correspondents abroad

Shifting Shakespeare

MARTIN ORKIN

AS A STUDENT IN SOUTH AFRICA AND, AFTER THE MID-SEVENTIES, AS A UNIVERSITY TEACHER THERE, I FOUND IT impossible to do what some South African practitioners of New Criticism or devotees of F. R. Leavis who had been my teachers seemed to want me to do: detach awareness of my location from my interest in the literature I was reading. Location involves historical moment as well as place. Over time, to constitute further my sense of the local, I included other by now commonly acknowledged factors, such as epistemological currency; institutional position; political, material, or gender struggles—the particular knowledges, as opposed to others that any reader will legitimate or exemplify. I came to think of engagement with especially the Shakespeare text, in these terms, as analogous to a cultural encounter or clash between the always specifically located present-day reader and the literary text.

This is not to suggest that the common bank of knowledge and scholarship to be derived from what I thought of as the Shakespeare metropolis in Europe and North America, on which all Shakespeareans draw, did not remain always a sine qua non. But I could never fully comprehend insistent metropolitan Shakespearean constructions of scholarship as, to coin a phrase, ideally reader-location-free. In the routine of daily life in apartheid South Africa, any choice, including even the minor act of reading and teaching literature, seemed weighted. To claim no political agenda was itself a political act. The by now well-remarked-on practice of traditional South African Shakespeareans, who replicated a New Critical, Tillyardian, and Leavisite essentialist Shakespeare, indicated escapist affiliation with the erstwhile colonial center. If, in the study of Shakespeare, these readers' historical moment was to be erased, so was Shakespeare's. The plays offered instead universal and moral psychomachy. Such depoliticization of Shakespeare's texts also served apartheid pedagogy well. In stark terms, the South African reading experience seemed even exemplary, encouraging me to infer the informing importance of location for any reading anywhere.

Given these aspects of my moment and place, I inevitably became interested in whether the reader located outside the Shakespeare metropolis and its archives might achieve any additional purchase on the text—

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beyond that resulting from reliance on metropolitan scholarship. During the height of the colonial and apartheid periods, the simple and pressing task was to detect and contest colonial elision of reader location. With the demise of apartheid, the turn in the Shakespeare metropolis toward a heightened archivist historicism requiring rigidly archival investigation of the historical conditions determining the writing as well as the content of literature, however commendable in itself, jeopardized, so far as the reader-text cultural encounter was concerned, the reader part of my equation. Particularly jeopardized were readers without access to what the Folger, say, offers and readers who, perforce reliant only on secondary sources, were also in danger of remaining totally dependent on the perspectives and positions of those in the metropolis with that access.

But can local knowledges—notwithstanding the conventional metropolitan proscription of them as corroborative evidence for special causes or as anachronistic or irrelevant—add to what the crucial labor of the denizens of the Folger and the British Library invaluably produces? Conventional metropolitan dismissals of the potential relevance of reader location coincide in their effect with the "assimilation of reading to passivity" that Michel de Certeau questions (169). Such dismissals replicate also what colonization originally worked for: evacuation of local knowledge and production of a submissive, displaced subaltern subjectivity. Nonetheless, the present global reach of the Shakespeare text—because of colonialism and its aftermath or because of, say, middle-class processes of globalization—continues, while Shakespeareans and their publishers in Europe and North America have no difficulty exporting Shakespeare or work on Shakespeare to any interested market beyond their geographic domain. As well as questions of profitability, this reach indicates, presumably, an attendant metropolitan assumption that knowledge of Shakespeare's works and its by-products are worth disseminating beyond the metropolis. This is to say nothing of the similar premise that in Europe and North America such texts will benefit the vast numbers of present-day undergraduates whose location is, similarly, beyond the provenance of those with access to the great Shakespearean libraries and whose knowledges include instead that gained from cinema, computers, and popular culture. But if the inhabitants of the Shakespeare metropolis consider that the epistemologies they authorize are exportable in a culturally beneficent way, then the reverse should also be true. Knowledge can presumably be benignly imported into the Shakespeare metropolis. In actuality, although colonial powers, while never averse to importing the gold and silver of the territories they colonized, were noticeably resistant to importing anything else, recent research argues that assimilation of local knowledges by colonizers was more extensive and significant than has been acknowledged. Indeed, it has been proposed that present-day metropolitan readers and audiences of Shakespeare and their knowledges, albeit in ways that still need investigation, have become irreversibly hybridized as a result of colonialism and, more recently, globalization (Jameson 51).

