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Taming the Glitter Ball: A Diagnosis of Shakespeare 'for all time'—Sketched from South Africa

Abstract: Shakespeare travels the globe more variously and unpredictably than any other dramatist. In performance his texts have shown themselves hospitable to vastly different ideological interpretations. By making these two points, I do not mean that Shakespeare pops up around the globe, sometimes in quite extraordinary guises, without rhyme or reason. Far from it. Where Shakespeare makes his appearance this is an act of deliberate choice, by a producer, a production company, an arts foundation, a school or university, a national arts authority, or even simply an ad hoc group of Shakespeare enthusiasts. His advent is always intentional, and often contextually explicit, whatever the rationale. But the sheer variety of guises in which his work appears, the disparate cultural and ideological vogues that attach to his work, the geographical spread of art pieces, performances and installations based on Shakespeare, not to mention the diverse artistic disciplines which seize on him as an inspiration, calls for explanation. No other artist in any medium exhibits comparable artistic fertility across time and space. To claim the limelight for more than 400 years without any sign of diminution is remarkable. This article seeks to understand why this ubiquity is possible. Specifically, is there a definable textual mechanism underlying his historical and international success? At the outset it should be indicated that this paper focuses on a technical diagnosis of textual prerequisites for Shakespeare's international success. It is not about what his plays say or mean, and only incidentally about the values they exemplify. While the paper sets out to describe textual features which make possible some of his manifold theatrical enchantments, there is no intention to describe, evoke, or celebrate those enchantments.

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Shakespeare, Ben Jonson told us, was “not of an age, but for all time” (3352).¹ This famous encomium today evokes reactions akin to fingernails scraping on a chalk board. The postmodern bogie of ‘universal Shakespeare’ stirs, impugning by implication rival creative achievements from other cultures, ages, and climes, and evoking a host of awkward political and philosophical issues. For good reason, the slack invocation of Shakespearean ‘universality’ has been decisively rejected by contemporary scholarship. A comment by David Schalkwyk goes to the heart of the matter:

The reason we want to flinch at the notion of the universal is not because it claims too much but rather because it is vacuous. It offers neither a conceptual nor rhetorical hold on the issues that concern us.

(Schalkwyk, Foreword xix)

To put Schalkwyk’s point another way: all human activity exhibits universal human nature by definition. Averting that Shakespeare’s output does so is banal, utterly unremarkable, and offers not an iota of illumination. If Shakespeare is indeed “for all time”, as Ben Jonson avers, this cannot be established merely by proclaiming his universality, or by suggesting some ideal coincidence between human nature and the specifics of what happens in a particular Shakespeare production or reading. As Schalkwyk suggests, any such claim requires conceptual and rhetorical justification. Granting this to be so, the assertion that Shakespeare is “for all time” still offers a resounding challenge. Instead of standing abashed, perhaps we should take steps to understand whether the assertion might in some sense be true, and if so, how and why?

It goes without saying that Shakespeare is historically embedded, as are Lyly, Kyd, Marlowe, and Beaumont, the contemporaries Jonson names as being outshone by Shakespeare. So are “tart Aristophanes”, “Neat Terence”, “witty Plautus” and the other more remote authors listed by Jonson as garnering English Renaissance attention. All writers are caught in the lineaments of their time. Nevertheless, as the world’s first global artist it is impossible not to acknowledge that Shakespeare has somehow managed to evade historical confinement, as others have not. He is most definitely of his age, redolent of a specific historical conjuncture—but then why is he still prancing across the world’s stages? In other words, what makes him “for all time”?

If a merely rhetorical explanation for the phenomenon suffices, it must be accepted that the first part of Jonson’s claim is relatively unproblematic. With Shakespeare ubiquitous on the internet, in television and in mainstream cinema,²

¹ See Jonson’s preface to the First Folio (1623).

² Without his ever seeing a film, Shakespeare is the most credited movie and television writer ever, with over 1600 writing credits, exceeding *the next ten screenwriters combined* – *Internet Movie Database*, IMDb.

and with stage productions flooding performance spaces round the world (COVID-19 permitting), it would be difficult to argue that he was purely “of an age”. The contrary is sober fact, not silly eulogy. Some performances register internationally, some regionally or locally; others sink without trace, barely making it out of the school hall. The list is endless: productions, adaptations, translations, re-writings; on stages and in the street, on paper and film, in graphics, painting, sculpture, music, ballet, contemporary dance, puppetry, poetry, mime; from many different countries and cultures, with different artistic and political affinities, reflecting different aesthetics, different histories. This is what I call the Shakespearean glitter ball. Its reflective facets gleam locally, nationally, and internationally, circulating across the world in sparkling mimicry of the turning globe.

