"I need some answers William": Shakespeare and Post-Colonial Drama

1.0 Between Counter-Discursivity and Compromise: Modes of Appropriating Shakespeare

The idiom "food for thought" has become part and parcel of those standard phrases with which well-meaning reviewers are prone to end their appreciation of the book under scrutiny. And in spite of occasional setbacks even the most critical and professionally pessimistic representatives of academia would hardly be able to deny their share in, what I would love to call, a healthy diet of good reads. Colleagues with a joint interest in both Shakespeare and the New English Literatures are obviously far better off, given the bulk of the published material and thus a relatively slim chance to suffer from intellectual malnutrition. If I were to name some such nourishing pieces of research within the latter field, Helen Gilbert's and Joanne Tompkins' inspiring book Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics published in 1996 would certainly be among them. I shall explain my choice below, but before entering on a broader theoretical embedding of the present study, the editor feels obliged to follow his initial path of nutritional correctness to confirm the suspicion that the main title of our book was borrowed from one of the sub-chapters of Gilbert's and Tompkins' work (1996, 19-25). Yet, as the reader will have cause to notice, I have appropriated the term "legacy" by way of redrawning the evaluative semantic boundaries to the effect that in my reading the notion now anticipates counter-discursivity as well as accommodation or compromise. Indeed, many of the contributors to the current volume would subscribe to the ambiguity of the title as a convenient form of shorthand for the diverse responses to Shakespeare. As to the title's double entendre a welcome piece of semantic advice is provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. With the evidence of some 500 years of diverse references it distills seven definitions of the term "legacy," most of them, however, have become obsolete over the centuries. Only two cognate meanings seem to have been able to avoid the linguistic traps set by the combined agency of a changing political, legal and cultural practice. From the mid-fifteenth century onwards "legacy" was understood as "[a] sum of money, or a specified article, given to another by will" (OED 1989) and it is, of course, just a coincidence that the term adopted its figurative meaning during Shakespeare's own day when it also stood for "anything handed down by an ancestor or predecessor" (OED 1989). It is precisely the neutrality of the figurative meaning which evoked further classifications between, for instance, a rich or fatal legacy. Building on these extreme readings, I would like to argue that post-colonial encounters with Shakespeare reflect almost every facet of response when oscillating between those poles.
But there is a major methodological problem. What, one might ask, are the theoretical positions which enable us to foreground the ambivalent merits of the title Shakespeare's Legacy when the plays under discussion bear the post-colonial banner? Or, to put it differently, how are we to define post-colonialism's agenda in the face of various playtexts which deliberately accept Shakespeare's rich textual legacy and thereby fail to meet the requirements of canonical counter-discourse as they were formulated by Gilbert and Tompkins:

Given the legacy of a colonialist education which perpetuates, through literature, very specific socio-cultural values in the guise of universal truth, it is not surprising that a prominent endeavour among colonised writers/artists has been to rework the European 'classics' in order to invest them with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity. [...] Counter-discourse seeks to deconstruct significations of authority and power exercised in the canonical text, to release its stranglehold on representation and, by implication, to intervene in social conditioning. (1996, 16)

While I share Gilbert's and Tompkins' definition of post-colonialism as "an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses" (1996, 2) and especially their understanding of colonisation as a process extending "well beyond independence celebrations" (1996, 2), my argument would see canonical counter-discourse as only one possible post-colonial response to the canon. In the face of a heterogeneous post-colonial world any theoretical approach that privileges counter-discursivity as the standard frame of a post-colonial dialogue with the English canon runs the risk of oversimplification and unwanted homogenisation of textual or cultural evidence. Indeed, there are numerous reworkings or appropriations of Shakespeare which fail to meet the expectations of a rigid counter-canonical practice, and yet, given the effect of their theatrical presence in a specific socio-political context, they clearly subscribe to a post-colonial discourse that attacks power structures and hierarchies with the full support of a canonical text. Thus, the counter-discursive target might be spelt Shakespeare as the representative of a metropolitan culture, but it does not have to be the Bard, since he himself seems to be able to provide an oppositional reading that receives its political update indirectly, i.e. from the contextual frame of external political communication.

Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, the editors of Post-Colonial Shakespeare (1998), develop what I consider to be a similar argument when they outline the subject of their publication. Referring to the artists' and writers' responses to Shakespeare, Loomba and Orkin describe a tripartite set:

[S]ometimes they mimicked their colonial masters and echoed their praise of Shakespeare, at other times they challenged the cultural authority of both Shakespeare and colonial regimes by turning to their own bards as sources of alternative wisdom and beauty. In yet other instances, they appropriated Shakespeare as their comrade in anticolonial arms by offering new interpretations and adaptations of his work. (1998, 2)

With its focus on race and colonialism, a focus that unfortunately does not throw a light on the situation in Australia and Canada, the book announces a discussion of "oppositional practices, appropriations of Shakespeare and contests over the meaning of the plays" (1998, 5) under the umbrella term "post-colonial." The regional con-

1 According to Christy Desmet "[t]he word 'appropriation' implies an exchange, either the theft of something valuable (such as property or ideas) or a gift, the allocation of resources for a worthy cause (such as the legislative appropriation of funds for a new school). Something happens when Shakespeare is appropriated, and both the subject (author) and object (Shakespeare) are changed in the process" (1999, 4).
In the former settler-invader countries Australia and Canada, Shakespeare's stage presence has also met with some substantial critical attention. In *Shakespeare’s Books* (1993), a collection of essays edited by Philip Mead and Marion Campbell, the playwright finds himself at the heart of a lively debate over cultural values down under. *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage* (2001) presents what I take to be the most systematic exploration of the theatrical realities of Shakespeare’s Antipodean afterlife. The editors, John Golder and Richard Madelaine, intend to examine the interplay between the Bard and the formation of an Australian national culture, very much in the way Michael D. Bristol has followed in *Shakespeare’s America. America’s Shakespeare* (1990). Yet, with Golder and Richard, there is a strong emphasis on the conventions of the stage to the extent that the colonial issue is reduced to a study of John Bell and his staging of Shakespeare (Kiernander 2001, 236–255).

Arguably the most prolific critical output has come from Canada. Within a relatively short time span of only three years an increasing interest in Canadian Shakespeares came to be reflected in a number of major studies and one extremely helpful data collection. In 2002 the summer edition of the *Canadian Theatre Review* devoted to “the astonishing range of theatrical practices associated with Shakespearean adaptation in Canada” (Fischlin and Knowles 2002, 3). In the same year Diana Brydon’s and Irena R. Makaryk’s *Shakespeare in Canada: ‘a world elsewhere’?* was published, a collection of essays that set the benchmark even for future studies in other countries. One of the major critical achievements of this volume is its diachronic concern with Shakespeare as an icon of cultural value and a vehicle in the creation of communal identities. Most of the contributions subscribe to the positions of post-colonial critique with a clear tendency to discuss the allegedly Canadian penchant for parody and adaptation in terms of Ángel Rama’s concept of transculturation whose emphasis on the agency of the cultural host corresponds to my reading of the Bard’s stage presence as a liberating influence when addressing contemporary issues of violence on the African continent. There are clear references to the *Uganda of Idris Amin*, mainly because *Mambo* makes it quite clear that this country has to be seen as a metaphor for post-colonial anomy. In spite of some democratic achievements, for African people the risk of falling victim to reactionary forces is still there and *Mambo* proposes what amounts to an unmistakable theatrical warning against untimely complacency. While some critics, such as the Ghanaian playwright Kofi Agovi, have expressed their theoretical distance from Joe de Graaf when accusing him of being too fond of Shakespeare and thereby neglecting the African tradition, the contributors underline a liberated dialogue that approaches Shakespeare with an independent spirit.

While the Malawian censorship board was prone to reject local or African drama until the early 1990s, i.e. until the end of Hastings Kamuzu Banda’s authoritarian dictatorship, European classics did not suffer from any comparable restriction, no matter what the subject of the drama was. Officially, the Bard was classified as a cultural icon, but at the same time also as a dead and apparently irrelevant playwright. In what turns out to be a unique first-hand account of his experiences as teacher at the University of Malawi, James Gibbs even recalls the censor’s permission to stage *Julius Caesar* in spite of the conspiracy and the murder scene it contains. Surprisingly, the police state seems to have ignored the political potency of the play whose unhindered stage presence encouraged the audience to discern double entendres and to decode critical references. Once the rigid regulations of censorship were relaxed, Shakespeare’s plays, for example, *Macbeth*, now provided an open vehicle by which Malawians could re-view the past and come to terms with its political traumas.

