

Book Reviews

***Shakespeare and Asia. Shakespeare Yearbook* vol. 17, Eds. Yang Lingui, Douglas A. Brooks, Ashley Brinkman, New York: The Edward Mellen Press, 2010. Pp. Vii+528. ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-3726-5, ISBN-10: 0-7734-3726-6.**

Reviewed by Dhrubajyoti Sarkar*

I

There are three things about the book that grab our attention immediately and prod us to explore its contents: the cover photograph of the Prince's Sword Dance, an iconic cultural production in the Chinese tradition, its impeccable lineage of being the seventeenth volume in the Shakespeare Yearbook series, and finally, its publication from The Edward Mellen Press.

The General Introduction of the book informs us of its conception as a panel in the MLA convention in 2004 as "Shakespeare and China" and subsequent gain in bulk and scope to assume a pan-Asian coverage. Twenty-two essays of the volume are divided into three sections: A 'Special Essay' that opens the volume; 'Theme Essays: Shakespeare and Asia' and 'General Essays'. As may be expected from the thematic focus of the volume, there are fourteen essays that constitute the second section. Moreover another essay, entitled "Shakespeare's Humanism: *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and Sufism" could have justifiably made its way to the second section, thus it could have increased the number of essays in the section of thematic focus to fifteen. Numerically speaking, fifteen essays devoted to such a large cultural and political category like Asia and its engagement with an equally complicated and protean cultural category of Shakespeareana is too small a platter to do justice to its proposed scope. However, even if the practical contingencies of a single-volume work are accepted, the book's proposed thematic focus is thoroughly undermined by the content of the volume. Out of the fourteen essays in the section entitled "Thematic Essays", eight are concerned with reception and adaptations of

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Shakespearean texts in PR China, three essays are concerned with a Taiwanese experience and only one with a Japanese case study. If there were a few essays on Korean experience in this volume, that would have rendered the treatment of the category of 'Asia' in this volume in line with the American academic practice of considering Asia as the shoreline as something visible across the American strategic borderline to the Pacific. Thus, the book's conscious attempt to variegate the attention Indian engagement with Shakespeareana has traditionally received in the wake of postcolonial studies remains vindicated, only at the expense of disciplinary confabulation of a new connotation of Asia. The double-bind of the national boundary of the PRC and the cultural-linguistic boundary of the Chinese culture on the volume operates in a vice-like grip.

The reviewer, therefore finds, that the original scope of the book could have remained the same with a much better result. This is true not only because of its lopsided claim to subsume a pan-Asian identity, but also because of its inclusion of a number of wonderful thematic and bibliographical essays that fails to integrate into the book's proposal and design. The entire section of "General Essays", leaving apart the one already mentioned, looks like an appendage, so does the opening essay which may claim its place among the classics of thoroughly researched Shakespeare criticism. It is anyone's guess that no researcher would ever expect to stumble upon essays on liturgical symbolism and design of *The Tempest* or an approach to teaching *Othello* or a deliberation on a performative puzzle on *Hamlet* in a volume on Shakespeare and Asia.

II

As has been already mentioned, the opening essay by Glyn Parry, "New Evidence on William Shakespeare and Edmond Campion" (1-27), contributes to the volume through engagement with the biographical and thematic interface of Shakespearean studies. It takes on the question of identification of William Shakeshafte as the pseudonymous William Shakespeare in service to the Catholic sympathiser Alexander Houghton and its possible consequence of Catholic interpretations of Shakespearean plays and passages. Providing thorough biographical and archival evidence on the contrary, the essay however, reiterates the warning against "political enthusiasm" overcoming the "cautions inherent in the historical record" and thus diminishing, rather than expanding, the understanding of Shakespeare (21).

