Special 40th Anniversary Issue

Contextualizing the Apparently Bizarre

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Paul E.H. Hair, "Hamlet in an Afro-Portuguese Setting: New Perspectives on Sierra Leone in 1607," *History in Africa* 5 (1978), 21–42, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171477.

The article which is the subject of this essay concerns the visit of an English expedition headed for the East Indies, commanded by William Keeling, to the River Sierra Leone, where it spent five and half weeks in August and September 1607. Keeling's journal of this voyage is no longer preserved in full, but extracts from it published in the nineteenth century record that while he was at Sierra Leone, probably on 5 September 1607, a performance of "the tragedie of Hamlett" was presented on board his ship, apparently for entertainment of a Portuguese-speaking African, Lucas Fernandes, who was serving as interpreter and intermediary between the English and the local community.

From the perspective of literary history – assuming that the reference is to William Shakespeare's play of this name – the incident is of interest as representing the earliest performance of this play of which there is historical record. But while for Shakespearean studies this is no more than a curiosity, Hair argues, from the perspective of African history it is of "of rather greater interest," for the light which it casts upon "the social setting of Sierra Leone in 1607." English literary scholars have generally

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perceived the episode as inherently bizarre – "Has there ever been a stranger episode in stage-history?" commented the eminent Shakespearean scholar Frederick S. Boas in 1923. But in fact, Hair argues, it was "not particularly strange," given the local context.[1] There was already – as Fernandes' role indeed implies – considerable European, specifically Portuguese, commercial and cultural influence in the Sierra Leone area at this time; indeed Portuguese influence in Upper Guinea, according to Hair, was currently "at its height."[2] Those with whom the English had dealings included not only the leading locally based Portuguese trader, Bartolemeu André, but also a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Father Baltasar Barreira, established in the area since 1605; and the local king, Buré, had recently been converted to Christianity (and baptised with the name Philip) by Father Barreira. In such a context, there was after all nothing so very odd about a European play being performed before a local Afro-Portuguese dignitary. As Hair observed, this was neither the first European play to be performed in Africa, nor indeed, in all probability, given that Fernandes had spent some time at Santiago, capital of the Cape Verde Islands (where he also was converted to Christianity), was it the first European play which he himself had witnessed.

This article can stand as an exemplary instance of the late Paul Hair's scholarship, which has been a profound influence and inspiration for myself personally, as well as for the study of early modern West African history more generally. Hair's approach was based on meticulous collation and critical evaluation of fragmentary documentation, principally in contemporary European accounts. This article includes painstakingly detailed reconstruction, focused on a period of twenty-four hours on 4–5 September 1607, including even a discussion of the weather, to show that "if Englishmen in 1607 cared to act a play aboard ship or attend a play-acting, the earlier part of a dry morning in mid September was a very reasonable time to do so."[3] Although the performance of *Hamlet* is documented only in William Keeling's journal, Hair's reconstruction of the wider context draws upon several other sources, including not only other English accounts of the voyage, but also local Portuguese sources, especially the reports of the missionary Father Barreira. The Portuguese sources, being generated by persons actually resident in the area, might seem self-evidently superior to those of the English, who were only brief transients, but Hair argues persuasively that in fact the English sources are "in certain respects to be preferred," and so form "both a supplement and a corrective" to the more extensive Portuguese accounts. In particular, the English accounts show that the attitudes both of the local King Buré

[1] Hair, "Hamlet," 34.
[2] Hair, "Hamlet," 35.
[3] Hair, "Hamlet," 33.

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and of his Portuguese associates André and Barreira towards dealing with the "heretical" English were more pragmatic and flexible than the latter's reports home implied. The combination of Portuguese and English sources thus permits a more nuanced understanding of the local situation, as well as of detailed events. In Hair's felicitous formulation, these "can to some extent be seen stereoscopically, through the different viewpoints of the Portuguese and the English."[4] This compensates for the lack of a specifically African perspective, and permits Hair to speculate on King Buré's motives in his apparent duplicity or dissimulation: "While he may – indeed, must – have lacked full understanding, he need not have lacked a measure of sincerity."[5] As ever, Paul Hair pursues serious matters with an agreeable lightness of touch, and at points it is difficult not to suspect a metaphorical tongue held in cheek. While Boas had wondered about the choice specifically of *Hamlet*, and suggested that *Othello* would have been more appropriate, Hair dismissed this observation as "facile," and suggested that "perhaps the players had a limited repertoire, and *Hamlet* was merely the play that they knew best." But he also noted that *Hamlet* was not in fact inappropriate to the local context, as it included "kings, ambassadors, a play performed before ambassadors;" and moreover, though the English probably would not have appreciated this, "the theme of poisoning the king was pointedly apt," since "Africans were as wont as renaissance Europeans to attribute unexpected deaths to the administration of poison," and indeed King Buré's own predecessor had allegedly been the victim of poisoning.[6] In common with many others of Paul Hair's publications, this can be read for pleasure, as well as for its scholarly merit.

[4] Hair, "Hamlet," 23.
[5] Hair, "Hamlet," 26.
[6] Hair, "Hamlet," 35.

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