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Towards Intercultural Dialogue with Shakespeare

Ptolemy's geocentric scheme of the universe gave a relative place to all things in creation. The medieval idea of a Great Chain of Being, adopted by the Renaissance, is not so foreign to contemporary minds. Even in an enlightened age of democratic progress upheld by peaceful political and economic alliances such as the United Nations and the European Union, a hierarchy of values necessarily informs social relations. Of course, in the Ptolemaic world view degrees and stations are fixed, and it is the countermovement of Renaissance humanism to which today's championing of social and individual mobility corresponds. Globalization simultaneously adds and removes limitations on social and economic mobility, depending on what particular point of the process a group or individual is located.¹ The tempest in Lear's mind results from this same asymmetry between humanist and Ptolemaic philosophy: a lament for a lost order and belated remorse for those it leaves dispossessed.

Cultural and economic displacements take unique forms in English speaking countries with multicultural policies. Within typical multicultural societies such as Ontario, Canada, an urgent question arises for the secondary English teacher: To what extent is teaching English, and Shakespeare in particular, an act of cultural colonization? Is the secondary English classroom implicated in the postcolonial

¹ Selma Sonntag surveys the debate between theorists like Thomas Friedman who portray economic globalization as democratization and others like Barry Gills and Benjamin Barber who identify adverse and even anti-democratic effects. See Sonntag 11.

discourse? Who do we accommodate, who do we dispossess of their own languages and cultural heritages? Such questions underlie current debates in Ontario on the place of ethnocultural heritage, racial and religious identity in education.² Before answering them, it is helpful to consider whether they apply more to the area of language or to that of literature.

Within the new order of globalization, the English language is a tool for social and economic mobility. Multinationals, American movies and media, and the magnetic pull of Shakespeare, all contribute to the position of English as today's *lingua franca*. It is this phenomenon of linguistic globalization that Selma Sonntag describes in *The Local Politics of Global English*. While UNESCO estimates that half of the world's 6,000 languages risk extinction,³ the dominant English speaking countries – the US and Britain – are at the core of linguistic, and with it, cultural power. Proximate to their centrality are other Anglo-Saxon countries that are well integrated within the global economy. In the wider orbit are countries of varying degrees of global integration which either resist English influence (China, France) or lack the economic or educational development for it to spread more rapidly (Nepal). In a separate category are countries where historical dependencies have given way to democratization and English serves only as an official language (India, South Africa). There is a Ptolemaic constancy to this hierarchy of Englishes that defines the place or rather placeless-ness of most other languages. It is as though Renaissance England's ideological bid for empirical supremacy, helped by its literary tradition (especially Shakespeare, although ironically not the nationalist plays primarily), comes to life through the spread of the English language.

Through traditional pedagogy, the English cultural influence can be felt in the predominance of Shakespeare in education. In this sense, it can be argued that there is another language at the core of linguistic globalization. As many of my Ontario-Canadian highschool students over the past decade would attest, Shakespeare is not English: "Miss," they would say, "It's hard to understand because of the old English". Explaining to them that the works reflect the early period of modern English does little to solve the dilemma. It cannot be denied that learning to appreciate Shakespeare's plays demands familiarity with a different linguistic universe, and like any new language, requires the help of a glossary or dictionary. Whether this experience is comparable with that of learning Shakespeare in a non-English country would of course depend on what versions are used, whether English or translated. Yet quite apart from the verbal

² The 2007 Ontario provincial election was decided on the rejection of the Conservative party's platform for publically funded religious schools. In February 2008, a heated public debate on the creation of a pilot Afrocentric school led to a narrow victory of those in favor.

³ For more information see: UNESCO.org: "Intangible Cultural Heritage – ICH" <www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00136>. The UNESCO statistics derive from the research of Professor Stephen Wurm.

precipice, especially steep for non-native and ESL students, there are the hurdles of classical allusion, poetry and dramaturgy, and in senior years, Shakespeare criticism – additional distinct modes of the bardic discourse. A scene from *King Lear* illustrates the problem:

GLOUCESTER: But have I fallen or no?

EDGAR: From the dead summit of this chalky bourn.
Look up a-height, the shrill-gorg'd lark so far
Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

GLOUCESTER: Alack, I have no eyes.
Is wretchedness depriv'd that benefit,
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort,
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage,
And frustrate his proud will.