This essay is followed by David Bevington's treatment of Shakespearean attitudes towards the Asia and Asians in "Imagining the East: Shakespeare's Asia" (29-44). The essay is not only bolstered by close textual references from all the canonical Shakespearean texts but also successfully demonstrates possibility of a categorical distinction between the representation in dramatic mode and that of sonnets; the former being more objective or social-realistic and the latter of more subjective. In continuation, Bevington observes that "the word 'orient' has

a generally positive connotation in Shakespeare” (43); though almost all his references are to Shakespeare’s sonnets. Interesting observations like Shakespeare’s pioneering role in introducing the pejorative connotation of the word Cathay from seventeenth century onwards stand out against the general confusion that obviously arises out of any attempt to categorize Shakespeare’s Asian citizens. This confusion in Shakespeare does not come as a surprising omission as more than hundred years after Shakespeare’s time, even during the early heyday of the East India Company, canonical English texts, like De Quincey’s *Confessions* unabashedly confuses the Tartars, Malays, Indians and Chinese.

A group of thematically cogent essays on reception of Shakespeare in its three different varieties – theatrical adaptations, textual adaptations and translations – constitute a substantial portion of the rest of the section. Interesting historical evidence of appropriation of a single text for different and changing political regimes in China makes for a curious case whose potentialities have been well-documented but not adequately explored in the volume. Similar interesting observations regarding how the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* becomes the de-facto alternative for Shakespearean folio and quarto editions and how the consequent genre transformation from a dramatic to a narrative mode change the entire idea of the Shakespeare canon is an exploration that would contribute towards contemporary theories of narratology and intertextuality.

Richard Burt’s essay on adaptation (45-78), claims to straddle three distinct areas of digital films, Asianization and transnational film remake. Though the essay does not conclusively build on a model of interaction between such coordinates, the terms of reference and terms of variety of adaptive mechanism make for interesting observations, possibly taking off from the parameters set out in the essay.

Another set of essays, completely different in their methodological emphasis, incorporates new technology and its incorporation into reinventing Shakespeare in a contemporary classroom. Though the empirical evidence that informs the essays by Chin-jung Chiu (233-52) and Alan Ying-nan Lin (253-66) are specific to a Taiwanese postgraduate classroom scenario, its derivations can surely be extended to both applied and theoretical reconfigurations that are not specific to the source of the original data set.

Finally, there are two essays that deal with the issues of class and Shakespeare in two different cultural contexts. Weimin Li’s essay (161-80) on Maoist China’s changing attitudes to Shakespeare and its inclusion in the state propaganda mechanism indicates an afterlife of Shakespearean text that transcends all contextual apprehension. The elision between the two becomes so obvious that the boundary between “class struggles in Shakespeare’s plays and those in contemporary [China]” becomes impervious (176). In effect the “only purpose of Shakespeare studies” in those times was to “provide commentary on

class struggle and the untoward bourgeoisie” (176). A more complicated relationship between Shakespeare and issues of class is analysed in Masae Suzuki’s essay on reception and adaptation of *Othello* in Okinawa and Japan (321-36). A complex mix between internal imperialism of the Japanese sort and its modernization project of emulation the Western ‘virtues’ provide a layered and multi-dimensional analysis of signification of Shakespeare canon for nineteenth and early twentieth century imperial Japan.

III

In the wake of various post-modernist discourses, the area of Shakespeare studies has vaulted into newer directions. This has necessarily required newer attitudes to grapple with the new directions. One such major shift in attitude was the tendency of writing back to Shakespeare. But often in such activities British colonial discourse provided the mainstay of references. But both the Chinese and Japanese experiences are technically free of such imperial imperatives. Therefore, an in-depth engagement with such cultural contexts will certainly open up newer possibilities of terms of engagement. However, a different set of binaries of more over-arching nature like the Orient and the Occident emerges from the general pattern of analysis of the encounter. Even though the volume reasonably eschews all references to Indian or other postcolonial interactions with Shakespeare, the wonderful symbolic assumption of Shakespeare to stand for the West in Raja Rao’s *The Cat and Shakespeare* obviously comes to mind.