When I talk of ‘taming’ the Shakespearean glitter ball, it is well to be clear about the kind of answer sought. There is no desire or intent to curb or thwart Shakespeare’s international plenitude. Audience enthusiasm and cultural preference are themselves an adequate regulatory force in that regard if one were required. Instead, I want to understand underlying reasons for Shakespeare’s success, to move the answers to Jonson’s assertion from the sphere of rhetoric to that of conceptual insight. To this end, a Shakespearean *catalogue raisonné*, modelled on the practice of art historians, would be unsatisfactory. A mere descriptive listing of disparate Shakespearean phenomena from round the world, however vast, however categorized, organized, and arranged, would not fit the bill. Nor could the systematic analysis of such a catalogue, were it to be created, meet the requirement. This would merely be a close-up description of the glitter ball. Both these approaches, the *catalogue raisonné* and its studied analysis, would leave the matter in the realm of rhetoric. The question I want to answer would be this: ‘What in the Shakespeare text makes this extraordinary catalogue possible?’; ‘Why Shakespeare and not some other artist or dramatist?’ This question is very different from detailing the cultural forces that today shape the dynamics of the worldwide Shakespeare industry. Pointing to mechanisms of international artistic interchange and globalising education and distribution, or to the character of electronic/industrial culture and entrenched dramatic practice in different parts of the world would not be adequate. These would be effects not causes. What I want to get at is an explanation of what it is *in the character of the Shakespeare text*, that has enabled the Shakespeare industry to gather this extraordinary momentum.

Quest for a Formal Cause

In place of an endless enumeration of productions and performances, which is obviously an activity both interesting and worthwhile in itself, can we, as a supplement to such activity, describe what it is about the Shakespeare text that

makes the story of Shakespeare's international success conceptually explicable? This challenge suggests a quest for a particular kind of causal explanation, one which Aristotle long ago denominated a 'formal' cause. Referring to ancient Greek metaphysics may seem strange, but I hope it clarifies the nature of the argument which follows. We recall that Aristotle denominated four categories of cause: 'material', 'formal', 'efficient' and 'final' (see *Physics* II 3 and *Metaphysics* V 2). We are not examining the Shakespeare text for a 'final' cause: that would be to probe the fully achieved surface character of his text (or texts), the *ipsissima verba*. Nor are we looking for 'efficient' causes: that would be to investigate the interpreters (directors, actors, designers, and producers) and the complex processes that turn text into production and performance. Nor are we exploring the stuff out of which the Shakespeare text is made, Aristotle's 'material cause', which would be language in general or Shakespeare's language (his idiolect) in particular. Instead, we are investigating the 'formal' cause of the Shakespearean glitter ball; what it is in the character of the Shakespeare text that enables the prodigious fecundity and variousness manifested synchronically and diachronically in the record of Shakespearean production, reception, and appreciation. In other words, what drives the glitter ball?

During a recent international seminar on 'Lockdown Shakespeare' one of the participants, Buhle Ngaba, remarked of Shakespearean performance that "it can be anywhere" and that such performance aims at "capturing what's behind the language". This seems a good way to broach the vexed question of Shakespeare "for all time".³

Ngaba's comment that Shakespearean performance involves "capturing what's behind the language" is an important clue, suggesting that there may be something in the structure of Shakespeare's texts, the way they work on the stage and in the minds of his audiences, that enables their portability. The remark implies that Shakespeare's language, the *ipsissima verba*, beautiful though it is, may not be intrinsic to his transhistorical and transcultural success, may not be either necessary or sufficient. On the face of it this is an extraordinary claim. The seductive experience of Shakespeare on stage and in the study seems inextricably bound up with the sound of his words, the rhythm of his lines, and ultimately the language-embedded sequence of his thoughts—his power of verbalisation. He has a characteristic way of 'linguaging', a rhythm of meditation, a way of perceiving, responding to and imagining the world, which is unmistakably and distinctively Shakespearean. Millions have fallen in love with this language—there is no more modest way of expressing the addiction—including large numbers of people whose home language is not English, but who nevertheless respond to what is for them the arcane foreign

³ A recording of the event is available. See *Lockdown Shakespeare: Transnational Explorations*.

vitality of Shakespeare's language. This is true, but it is not the whole story. There are many instances of people falling for Shakespeare without reference to his original language.

Buhle Ngaba herself was entranced by Sol Plaatje's Setswana translation of *Julius Caesar*, *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara* (1937), before ever meeting Shakespeare in English. A Setswana first language speaker, it was the quality and zest of Plaatje's Setswana translation that led her later to want to read Shakespeare's own language. Before that encounter, without the magic of his unique English but with the help of a master translator, Shakespeare spoke directly to Ngaba in her own language and culture, *about* her own language and culture. Her enthusiastic response to Shakespeare in translation is not unusual. Speaking of *Diposho-posho* (1930), Plaatje's translation of *The Comedy of Errors*, his long-time friend and collaborator David Ramoshoana wrote at the time that Shakespeare "has inspired Mr Plaatje to bring into bold relief the etymological beauties of his mother tongue", asserting that he "rendered the entire story in a language which to a Mochuana is as entertaining and amusing as the original is to an Englishman" (qtd. in Willan 309). Something of Shakespeare evidently survives translation, even if in the process he loses much that those who cherish his English might value. The vitality which survives does so in sufficiently robust a fashion as to flourish in other languages and cultures.