(4.6.56–64)

The enigma of Edgar's maintaining his disguise with his father, the complexity of staging a false fall, and the rare vocabulary – *chalky bourn*, *shrill-gorg'd lark*, *Alack* – combine to make this fragment of text a dense, vertical reading experience even for masters of the English language.

Nevertheless, scene by scene play by play students are rehearsed in the Bard's language. To be sure, the anticipated educational rewards are great: empathy for the human condition, respect for the power of language, enfranchisement in a universal conversation. Today, Shakespeare's allusive reach courses well beyond universities and theatres, into the veins of everyday life and popular culture.⁴ Internationally, Shakespeare is a hallmark of a truly complete education, and students perceive this (even if they are not constantly reminded).

Partially because it is a linguistic universe of its own, Shakespeare pervades the North American educational agenda. In Canada Shakespeare is featured in the English curriculum at every highschool level. No other author receives such repeated, layered emphasis amounting to up to twenty percent of the total time spent on full length literary works. An even clearer sign of Shakespeare's dominance is the increasing use of the plays at the elementary school level and the accompanying rise in the number of publications of school guides and adaptations for young readers⁵ to say nothing of educational websites. All point

⁴ Bearing witness to the bard's status as popular icon, is the 10th Anniversary of the North American tour of *MacHomer*, a one-man show melding *MacBeth* and the legendary American animated sitcom, *The Simpsons*. Peter Donaldson heralds the trend in "All which it inherit: Shakespeare, Globes and Global Media" (1999).

⁵ Castlemoyle Publishing's series *Shakespeare Shorts* (Grades 4 to 6) with rubrics for teachers, Jeannette Sanderson's *Shakespeare's Mini Books* in comic book format and Carol Miller's *Irresistible Shakespeare* (Grade 5 and Up), to name a few.

to an argument for Shakespeare literacy that brings into question the broader social relevance of academic canon debates.⁶ Canada is far from an anomaly in this regard. In England, the National Curriculum Test requires students age 14 to pass a compulsory Shakespeare task. In other English speaking countries, and increasingly Europe, Shakespeare's mark on public education and common culture is no less obvious.

While the linguistic challenges of learning Shakespeare for English language learners are obvious, less so is the binding effect that Shakespeare has on the traditional English curriculum. The exceptionality of Shakespeare can be overlooked in reactions against curriculum reform efforts designed to reinvigorate the subject English in ways that make it more meaningful for specific groups of learners. Does Shakespeare earn its lion's share of space on a curriculum bench still crowded with male white Anglosaxon authors? Can the curricular hierarchy (which lags behind the world canon) shift to accommodate marginalized identities without apocalyptic consequences?

A test case is found in a geographically and culturally "separate society" within Canada: High school drop out rates and a disproportionate incidence of teen suicide among Canada's Inuit communities⁷ argue for a more culturally reflexive curriculum. The drastic impacts of Western cultural hegemony and environmental damage – including fragile language and customs and alienation from the larger society all but make the canon debate moot in these small isolated settlements cut off from urban centres. Neither is the solution of "multicultural literature," sentimentally applied, any more an adequate answer than in French speaking Quebec. But if Inuit and Quebec youth are not to miss out on Shakespeare, how will the thorns of colonizing assimilation be removed from the experience? The eagle must "suffer little birds to sing" (Titus Andronicus, 4.4) if their song is to survive. In such circumstances, ill-suited texts: novels of the American deep south, urbane middle class satires, eccentric Victorian novels, for example, must be reconsidered to make room for literature that corresponds to the experience of learners, not merely through matching settings and ethnic or historical backgrounds, but more deeply through the narratives of aspiration, struggle, and loss that in their particularities evoke satisfying interpretations and responses on the part of learners. In this the teacher's role is a critical canonicity that begins where students are and where they come from.⁸

Because Shakespeare, as Harold Bloom estimates, is the most truly multicultural of authors, the plays and the methodology used to create learning experi-

⁶ See Brantlinger 2001.

⁷ More information can be found: Hicks, "The Social Determinants of Elevated Rates of Suicide by Inuit Youth" at http://www.ppforum.ca/common/assets/arctic/jack_hicks.pdf in the report on Economic Transformation North of 60, December 13, 2006.