The General Introduction informs us of a three-volume series whose first publication is the present volume. Two more in the same series, entitled *Shakespeare and Lacan* and *Shakespeare after 9/11* would surely demand our attention the way this volume has done for an increasingly significant area of global concern. All serious scholars of Shakespeare in particular and multicultural engagement in general will surely be benefited from the book.

Abdulla Al-Dabbagh, *Shakespeare, the Orient, and the Critics*, New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010. Pp. Ix + 148. ISBN978-1-4331-1059-7.

Reviewed by Sagar Taranga Mandal*

On 14 July 1099, with the first light of dawn, horn-calls resounded through the crusader camps, announcing the final assault on Jerusalem, ending the siege that began exactly thirty-seven days ago. Over the course of three years the Latins had, through the force of arms and power of faith, forged a route across Europe and the near East: a journey that reduced once-proud knights to riding donkeys and oxen. Now, in this long-imagined moment of victory, with their long-cherished dream realised, the unholy train of brutality they unleashed on their Muslim foes irremediably transformed relations between Christendom and Islam, setting these two great religions on a war path for times to come.¹ However, we must recognize, privileged as we are with retrospective hindsight, that only when the memory of the First Crusade was “appropriated and refashioned in western Europe” did the atmosphere of Latin-Muslim antipathy solidify. Between 1096 and 1099, although the Latin West and Islam did fight each other as enemies, the collective consciousness of western and eastern societies rarely harboured any, to quote Asbridge, “inbuilt, genetically coded hatred” (Asbridge 338). On the contrary, the ground reality had been one of commerce and diplomacy alongside skirmishes. In 1108, and again in 1115, the Latins even campaigned alongside Muslim allies. Restoring the history of this confluence, more so in a literary form, is a valuable exercise, because not only such an act dismantles pretensions to cultural hegemony, it enables one to break free from a ‘critical confusion’ that views any Oriental legacy as an inversion of normal gender roles and sexual behaviour.

In Abdulla Al-Dabbagh’s *Shakespeare, the Orient, and the Critics*, a primer on current critical vectors of race in Shakespeare studies, we find a humane effort to contextualize Shakespeare’s imagination within a broader framework of Islamic Sufi thought. The seven-chapter book could approximately be seen as a combination of two major thrusts: the first concerns the exposition of the eclectic mix of historical or cultural backgrounds that have informed much of Shakespeare’s oeuvre; the second deals explicitly with how this confluence of Eastern and Western elements works its way into a special expression of Renaissance humanism that transcends the boundaries of class, race and culture. Al-Dabbagh’s study looks at the complex history of exchange, attraction and

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¹ See Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (London: The Free Press, 2005).

repulsion between English and Moorish peoples; admiration for aspects of Islamic culture, and more importantly, Oriental/Islamic contribution to European Renaissance culture. The Introductory chapter, in itself a rich survey of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, and its inadequacies thereof, highlights initially, "Shakespeare's tragedy as a blueprint for the legitimization of state violence" and "humanist trivialization of history" (Al-Dabbagh 7-8). It next moves more insistently towards identifying the key components of Islamic culture like a high degree of urbanization, the spread of literacy, the development of science, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and religious tolerance as the very tenets that gave rise to the spirit of universalism and the "idea of the unity of mankind" (Al-Dabbagh 8) and effectively impacted western consciousness. This critical stance, to be taken up in much detail in the chapters dealing with the 'love tragedies' (Chapters 1 and 2), and the major tragedies, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* (Chapter 3), is a more viable alternative towards the formation of a stable East-West dialogue than the ones proposed by the paradigms of enslavement, domination, and "wider spiritual conversion" (Al-Dabbagh 6) which Dabbagh briefly explores. Interestingly enough, in his "Introduction" Dabbagh points out that while most traditional Eurocentric schools of Renaissance thought acknowledged European humanism's debt to the tradition of medieval mysticism, such acceptance came without understanding the Islamic affinities of this heritage. He then links, in an effort to lay bare, as one might say 'this debt', Shakespeare's dramatic strategy with Islamic Sufi philosophy, and deems it to be the "proper philosophic" focus for investigating the Bard's humanist outlook.