Of course, it may well be that the splendour of Shakespeare's fully imagined linguisphere spurs skilled translators to attain heights in their target language that lesser writers could not inspire. The South African actor John Kani recalls that he first met Shakespeare at school in the 1950s, in B.B. Mdllele's Xhosa translation of *Julius Caesar* ([1957?]). When later he encountered Shakespeare's English text, he found it disappointing: "I felt that Shakespeare had failed to capture the beauty of Mdllele's writing!" ("A brief history . . ."). Similarly, the Shakespearean scholar David Schalkwyk has long argued that Uys Krige's Afrikaans translation of *Twelfth Night* is in some ways superior to Shakespeare's original (Schalkwyk, "Shakespeare's Untranslatability"). Another South African scholar, Frederik van Gelder, currently seized with the problem of freshly translating the work of Theodore Adorno into English, comments that Adorno's *Hamlet* in German "just blows you away" (Van Gelder). Such examples could be multiplied. They do not detract from the miracle of Shakespeare's language, nor should they occasion profitless debate over the virtues of specific translations, unless translation itself is the issue under consideration. Translations are most usefully and accurately assessed as autochthonous works of art. But the power and influence of great translations underscores the question of what drives the glitter ball if the force is *not* (or not merely) Shakespeare's captivating, mesmeric language. What is there that is distinctive about the Shakespeare text that survives the 'bracketing', circumvention, translation, or evisceration of his English?

We are looking for analytical features of the Shakespeare text which take us ‘behind’ his language, allowing us to “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” (*Hamlet* 3.2.336), and to explain in some measure his extraordinary cross-cultural and linguistic portability. Canvassing the standard categories of dramaturgical description; examining plot, character, action, dramatic structure, scenic rhythm, underlying mythography, historical fabulation, ideological import, digressive humour, tragic intensity, or sheer whimsicality is unlikely to yield apposite data. Such a strategy, diagnosing and delineating Shakespeare’s many discrete theatrical excellences in productions which reflect radically different aesthetic ideals and ideologies, and then striving to deduce from this what it is that has made him a global artist, strikes me as a recipe for inexhaustible recapitulation – a descriptive feast without end, unlikely to reach cogent conclusions. This might be a valuable contribution to reception studies or theatre history but would be utterly opaque concerning the reasons for Shakespeare’s spectacular cultural portability. Distinctive textual attributes could hardly be separated from their realisation in performance, a recognition which leads us back to the international smorgasbord of Shakespearean production from which we started, keeping us in thrall to the Shakespearean glitter ball. A different approach is required, one which I term ‘paratextual semiology’.

Towards a Descriptive Rubric

We need to pay closer attention to what lies *behind the language*, in Buhle Ngaba’s formulation. I sketch in what follows a rubric of five substantive discourse features characteristic of the Shakespeare text, and which are distinguishable from the ‘accidentals’ of specific productions, performances or readings. These features are *performativity*, *aspectuality*, *thematic centrality*, *formal plasticity*, and *diachronic relevance*. These five aspects characterise the Shakespeare text, generically, with more specificity than could any formal dramaturgical description deduced from singular productions or readings. They are designed to illuminate the textual basis influencing audience response and the possibilities of realising Shakespeare’s portability.

Although they are rooted in the text, the discourse features identified belong to performance, to theatre-in-motion. While based in text, if they register anywhere they register in the minds of audience members as the play proceeds. They are not arbitrary because they are responses to the text-in-action. Their domain is the fleeting paratextual structures which interpose themselves between performance and receptive sensibilities as Shakespeare’s texts are being experienced and interpreted by audiences. Rooted in the text, as interpreted on stage or in the mind of the reader, they are mental hypotheses entertained, considered and evaluated in the course of a performance or reading.

Developing William Empson's insights in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1931), Jonathan Bate makes a significant start when he extends the domain of Empsonian semantic ambiguity to two characteristics which confront audiences wherever and whenever his texts are experienced: 'performativity' and 'aspectuality' (Bate 323-34).⁴ The paratextual structures to which I refer are those temporary perceptions or insights which populate the receptive sensibilities of audience members (or readers) as they struggle with semiotic multivalence, striving a) to make sense of what is being experienced, and b) to integrate this response with their habitual outlook—their ingrained sense of things. The paratextual hypotheses, springing from 'performativity' and 'aspectuality', and indefinite in number, are provoked by Shakespeare's language—or a translation of it—but lightly emancipated from it. Entertained tentatively and disparately by audience members during a performance or reading, they jostle and compete, eventually settling into what the individual spectator or reader takes to be 'the meaning' of the episode or passage.

