to our temporal and spacious existence in culture, producing an endless procession of Hamlets whether in theatre or in critical essays. No matter in how many ways critics examine him, no absolute truth emerges. Hamlet breathes with the multiple dimensions of a living human being, and everyone understands him in a personal way, dictated by the *habitus*² in which we exist. Hamlet is very conscious of the mystery of his own being, and of the mystery of any human being. He mocks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who try to sound the truth about him:

You would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.

Hamlet's mystery cannot be discovered or uncovered. Mystery is mystery. He himself cannot at any point be sure who he is. His mocking of Rosencrantz and

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/plays.php>

² A term coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It is a system of dispositions and tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it.

Guiderstern, also of Polonius (is it a cloud or a camel?) turns ironically against his own ability to possess self-knowledge.

The excellent music of a human being, the humanist optimistic view on human nature is obviously inscribed into the play, yet, every time that the music of human perfection is mentioned, it is deconstructed, and from this perfection its opposite emerges. Hamlet's famous speech on man is the best example:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in
reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving
how express and admirable; in action how like
an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the
beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and
yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

The diverse possibilities of plucking Hamlet's mystery are reflected in the profusion of critical questions asked throughout the long history of the play's reception. Is Hamlet a melancholic? A hopelessly romantic nature who cannot make up his mind? A sweet prince or a brutal and ruthless avenger? Is Hamlet in love with his mother? Could his disabled love life result from his Puritanical nature? Is Hamlet at heart a brutal misogynist, terrified of love because he is terrified of women? Is he mad or merely pretending madness? No interpretation is flawless, but the play provokes such questions exactly by leaving unexplained areas and often contrary suggestions as to who we are. Its endless attraction lies precisely in this ambiguity, in this unsolvable mystery.

If Hamlet's mystery were easy to pluck, we would not have 400 years of the theatre fascination with the play. Actors and directors alike are fascinated with the way the play sets up the mirror to their own times and ideas. And so, in the late 17th-century Restoration critics saw *Hamlet* as primitive and disapproved of the play's lack of unity and decorum; in the 18th century, Hamlet was regarded as a hero – a pure, brilliant young man thrust into unfortunate circumstances. By the mid-18th century, however, the advent of Gothic literature brought psychological and mystical readings, emphasising madness and putting the horror of the ghost to the forefront. Romantic performers began to view Hamlet as confusing and inconsistent. Romantic vision which went on until the 20th century focused on Hamlet's delay and indecisiveness, as well as on the ambiguity of madness; this led to yet another fascination of the 20th century lying in the fact that there is so much of an actor in Hamlet, and that the play stresses emphatically theatre, acting, pretending. Endless varieties, without any definite or final one, perfectly uncovering Hamlet's – our own – mystery. And what a fascinating lesson in this diversity of cultural positions!

If *Hamlet* makes us aware that human nature is a bottomless sea and by that token opens endless possibilities of its exploration, *Macbeth* offers a case study of the psychology of a man who falls from the certainty of being noble and brave, honest and loyal, down to the most horrible awareness of having wasted his life by succumbing to ambition and becoming a murderer. It sounds snug and simple, but the representation of human mind and conscience on the stage is a challenge, and a double one when we realize that Shakespeare had no access to what we now know as psychology; neither did he have at his disposal sophisticated digital technologies.

The early monologues of *Macbeth* concentrate on mind and soul searching: tempted by the idea of becoming king, he discovers – to his own horrible fear – that he contemplates murder:

Two truths are told,
 As happy prologues to the swelling act
 Of the imperial theme.—I thank you, gentlemen.
 [*Aside*] This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings:
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man that function
 Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
 But what is not.

Petrified by the horror of the discovery of his evil thoughts, *Macbeth* loses for a moment the ability to control his mind and body, he exists as if outside of what is going on in his world: Shakespeare makes him deliver these words in the presence of other characters. Banquo, Ross and Angus are on the stage elated with the recent military victory and *Macbeth*'s promotion due to his valour. But they do not hear his words. On the strength of the stage convention of speaking apart, *Macbeth* delivers his thoughts – not words. The audience, therefore, may understand that the real action of the moment is inside *Macbeth*'s head, not outside in the lively conversation of the other three men, the conversation which we do not hear. From this moment on we shall be progressively watching *Macbeth*'s inner struggle and, perhaps most strikingly, his decision “to wade in blood”. The assassination of King Duncan does not take place on the stage, yet its representation through *Macbeth*'s mind and conscience in his monologues delivered in the presence of Lady *Macbeth*, though without recognition that she

is beside him, is the most terrifying moment in the play. The dagger keeps getting into Duncan's body, the blood keeps flowing, Macbeth is murdering Duncan and himself at the same time, realising that he will never emerge from the terror of the committed murder.

These moments are Shakespeare's supreme achievement in welding together the power of the word with the art of dramaturgy.