Does this link-up, we may ask, so valuable in its own right, enable the readers to view Shakespeare in a new light? The answer is perhaps both a yes and a no. In Chapter 2, "Shakespeare's Orientalism and the Reversal of Stereotypes," Dabbagh ascribes, at the very outset, in some haste it seems, Shakespeare's dramatic strategy for refuting racism in the play *Othello* to the product of an enlightened mind, calling it a "superb and ingenious" (Al-Dabbagh 18) instance of 'negative capability'. Now, even we become, albeit temporarily, blind to the projection of Othello as a "complex, tension-ridden, discursive vessel" racked with psychic rifts which no concept of racial identity can adequately explain (Mallin), we may take it as a veritable truth that an Elizabethan dramatist choosing to write about a Moor's marriage with a white wife did not do so merely to peddle platitudes. This simple logic was not missed, as claimed by Dabbagh, by contemporary exegesis on Shakespeare. As E.A.J Honigmann observes in his Introduction to the Arden edition of *Othello*, "Shakespeare's determination to question the 'the normal' emerges from the large number of stereotypes that sets up only to knock them down" (Honigmann 61).

In *Othello* Shakespeare asks us to think the unthinkable and challenges us to see and locate the man beneath the mask. For a man who was a principal shareholder in London's most successful theatrical company and an energetic

accumulator of wealth in Stratford and London, such negation of the market ethos, makes him something of a romantic, even if, to quote Mark Rose, “an unillusioned one” (Rose 76). That Dabbagh’s survey, at times, glosses over this ‘humanist’ angle in western scholarship on Shakespeare, if not disappointing enough, his silence, while deliberating on the elements of Shakespeare’s literary Orientalism, on the post-colonial and African readings and revisions of the play is hard to extenuate. It is useful at times to position the play onto a different clime, and watch the effects. For example, the Sudanese author Tayib Salih’s novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) retells story of a North African Othello, named Mustapha Sa’eed, and shows him up in the throes of mimicry and self-alienation in a post-colonial society. Mustapha lands in jail after murdering his English wife (Singh 180). Such renderings, however, are based on an unqualified appreciation of one key element of the Bard’s genius. By way of a de-tour, the explanation of this patent novelty could be gained by simply asking why is there such immense pleasure to be had by subjecting the Bard’s plays to myriad ideological readings. The answer, to be found in the lived experience of Shakespeare’s characters – in the ‘life’ and ‘energies’ they create of their own – and which always allows us to re-read Shakespeare in the light of new and ever-expanding worldviews, be they post-colonial, post-modern, or Sufism, is exactly what might allow us to ‘deprovincialize’ the Bard and make way for the understanding that “freedom, improvisation, or play can exist in the context of racialist inscriptions” (Mallin 355).

In this connection, the feminist critic Juliet Dusinberre points out that, in modern times, actresses who have relied too much on their physical charisma in the role of Cleopatra have been less successful than those, like Judi Dench at the National Theatre in 1987, who have allowed others to make as “important contribution to her irresistible aura – in the way they describe and react to her – as the actress’s own performance” (Dusinberre qtd. in McEvoy 92). Perhaps this is borne out none too clearly than by that remarkable scene which sees the queen of Egypt contemplating her fate as one of abjection, being dragged through Rome while the people perform satirical plays about her:

CLEOPATRA. The quick comedians
 Extemporally will stage us and present
 Our Alexandrian revel: Antony
 Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
 Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
 I’ the posture of a whore. (5.2.215-20)

Of course, in 1608 these would have been spoken by a boy actor. At this point, however, Cleopatra ‘imagines’ the boy who will be (mis-)playing her, rather than the adolescent male actor imagining the character (Dusinberre qtd. in McEvoy