Provoked by his texts, the richness and inevitability of this interpretive activity separates Shakespeare from his competition, his forbears and contemporaries. To a large extent, these rivals typically create fictive structures based on recognisable character types and predicaments, with strong elements of allegoresis. The plays may be well structured, entertaining and beautifully produced, but they leave audiences in little doubt as to their intended meaning. However nuanced the staging and direction, the narrative or dramatic lines remain monological and the resolutions on offer present summative conclusions for audiences' consideration, rather than debatable possibilities.

Performativity

Examples to justify this assertion could be supplied from a wide range of pre-Shakespearean drama as well as from his near-contemporaries. I will supply here only one. Consider, for instance, a comparison between the metaphysical 'tricksiness' and profound illuminations presented in Shakespeare's so-called 'Last Plays', and the merely contrived theatricality on offer in those of some of his rivals. A small example of the latter occurs in Massinger's Suetonian piece *The Roman Actor* (1626), where Aretinus remarks to Paris the Tragedian:

Are you on the Stage,
You talke so boldly?

⁴ Although precipitated by his insights, Bate is not accountable for the argument which follows!

Paris responds:

The whole world being one
This place is not exempted. (1.3.49-51)

A situation which might have given rise to an exhilarating theatrical and poetic exploration of metaphysical differences between stage and world, or acting and 'acting', subsides flatly in a comparison which goes nowhere. There is seemingly no interest in the idea of theatre as a metaphor for life, no interpretive work for the audience to do, and therefore no performativity.

Compare this with the statue scene which draws *The Winter's Tale* (1609-1611) to its conclusion. The poverty of imaginative opportunity Massinger presents to his audience becomes blindingly apparent. In Act 5 scene 3, when the 'statue' of Hermione 'comes to life', perception by perception, Leontes follows the metamorphosis with mesmerised longing and attention, and the audience at one remove finds itself watching the revival of Leontes' inner being as he attends to this supposed 'resurrection'. "It is required," Paulina tells us all, "You do awake your faith" (5.3.94-95). Audience members face a stark choice: either respond to the scene deeply and emotionally, as Leontes does, with profound aesthetic, spiritual and critical attention, or dismiss the statue scene as a fraud, a trick unworthy of any playwright. After all, on every fictional presumption, Hermione is dead: fancy using a live actress to enact a strange form of physical resurrection, a restoration to life! From this latter perspective, the ploy seems hardly more enticing than Massinger's. But once the fact of Hermione's preservation has been revealed, it dawns on the audience that *they* are the ones suffering a failure of imagination. Hermione is in fact alive, Leontes' entranced longing has been rewarded, their own scepticism is chastened, and they are left privately pondering the mysterious powers of religion, of magic, of art, of the theatre, or some idiosyncratic mix of all of these. Given the complex performativity latent in the scene, and the potential for very diverse and equally valid responses, who knows where individual interpretations will settle? This is a tribute to the powers, freedoms and inescapable demands of Shakespearean performativity.

Note that this is not merely a comparison between Shakespearean drama and works of lesser quality. It is part of a formal explanation for his continuing transnational popularity grounded in general aspects of his texts. The argument is that Shakespeare's texts make audience members work harder, providing intriguing interpretive possibilities which they are called on to resolve *in propria persona*. Where his contemporaries tend to leave their audiences in little doubt as to what they are supposed to think or feel, Shakespeare's stories, their characters and plots, are subjectively underdetermined, until realised in the interspace between happenings on stage and diverse audience interiorities (for

spectators) or between text and mind (for readers). In both live theatre and 'theatre of the mind', the Shakespearean text offers multiple provocations, challenging and complicating the spectator's or reader's progressive realisation. Possible paratextual meanings must be intuited, tested and formatively revised by the audience as the performance proceeds.

Aspectuality

No Shakespeare text offers one stable perspective. The dialectic between Shakespeare's characters and his plotlines is radically multivalent. As the plays progress through their constituent episodes, disparate paratextual meanings suggest disparate and competing resolutions. Things look very different viewed from the perspective of different characters, when audiences take full account of what Harold Bloom calls the "peopling" of Shakespeare's world (Bloom 280). This is what Bate means by 'aspectuality'. Audiences must work hard not only to interpret the development of Shakespeare's characters within 'their' plots, but to place them in relation to other characters, their doings, and the audience's own world view. Some trivial examples: Is Petruchio a calculating bully and Katherine an abused woman? Or is she a wily seductress who has her man just where she wants him?⁵ Is Hamlet a weak and vacillating Prince or a determined but over-scrupulous strategist; a huge loss to statecraft or a weaselling ne're-do-well? Is Prospero a wise and benevolent ruler subduing an uncouth and subversive indigene (Caliban)? Or a harsh colonial tyrant abusing an already oppressed victim? I have articulated these questions as paired oppositions. Considering that the plays are populated with a multiplicity of characters beyond these central pairings, the opportunity for aspectual comparison and resultant tension is greatly enhanced. Ongoing dialectic between plot and character generates a plurality of distinct possibilities to be adjudicated by audience members, presupposing differing values, emotional textures and preferred outcomes. Fleeting answers to such questions proliferate as the play moves forward. They are not merely a function of directorial inflection or actors' interpretations. The disparate potentials are inherent in the text as it is performed, ready to be matched against the diverse repertoire of the real people audience members have known or read about in their own lives. Any conclusions reached must at least in part be the result of this internalised audience reception and debate, potentially different for each reader or spectator,