To validate the active intersection of knowledges in encounters between reader and text—the reader who comes to the text with local knowledges and the archivally constituted or recovered Shakespeare text—is to contest versions of culture that, as Satya Mohanty points out, under the guise of multiculturalism confirm unbridgeable difference and perpetuate othering, alienation, and elision. It is to enable instead dialogue that, as in the well-known case of postcolonial readings of *The Tempest*, may add to or at least problematize purely archivally based metropolitan readings of the play.

I have therefore an ongoing interest in exploring these potential negotiations between reader and text. My present location also insists on this interest. I joined the University of Haifa in 1998, when, as I then imagined, the movement toward peace in the Middle East begun at Oslo, which I glimpsed from the recent vantage

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point of the negotiations that had led to a non-apartheid government in South Africa, presaged reconciliation. In 1991 at a seminar of the World Shakespeare Congress in Tokyo, I was struck by the extent to which the essentialist, universalized Shakespeare that had been the mainstay of a pro-apartheid establishment South African Shakespeare was invested in by eastern European scholars in the seminar, who used it to address what they saw as totalitarian regimes oppressive of individual subjectivity. Today, finding myself in a Pandora's box of myriad, nightmarishly conflicting enactments of symbolic violence—as well as complex material struggles—which reflect on all sides extremist positions hostile, not to say lethal, to every difference, I am tempted, if not toward that eastern European resort to an essentialist Shakespeare, at least toward what I have noted as a current metropolitan vogue for reader-location-free, archivally based scholarship. However, for all its own appalling recidivism, my present location makes impossible any such imagined retreat from a sense of the inescapability, for the reader, of historical moment and place.

Haifa is fairly atypical of cities in Israel. It has a numerically significant multicultural population, living and working together even now relatively peacefully, one inflected in multiple ways and identifiable as Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i, as Israeli, Palestinian, Israeli Arab, Russian, and Ethiopian. Israelis are themselves often inflected by multiple cultures, secular and religious. The student population at the university reflects this multiplicity. It includes significant numbers of Arabs/Palestinians as well as Israelis. It also comprises Christians and Jews of Russian extraction and Ethiopians. For academic discourse to exist, this dimension of my present location insists, in the moment of cultural encounter, on mutual recognition and respect, an address of difference that I saw in South Africa after apartheid in the attempt to establish a culture of human rights, one in crucial respects exemplified in the extraordinary intersection of narratives by persecutors who were given space and by victims during the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

It still seems crucial that I try not to elide my present location, which will in any event inform my reading position, as location does everyone's. To opt for an imagined reader-location-free approach to the literary text will have no less an implication for what that text means for us, here and now, than active engagement with location will, although the outcomes will of course be different. If I choose the latter, it is because I argue that intersections between the reader's knowledges and the knowledges to be found in the literary text enable in small what Mohanty in a larger context has in mind when he advocates "genuine dialogue between the anthropologist and the native, the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized" (131). Most important, intersections produced by an active reader interacting with the scholarly constitution of a literary text will not only sharpen respect for difference (what Barbara Mowat calls "the effort to see our world with the clearest of eyes and to see Shakespeare—his plays and his world—with equal clarity" [iii]) but also make it possible to identify, in that difference, points of connection in ways that may bring recognition and understanding rather than othering or alienation. The terrible events of 11 September and its aftermath have made such meditations on reader location only more urgent for me.

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