94). In this reversal, McEvoy observes, “we can perhaps see that the language, the role itself, does not *depend* on the *physical* body of the actor to create the sensual, playful and powerful role which dominates the play” (McEvoy 94, emphasis mine). This aspect of pure aesthetic merit lighting it way towards the ethos of an ideational flexibility is sadly neglected by Al-Dabbagh. His reading of *Anthony and Cleopatra* creates an overpowering totality of racial notions within which Egypt’s moral scrupulousness is made evident. This seemingly all too literal inquiry, reliant as it is on showing up instances where Shakespeare’s dramatic technique of undercutting accepted notions of racial stereotypes is in full bloom, carries on in the section titled “The Merchant of Venice”. This, though, is not the segment’s only flaw.

In the Elizabethan imagination, the Jews occupied a special position theologically. Considered separate from the Muslims, they were neither heathens nor heretics but were seen to mirror Renaissance Christianity’s own past. As a result, the conversion of Jews was looked upon as a holy mission because it marked the historical completion of Christ’s project (Orgel 242). This order of consideration goes a long way in explaining the strange ambivalence Shakespeare exhibits about Shylock, and it also helps to explain why he is unwilling to banish him after the trial scene, but wants to incorporate him into the Christian world. Al-Dabbagh in his humanist formulations stops at crediting Shakespeare with a fundamental universal vision that is never “one-sided”. He lauds his basic strategy of the balanced condemnation of both anti-Jewish and anti-Christian prejudice, and goes on to suggest that such refutation of anti-Semitism could only have been possible within the parameters of Renaissance humanism, ending with the sweeping, yet valid, proposition that Shakespeare could only be a man of his age (Al-Dabbagh 44). We concur with Al-Dabbagh. Nevertheless, it would have placed the author of the text on surer ground if he would have been patient with his turn from semantics to biographical criticism, and took it upon himself to explore a bit more steadfastly just ‘how’ Shakespeare was a man of his age, and what critical compulsions, like Jews being part of a Christian religious endeavour, did he re-fashion into his plays.

In Chapter 2, “The Oriental Framework of *Romeo and Juliet*,” we close in on Al-Dabbagh’s central argument, provided by Islamic Sufism, which as we shall see is brought upon to shed light on the paradoxical co-existence of good and evil in a play like *Romeo and Juliet*. Further, Al-Dabbagh resorts to the Islamic Sufi ideal of the unity of existence to foreground two more things in particular. First, he sees the play’s imagery of light versus darkness as reflecting both divine and human love. Second, he strives, through this essentially humanist paradigm to point towards an apparent resolution of the conflict between fate and free will, arguing that the latter “could only be expressed in conformity with the inner conditions of what is already there” (Al-Dabbagh 63). Thus, in Al-

Dabbagh's reading, man, or the perfect man, is one who achieves the union of freedom with necessity.

Such reading, in turn, is deeply suggestive of the etymological significance underlying the term 'Sufi'. Indeed, as a descriptive term, the word 'Sufi' is practically interchangeable with the words *darvish* or *faqir*, meaning 'mendicant' or 'poor'. While some have argued that 'Sufi' derives from the Arabic *safwe*, meaning 'elected', others deem it as a corruption of the Greek word *sophia*: wisdom. Now if *sophia* is to be understood in its Aristotelian aspect as "knowledge of ultimate things," then, as Reza Aslan notes in his history of Islam, "it is very much related to the term *Sufi*, just not linguistically" (Aslan 199). In fact, Aslan narrates the parable of the four travelers desiring the same thing, in different linguistic forms, and the linguist who makes them realize their folly. The four travelers represent humanity in its search for an inner spiritual succor it cannot fathom and which it expresses in different ways. The linguist is the Sufi, who enlightens humanity to the fact that what it seeks (its religions), though called by different names, are in reality one identical thing (Aslan 209). More pertinent to our discussion, however, is Aslan's direct answer to the query, *what is Sufism?* Aslan's response is illuminating: It is the love of Majnun for Laila. It is "numberless waves, lapping and momentarily reflecting the sun – all from the same sea" (Aslan 204).