⁵ See for example Danie Stander's illuminating discussion of *Die vasvat van 'n feeks*, a subtle feminist revision of *The Taming of the Shrew* in Afrikaans by Nerina Ferreira (translator) and David Egan (director), staged in 1983 by the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (2021).

a running mental conversation steeped in ideological presupposition and informed by a circumambient culture together with the legacies of earlier theatrical experience. Internal debate arising from the textual richness of Shakespearean plot and characterisation, embodied in specific productions, spills into the public sphere, and is never-ending. All this helps to energise the Shakespearean glitter ball.

It is clear that Shakespearean plots invite readers or spectators to follow the action from multiple perspectives, focusing on different characters' reactions, perceptions, and judgments as they move through the play's action, and without the guidance of a unifying authorial standpoint. Shakespearean theatre and poetry enacted the 'death of the author' long before Barthes coined the phrase (Barthes). Narrative and moral authority is dispersed among the different characters, groups of characters and points of view, challenging the spectator/reader to respond and adjudicate. No-one can transcend this radical aspectuality without supplementing the Shakespearean text with large doses of opinion and argument. Unless they simply ignore issues, audiences must engage. This further animates the glitter ball. No matter where personal preferences and convictions might lie, counter positions are there to be sustained and argued for. Shakespeare's texts offer rough closure but never an inescapable resolution. Conclusions must be argued for and, while provoked by it, they lie beyond the text, in the worlds of his audiences.

Thematic Centrality

This paratextual richness is also a function of Shakespeare's materials, his subject matter, the nature of which provides evidence not only of the distinctiveness of Shakespeare's art, but further reason for the Shakespeare text manifesting its global portability and ready cultural adaptability. At risk of stating the obvious, I would characterise this quality of the Shakespeare text as 'centrality'. Within the material embodiments of plot and story, manifesting obvious historical and cultural embeddedness, Shakespeare broaches abstract issues inescapable in any society. He writes of war and politics, power and authority, of legitimacy and illegitimacy (in all senses), of heroism and treachery, of love and lust, of fantasy and realism in human psychology, of cynicism and idealism, of innocence and guilt, of reverence and scorn, of presumption and insubordination, of hierarchy and egalitarianism in tension, of military and civic virtue—I could continue listing provocative dipoles forever, the point being that these abstract terms actively pertain in every society. And elements of each dipole can mesh and interact with elements of others, creating rich complexity. Even when translated into local cultural idioms in specific

productions, the centrality of Shakespeare's concerns ensures that diverse audiences around the world find the issues he treats compelling.

Centrality is important if an author's work, written at a particular time and place, is to resonate elsewhere and at other periods in the labyrinth of history. Take Jane Austen, for example, who operates on a well-defined, parochial canvas (despite efforts to refocus her work through the lens of the international slave trade) yet has become Shakespeare's only rival on today's film and television screens for the sheer number and variety of productions and adaptations.⁶ She achieves centrality but on a smaller scale. Her characters not only refer to and discuss Shakespeare, but their interaction is noticeably modelled on Shakespearean prototypes. To cite one example, the fraught courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* echoes that of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*—which is the founding model for so many feisty matings to come elsewhere, on the written page and in film. Of course, Shakespeare's big themes—kingship, governance, national fealty, and so forth, are missing or much curbed in Austen's reduced canvas, but her treatment of courtship, the economics of society, and the nature of human integrity imitates the Shakespearean recipe on a smaller scale. She manages character and story development by manipulating aspectuality and performativity to keep her readers engaged, intrigued, and working hard both to appreciate and resolve the emotional and ethical tangles she sets up. So 'centrality' is not merely a matter of great scope and scale, but the enduring treatment of central human issues.

All modern cultures exhibit instances of significant local art which fails to achieve resonant international purchase through lack of commanding centrality. In southern Africa the works of, say, Dambudzo Marechera or Roy Campbell, both powerful authors in different ways, are interesting because of their vivid insights and scarifying satire, but would scarcely be regarded as 'central' to readers outside southern Africa. They are of an age and a place, to which their art contributes valuably, while missing the international significance indicated by 'centrality'. In Britain, Evelyn Waugh might be an example, or Martin Amis—writers working in their own idiosyncratic habitus, which not everyone finds accessible or congenial. They are brilliant in their own select domain. Even Virginia Woolf, for all her theoretical interest and historical importance as a woman writer and an avatar of modernism, can be a marginal taste. This kind of thing happens in literary and artistic markets worldwide.