⁸ Such a critical canonicity would be remarkably different in a multicultural society from one recovering from oppressive forms of nationalism. See, for example, Nicolaescu 182–192.

ences through them, must also be carefully selected. The Inuit example is useful for its visibility and dramatic urgency, but more typical in multicultural centres in countries such as Canada, is a classroom filled with students from all the different continents of the world, with a variety of mother tongue languages and disparate levels of economic and social integration. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's expansive immigration policies of the seventies and the Multicultural Act of 1988 catalyzed the trend towards increased multicultural content in the Canadian curriculum. Within these demographics, cultural and linguistic loss may be far less visible since root communities are separate from the school which is either a heterotopia for diversity or a false utopia, a multicultural myth where distinct cultural identities do not glisten in a mosaic, but dissolve into a melting pot.

There is an upside to standardization: My South African friend and I, for example, can talk about very similar experiences of high school English even though we were educated on different continents. Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* are common books that we learned in school. For us, the Anglo-American literary canon is a common cultural experience, a kind of cultural language we both speak. However, this kind of Anglosaxon literary globalization through school curricula is in tension with more universal canons, such as those evident in European curriculum materials which allow students to survey literary contributions across nations and eras. In *The Western Canon* and *The Invention of the Human* Harold Bloom articulates a stable literary order that includes the ancient Greeks and Romans, the *Torah* as well as the iconic works of many Western nations; it is Shakespeare's plays that occupy the innermost circle of this hierarchy (with Dante for company) and *King Lear* the very core. Pascale Casanova, in *The Republic of Letters*, revises with a Paris-centred account of literary canonization but leaves for now the prominence accorded Shakespeare by earlier literary cosmographers intact.

In many schools in Ontario, Canada we find several of the world's peoples represented in our classrooms, but few in the English curriculum. In addition to ethno-racial heterogeneity, in many districts, there is a high proportion of visible minorities and a great deal of linguistic diversity. The English teacher in such a milieu, where the limits of multiculturalism are being tested, has much balancing to do in brokering the gulf between common and plural culture: There is the joy of reading and self-expression that we wish all learners; there is a strong belief in the humanizing effects of good literature, its capacity to nurture the faculties of empathy conscience and imagination; there is, too, the hold of canon literacy, the almost moral drive to introduce each generation to the "best" written English words, the most finely crafted poems and stories. But there is also the responsi-

bility to promote cultural literacy in many senses – knowledge of unique human experiences, shared democratic values, as well as the changing world and its diverse peoples. For this last task Canadian English teachers today enjoy vast resources. Much world literature is written in English and increasingly, Canadian novelists are voicing the “other”, and transforming the national critical canon. Yet for now, with the exception of some national authors and multicultural anthologies, our students’ knapsacks still carry the usual suspects: Dickens, Austen, Bronte, James, Golding, Beckett, Williams, Miller and above all Shakespeare. As long as this traditionalism (or economical adherence to inventory) persists, intercultural learning will greatly rely on pedagogical ingenuity.

And here lies the rub: whereas many other canon works are culturally flat, evoking geographically and historically specific settings, Shakespeare takes us everywhere as in *The Tempest*, and even, as in *King Lear*, literally nowhere.⁹ Shakespeare imaginatively transforms sources, plays with place, and transposes cultural experiences. Shakespeare is not English, except perhaps according to his bond, as in the history plays, the *terra firma* from which the plays dive into other worlds, defying (and then redefining) the limits of a national language through linguistic invention. There is a national Shakespeare, but greater still is the international Shakespeare, and the Shakespeare of Everyman.

While in theory, a Bard-centered curriculum enables a diversity of discourses, it can just as easily foreclose intercultural dialogue. This is particularly so when Shakespeare is taught as a national author, and over-historicized. The history of the Globe theatre, Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the Renaissance world view, are significant pieces for puzzling together the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays, but it is a mistake to let them overshadow the imaginary discursive spaces to which the poetry and drama give rise. Transcendent settings, perspectival variance towards human types, negative capability to see the present from outside of it, and a fertile cross-cultural existential language are precisely what justify the predominance of Shakespeare’s plays in English education as in world culture.

⁹ Shakespeare’s map takes us beyond the borders of physical life into graves (Ham.) catacombs (Rom.) nut shells (Rom, Ham.) enchanted forests (MND), the crevice in a tree (Tem.), a prison for birds (Lr.). In breaking with Aristotelian unities, Shakespeare radically questions identities of earthly place: “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (Ham. 2.2.)

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