One cried "God bless us" and "Amen" the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands,
List'ning their fear. I could not say "Amen"
When they did say "God bless us."

But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep"—the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.
Still it cried "Sleep no more!" to all the house.
"Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more."

I must stress here the power of poetry. The power of the word. The power of the language. We have access to Macbeth's terrifying experience through language. We have made a long detour to return to my initial remarks. Language creates and language opens access to the greatest treasures of what we recognize as English culture, but also, significantly, our own. Translation and different staging traditions and conventions are no obstacle to accessing the power and the universality of the representation of Macbeth's tribulations, as witnessed by productions all over the world.

4. Translation, Dissemination, Diversity

It is time we return to the problem of language. I have tried to demonstrate the cultural capital which is located in Shakespeare's works, its richness and variety. How can we access it? Of course, by language. However, it is worth stopping

here and pondering for a few minutes the question of language, or rather of languages. In the last 400 hundred years or so, Shakespeare became the top figure in world culture, not just in the English culture. Travelling across 400 hundred years means that Shakespeare moved across time, but also, and widely, across space. This has been possible because Shakespeare has been translated. Think of Bottom – perhaps the best known character from Shakespearean comedy. Why? Well, exactly because he was ‘translated’. The comparison is tentative and limited, of course. Bottom was translated into an ass, Shakespeare certainly has never become one in any translation whatsoever. But – and that is really important to remember – it is translation that pumps life into his old veins and makes his work alive and important in different cultural periods and in different cultural spaces.

Translation began as soon as his plays went onto stage and into print, in his own life-time. Translation means change, re-shaping, re-writing, changing the perspective. Plays are translated by directors, actors, stage designers, etc. A director would usually have his own idea of how he wants the play to become a spectacle. An actor can say the same line in 1001 ways. Just try to think of different ways of reading this short dialogue:

Snout: Bottom, thou art changed. What do I see on thee?

Bottom the Weaver: What do you see? What; do you see an ass' head of your own, do you?

Peter Quince: Bless me. Thou art translated.

By changing one's voice, its pitch, the intonation, one translates the text. The actor adds to this his body, and so, we can easily see ten actors and ten different Bottoms. Moreover, you can translate Bottom into pictures, and here not only the artist's own vision matters, but also the aesthetics of his time. So we do not have to change the language; the way we use it, and the way we combine it with the visual aspect so important in the theatre, is enough to create an endless variety of cultural facts within one cultural space. As a man of the theatre, Shakespeare was, of course, eminently aware of this. But his plays went also in print. Some of them ran into several “editions” in his lifetime, others appeared only seven years after Shakespeare's death in the famous first edition of the collected plays called the First Folio. Every appearance of a play in print meant that it went through quite a few “translations”: the copyists, the compositors, often working in teams, had their own ideas about spelling and punctuation, so each edition introduced changes and alterations into the text. After Shakespeare's death more than one Folio appeared, scholars and antiquaries set out to elucidate Shakespeare's lines, correct the mistakes of the early printed versions. The result was a series of “amended” (read “translated”) versions of Shakespeare, not to mention attempts at more radical improving of his art by

rewriting his plays, e.g. Dryden's remake of *Antony and Cleopatra* into a heroic play called *All for Love* (1677), or Davenant's *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (performed in 1667, printed 1670), an adaptation with John Dryden of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, not to mention his own versions of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*. Nowadays, there is an ongoing discussion, and also practice, of translating Shakespeare into contemporary English because the English readers and viewers find it increasingly difficult to understand his plays. And, increasingly, theatre groups present Shakespeare's plays in the realia of our world. But let me repeat again – it is the demand for translation that pumps life blood into the texts.

As for translations proper, in Jakobson's famous nomenclature (1959/1992), interlingual translation, Shakespeare's works have been living an energetic life in most languages and cultures. Translations of Shakespeare's plays form a historical continuum occupying inevitably a position at the very centre of the cultural polisystems of many European countries. Translations have been proliferating, not only diachronically, but also synchronically and this exceptionally vigorous career should give us pause. On the one hand they are proof of Shakespeare's richness which teases us to keep opening his texts and draw from that store of diversity. On the other hand, there is the other, equally important side to the phenomenon of translation. As Theo Hermans persuasively tells us in *The Conference of the Tongues* translation must not be looked at as a slave of the original. It is a text in its own right which is authored by the translator in his/her own language. The translator, then, brings to the text his/her own store of richness. That is why in our cultures we have canonical translations, often done by great poets of our own tongues who by their own talent and skill enrich the language, enlarge the culture, and by their own contribution of diversity construct the diversity of Shakespeare AND the diversity of our own cultural identity. Cultural diversity, then is the effect of a continual conference of the tongues. Of course, it is important who our partner in the dialogue is. Therefore, I would like to finish by saying *Thank you, Shakespeare!*

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