But apparently not to Shakespeare. In the 1970s, when the British Council was still in the habit of sending touring productions of Shakespeare to Africa as a means of exerting 'soft power', someone in the "little regarded" Arts Division (Donaldson 211) decided there was more to British Drama than

⁶ Jane Austen to date notches up 88 film and television credits, starting in 1938 with a TV movie of *Pride and Prejudice* – *Internet Movie Database*, IMDb.

Shakespeare and that some of these riches should be shared with Africa. A tour was sent to East Africa playing Ayckbourn and Pinter, both major British dramatists with a substantial international following. Some months later a report arrived from a distressed field officer, saying in effect, “Please send Shakespeare—the only people who can understand Ayckbourn and Pinter are expatriates in the social clubs” (Wright 44).

The centrality of Shakespeare’s concerns ensures his portability. Negotiating ‘performativity’ and ‘aspectuality’ in dramatic predicaments which stir and activate ‘central’ issues in the Shakespeare text, gives his worldwide audiences a theatrical charge which they evidently find engaging, thrilling, and permanently relevant. They remain willing and often feel compelled to respond to theatrical tropes, gestures, or assertions which pique, challenge or reinforce their own central belief structures. They must ‘perform’ the play *in themselves* to reach resolution—their own resolution. This paratextual dynamism of the Shakespeare text not only provides ample opportunity for actors, directors and production designers to mould and interpret his plays in ways which speak to specific cultural, political and production conjunctures round the globe, but this same dynamism accounts in large measure for Shakespeare’s perennial popularity with audiences. What he dramatizes remains perennially exciting and cogent.

Formal Plasticity

Then there is a more technical and privileged aspect of Shakespeare’s art, accessible mainly to those with some literary and theatrical background: the amazing ‘formal plasticity’ of the Shakespeare text. Shakespeare hardly ever just ‘uses’ or replicates received forms. He always plays with them, transforms them. Think what Shakespeare’s sonnets do with the formal conventions of Petrarchan sonnetteering. The Petrarchan conventions are at once sedately referenced, undermined and utterly transfigured. Each poem is itself, but formally in contention with others by Shakespeare and by earlier sonnet writers. Tensions between staid tradition and Shakespeare’s own creative interventions create a paratextual complexity which tantalises readers. The poems shimmer and stay in the mind as an ambivalent multidimensional experience (Dubrow, Vendler). Or, turning once more to the plays, consider *Titus Andronicus* (1588?). The savage ‘Rome’ on display here reflects more than a proleptic imaginative distance from later representations of the city as seen in *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, the Roman plays written after Shakespeare had made the acquaintance of North’s translation of *Plutarch* (1579). What was once considered uncouth ‘prentice work’ is now acknowledged as a triumph of formal experiment. The play messes with conventions of heroism and villainy, pitting ‘legitimate’ revenge against sheer butchery, religious sacrifice against

unsanctified murder, stoic competence and piety against state-authorised nationalist brutality. The text revels in excess of all kinds, starting and ending with burials, refusing not only comforting thematic resolution but any emollient formal closure. The entire theatrical structure simultaneously acknowledges and denies traditional ideological anchorage, enlivening and reshaping the presuppositions of those equipped to recognise this deliberate 'rape' of inherited formal convention (see, for example, Greg, Guy, Innes, Leggatt). The malleability of this formal theatrical contention animates the power of the Shakespearean text, offering his audiences a multifoliate puzzle to engross and challenge their all-too-human desire for adequate resolution.

The way Shakespeare tinkers with, adapts and improves upon his sources for theatrical effect creates this further sense of multi-dimensionality in the Shakespeare text, a resonance which intrigues and tantalises those in his audience who can hear the originals and rivals echoing beneath the dramatic surface. This may be an arcane feature, available mainly to scholars, but it contributes to the international fascination with Shakespeare. To cite a hackneyed pedagogical instance, teachers routinely compare passages from North's *Plutarch* with what Shakespeare makes of them in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07) (notably Enobarbus's famous speech evoking Cleopatra's arrival at Cydnus: "The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/Burned on the water . . ." etc. (2.2.197-224) and its source in North's *Life of Antony*). The exercise illuminates not only this portion of the play, but some of the foundations of Shakespeare's verse-writing. An additional legacy from probing source material in this way is possibly, even probably, an enhanced response to literary-historical depth in the Shakespeare text, its hidden palimpsestic dimensions.

Diachronic Relevance

'Formal plasticity' in the Shakespeare text is by no means confined to literary or dramatic conventions or sources. Shakespeare creates textual forms so capacious and pliant they become capable of registering glacial change in society, inscribing long-term cultural modulations so massively slow that their general direction still resonates significantly in many regions of today's world. This creates a 'diachronic relevance' extraordinarily useful in accommodating the demands of 'director's theatre' in different parts of the world, hospitable to different ideologies in different ages. Take *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98), though several other texts would do as well. The textual features we have been adumbrating appear here in full strength to work their magic on audiences. The first two, 'performativity' and 'aspectuality', manifest themselves at every turn, providing rich impetus for audience engagement.