Situating Shakespeare's play, notwithstanding its appeal to the collective unconscious of humanity, against this backdrop of Oriental tradition of devotion and tragic love is not without its problems. When we say a particular play deals with the notion of 'love', we necessarily assume love as both constant and abstract, imbued with a timeless quality. But love doesn't stand outside of history. As McEvoy notes, "[it] is an emotion felt by people in actual time" (McEvoy 2). It is a similar emotion connecting say, Romeo and Juliet in sixteenth century Verona with Nizami's Hüsrev and Şirin. But it is not the same idea existing independently through time rebuffing its historical context. Here, one might be subscribing too heavily to Greenblatt's notion of *poetics of culture* that accepts literature as part of the variety of cultural forms and institutions that combine to shape what we call 'culture' (Greenblatt 254). But the provocation was always there. In Al-Dabbagh's salient formulation of his "framework", his systemic locus. "Framework," he writes, "does not entail specific, conscious borrowing so much as a *rich cultural legacy* upon which the work is generally dependent both *intellectually* and *formalistically*, without there being the need of even an awareness of such dependence" (Al-Dabbagh 59, emphasis mine).

Such avowal runs counter to Al-Dabbagh's denial of "historical" and "comparative" framework to the New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, of the kind that seems to be "needed" for the study of Shakespeare and, Renaissance literature generally. We do not grudge Mr Al-Dabbagh his attempt to spiritually robe what in Shakespearean canon have been familiar conclusions. Lear has won

an enlightened soul, “adopting higher quality and leaving every lower quality” (Aslan 204), so that the fruit can be reached. Hamlet in his search for “the pearl hidden in the shell” (Aslan 204) confronts an unfair social system. In all this, even if we try to ignore the homogenizing impulse inadvertently brought about as a result of a too liberal application of the Sufi paradigm, we cannot overlook the author’s eventual acceptance of a system of thought based on material conditions of existence. Al-Dabbagh views both Shakespeare and Marx (“Shakespeare and Money”) as censors who in their works blasted the capitalist value system, one at the moment of its first appearance on the stage of economic history, the other at the historical moment of its approaching collapse. Yet this is not a moment of triumph for either school of thought, material or the abstract, or for that matter for Cartesian rationalism. More importantly perhaps, this grey moment brings us to *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Because we live in a culture that has severed its links with its own cultural heritage and is awash with Western ideas of history, we tend to forget the rich and powerful impact the East had on European writing. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the winds of *The Thousand and One Nights* rustle through the pages of Stendhal, Coleridge, De Quincey, and Poe (Pamuk 120). Pandering to the tastes of the back streets, the tales in this anthology are replete with never-ending rounds of betrayals, tricks, and provocations, miracles and scenes of terror. But equally enigmatic is its birth. Antoine Galland, the French translator, and the tales’ first anthologizer, did not cull the riveting stories from ancient manuscripts that he claimed to have acquired in Syria. He heard them from a Christian Arab named Hanna Diyab and subsequently compiled them into an anthology (Pamuk 120). Even though, Al-Dabbagh does not explore this background of assorted provenance of the tales, his analysis is attentive to the diverse strains of influence the Arabian Nights exercise on western canonical ethics, arguing that the essential orality of the tales allow western writers, the Bard included, to conceive a more flexible, more liberal idea of gender roles in particular, and humanity in general. Al-Dabbagh’s tome must be seen as a crucial contribution to the understanding of this cross-cultural legacy. It makes us remember that all true literature springs from the hopeful certainty that all people resemble one another. There is much joy to be had in such remembrance. It lifts our spirits, and in the same breath cautions us to the stupidity of believing in a singular cultural ethos. There are not many books about which we can say this.

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