To start with, the contrasting courtships of Portia and Jessica invite tantalising paratextual hypotheses that provoke disparate audience responses. Take the so-called ‘casket’ test. How does Portia feel about the strange competition set up by her father to secure an appropriate suitor for his daughter? How would I feel in her shoes? Is this contest supernaturally ordained, or is it rigged? By Portia’s father? By the Venetian patriarchy? By a suitor? By the invisible means of fairy-tale logic whereby the third choice, or the most counter-intuitive choice, or the most ‘romantic’ choice, is always the correct one? Then, which suitor do I find most sympathetic? Which of the suitors am I myself most like? Such questions linger even when the outcome has been decided, and they carry different resonances for different cultures at different periods. This varied aspectuality and performativity plays into the text’s temporal and geographical portability. To this must be added the broader question of how Portia’s formally managed engagement measures up alongside Jessica’s wild elopement with Bassanio’s friend, Lorenzo? Could I rob my widowed father and steal a ring belonging to his late wife, my mother? Which ‘courtship’ would I prefer; how would I react in either predicament? Would I submit obediently or rebel? How does this choice register in my culture? Different audience responses to such hypotheses supply dramatic energy in abundance as the different possibilities meld, morph and clash during and after the performance. Obviously there are many more speculative reactions that could be explored in just this one strand of the plot.

With audience sympathies and empathies responding trenchantly to such typically Shakespearean ‘aspectuality’ and ‘performativity’ playing itself out on stage, few could deny that the play engages central human issues of courting, mating and marriage, universal concerns in all societies and with people of all ages. The centrality of its romantic aspects in some measure guarantees the play’s geographical and historical portability and enables it to find receptive audiences in different societies.

The play’s thematic centrality is not confined to romance. *The Merchant of Venice* broaches large issues of culture, religion, and economics, and this is where the ‘formal plasticity’ and ‘diachronic relevance’ characteristic of the Shakespearean text come into play. Shylock’s famous speech in Act 3, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions” etc. (3.1.49ff.), is often received gratefully as a ringing celebration of common humanity, presciently affirming the equivalence of human cultures, a view congruent with the emollient cultural relativism of twentieth century anthropology. We indeed feel pity for Shylock, especially when his daughter elopes with someone outside his ‘clan’, without his permission or blessing, and moreover when she steals from him not only his ducats, but her mother’s (his late wife’s) precious ring. She has, for the sake of love and freedom, broken with all the religious and societal traditions Shylock holds dear. In orthodox Jewish circles, the apostasy of a child is marked by mourning rites, as though he/she were dead to the family, which is why Shylock says:

“I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin . . .” (3.1.74-76)

But it is also open to audiences to notice that the very speech which lauds Shylock's ineffable humanity at the same time inscribes the unthinking, mechanical responses of an automaton: “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?” (3.1.54-56). Shylock is implacably programmed for revenge. Here is someone prepared to see the life of a compatriot taken in the most savage manner on the basis of mere legalism. How could this be? What animates Shylock's vindictiveness? Consider this speech: “I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (1.3.29-32). So much for ‘common humanity’! Shylock reduces external society to the abstract transactional relations required of a moneylender. Nothing more. His allegiance is to his religious traditions. He hates everything outside his own narrow view of the world, his own restricted community. He can be at home only in small-scale society.

Audience sympathy for Shylock shifts and modulates in response to these changing paratextual intimations. Ethical judgment swings between deep empathy and utter revulsion. Where exactly it settles must be dependent on the individual. It would be utterly inadequate to suggest that the contest is simply that between Old and New Testament ethics because the fictive persons involved are not allegorical figures. ‘People’ are involved, persons whose on-stage presence cannot be reduced to an abstract doctrine. The audience's ethical sympathies become exercised in complex ways, responding to the formal plasticity of the situation Shakespeare has presented for their contemplation.

Shylock is relentless. The immediate cause of his vindictiveness becomes intelligible if the drama's religious dimensions are appreciated in some of their formal (in this case theological) plasticity. Antonio, the ‘Merchant of Venice’, is a Jewish convert to Christianity, known as a *marrano* (the word comes from old Spanish meaning ‘swine’—hence the play on pigs and pork throughout the play). *Marranos* often converted to Christianity not out of belief but to enable them to participate in mercantile trade without being persecuted for violating Jewish edict and tradition (Finn 1989). This is the explanation for Antonio's overwhelming sadness as the play opens: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad...” (1.1.1). He has forsaken his ethnic Jewishness, voluntarily or involuntarily, but is not fully accepted by Christian society which suspects his conversion to be more a matter of convenience than conviction. Neither one thing nor the other, he is pulled in both directions, a “tainted wether of the flock” as he calls himself (4.1.113). His is the play's central predicament, hence the play's title. He is stranded emotionally between a beckoning cosmopolitan future and a stable past he has not quite relinquished. This is also the reason Shylock

insists Antonio's heart should be cut out. It is not mere gratuitous savagery (though it is that, too). The heart was considered the seat of religious identity. Shylock wants to reclaim Antonio's heart to return him to the orthodox Jewish faith he has left behind. He wants to 'save' an apostate, to hold him in the bond of ancient Jewry.

In this play, Shakespeare is not writing merely about the wrongs done to particular people, but about deep social strains occasioned by the slow transition from closed or traditional societies to the more unpredictable, cross-cultural openness of the international, mercantilist civilization of Venice, as bravely contemplated by Jessica and Lorenzo from Belmont at the end of the play. The play's lyrical coda bids a forlorn aubade to Shylock as one who betrays humanity precisely because he is true to his own culture:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted: Mark the music.

(5.1.82-87)

Jessica and Lorenzo are sitting together under the open heavens, responding to the music of the spheres, he 'mansplaining' the workings of the cosmos, she admiring him and enjoying their fresh intimacy which, notably, includes a cross-cultural togetherness and freedom as yet untested by the crude societal prejudices and constraints from which the two have, at least temporarily, escaped. Shylock is rooted in the unchanging codes of small-scale society, confinements still prevalent in many parts of the world, a stranded remnant of tribal conservatism. Venice itself, steeped in mercantilist ethics, is a "refracted projection of London" (Salingar 182), a foretaste of the globalising society to come. Shakespeare is not writing about whether Christians are better than Jews (nobody in the play behaves very creditably), nor about whether Judaism is superior to Christianity, but about the large-scale shift in human outlook occasioned by the gradual, relentless change from closed to open societies. Small wonder this massive diachronic plasticity enables the Shakespeare text to speak cogently to different societies round the world.⁷

⁷ See Laurence Wright, "'Thinking with Shakespeare': The Merchant of Venice – Shylock, Caliban and the dynamics of social scale" (2017). Significantly, when Julius Nyerere came to render *The Merchant of Venice* into Swahili the title he came up with was *Mabapari wa Venise*, which translates roughly as "The Capitalists" or "The Bourgeoisie" of Venice – ably exploiting the text's diachronic plasticity (Nyerere, trans. 1969).

Conclusion

This, to date, is as far as my search for a 'formal cause' helping to explain Shakespeare's burgeoning global presence has taken me. The features described create the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions underpinning the extraordinary adaptability and 'shape-shifting' capacities of the Shakespeare text. The rest is up to the usual suspects: actors, directors, designers, producers—the creative team. But their work rests on the extraordinary textual structures Shakespeare has presciently put in place.

To bolster the thesis presented I would have to describe its implications for interpreting and understanding non-Shakespearean drama and literature in more detail than is appropriate here, but I hope I have said enough to suggest that the world-wide prevalence of Shakespeare is more than an effect of travelling theatrical imperialism, globalising electronic-industrial culture, or entrenched artistic taste—though it is obviously affected by these sociological phenomena. Such forces are equally available to act on the work of Shakespeare's forbears and contemporaries. The fact that this happens only rarely is testament to the fact that, for all their varied excellences, these texts lack the performative potential so richly evident in Shakespeare. At base, the international Shakespearean 'glitter ball' is driven and enabled by a robust textual mechanism comprising ascertainable features which subsist 'behind the language' and help to explain why Shakespeare 'can be anywhere'. Without this textual mechanism his work would simply have stayed at home instead of coruscating round the globe.

My hope is that sensitive use of this rubric may contribute to richer accounts of what makes Shakespeare's plays and poems appeal to such markedly diverse audiences around the world, in the way they so often do. It may well be that investigating worldwide Shakespearean phenomena in their attention to *performativity*, *aspectuality*, *thematic centrality*, *formal plasticity*, and *diachronic relevance* in context, will not only enhance the material specificity of performance descriptions, but increase our understanding of why it is that Shakespeare continues to thrive and outperform internationally not only his precursors and contemporaries, but countless other notable artists and writers who have subsequently come to prominence.

Adumbrating a neutral descriptive rubric to pin down elements in the Shakespeare text which enable its geographical and historical portability and traction, as I have done here, is not an effort to explain or eulogise Shakespeare's ageless contemporaneity and relevance on lines pioneered by writers such as Jan Kott (1967) or, more recently, Marjorie Garber (2004). (In any case, this would be redundant given his current popularity.) Nor is it antithetical to research which attempts to 'medievalise' our understanding of Shakespearean drama or to reaffirm the value of archival or paleographical

approaches to Shakespeare studies (Cooper 2010; Erne 2021). Although it emphasises the play of paratextual hypotheses provoked by the text which enable varied audience interpretations to take place, it is also distinct from the ‘Audience Frames’ approach developed by Susan Bennett (1997). The model strives to stand outside the semiology of empirical audience response in order to map those paratextual features characteristic of the Shakespeare text which enable it perennially to be “acted over,/In states unborn and accents yet unknown!” (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.112-14).

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