2 In April 2004 the University of Guelph’s Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP), directed by Daniel Fischlin, was able to launch the digital archive canadian.shakespeares.ca. This ever-growing website, already the largest of its kind in the world, provides an extensive online database devoted to the adaptation of Shakespeare into a national and multicultural theatrical practice in Canada. See Fischlin (2004).

3 See, for example, Agovi (1992, 134–140).
The impact of the British educational system can also be traced in Eritrea, particularly in the decade or so from 1941 to 1952 when the country was under the British Military Administration. With English as the newly established means of instruction, Shakespearean school drama became more and more popular and before long it could serve as a springboard for a life-long career in the urban theatres. During the thirty-year liberation struggle (1961–1991) against Ethiopian rule, the Bard’s work made its way into the theatre of Asmara, the Eritrean capital, this time, however, in translation and a highly naturalistic style that was not without some odd concomitants when, for example, actors were forced to whiten their faces. On the evidence of a number of interviews conducted by Christine Matzke in the years 2000 and 2001, this essay provides a rare insight into the far-reaching contexts of Shakespeare’s reception in wartime Eritrea. Among them a very unlikely theatrical site as the Central Hospital situated on a base near the Sudanese border where the medical and pharmaceutical staff staged Chekhov’s one-act vaudevilles and elaborate, if translated and abridged versions of The Merchant of Venice, Othello, Julius Caesar and Romeo and Juliet in front of wounded or bedridden fighters.

In the face of the two-way street of ideological contestation, Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn reminds us of Shakespeare’s double-edged potency to inspire dichotomous political readings. In focussing on three South African re-workings of his plays this article also addresses issues of school curricula policy and thereby modifies David Johnson’s criticism of Shakespeare when he chose to place the playwright’s work within a larger history of imperial violence (1996, 214). Building on a more balanced conjecture, Ghosh-Schellhorn’s critical assessment of Janet Suzman’s 1987 production of Othello, especially its paratexts, maintains the relevance of the play to South African whites in the apartheid state, while the life story of the Sowetan actor-protagonist, John Kani, requires a dramatic script that is genuinely black African.

Theatre-in-education is the topic of Mr O’s Story (1988) by the South African Indian Mr Kriken Pillay. Set within the all embracing context of racial segregation and fear of misconegation, the scenes of the play move between a contemporary classroom, where Othello is the subject, and the staff room of the school. The Shakespearean elements, intrigue, jealousy, manipulations, and marginalisation, are all present, yet this time, the dividing line cuts through Indian communalism itself, separating the Othello-like school director from the rest of the group on the misleading assumption that he is not a Hindu. Interestingly enough, on a meta-theatrical level, it is the text of Shakespeare’s Othello that confronts the students with their own complicity in today’s tragedy.

Ghosh-Schellhorn’s introduction to three exemplary reworkings of Shakespeare closes with a chapter on Welcome Msoni’s play uMabatha (1996), the highly acclaimed adaptation of Macbeth. The plot involves Shaka, the nineteenth century Zulu king, and it highlights the role of fate as well as political scheming in a way that more or less attempts to link the intrigues of the Scottish clans to the policies of the early nations of Africa. Some critics found fault with this cultural transfer of subject-matter, spotting in it a South African cringe in front of a dominating culture. Yet, referring to what Erika Fischer-Lichte has termed “intercultural production” (1990, 131), the present essay not only rehabilitates Msoni’s approach, it finally asks for a revision of Fischer-Lichte’s categories of First World and Third World cultures in the light of the more complex and diverse theatrical practice in South Africa.

Almost two decades before Othello was first performed in English in South Africa in 1818, Sydneyers had already been able to see Henry IV as the first official production of Shakespeare in the colony. Against this historical background of 200 years of staging and adapting Shakespeare in Australia, my contribution discusses three contemporary rewritings. In doing so, it tries to provide a critique of Joanne Tompkins’ sweeping assumption that Australian Shakespeare adaptations unite in their target of destabilising the imported cultural weight of the Bard (Tompkins 1996, 21). Indeed, it is my intention to show that the theatrical dialogue with Shakespeare is much more complex than Tompkins’ understanding of a simplistic post-colonial practice would suggest.

Michael Gow’s play Away (1986) completely discloses Shakespeare’s dialogical relevance, precisely because its reapropriation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream points to a cultural negotiation that firmly rests on the playwright’s pre-textual offer without tearing it to shreds. A slightly more critical response is to be found in David Malouf’s Blood Relations (1987), a dramatic parable or rewriting of the settler-invader past via Shakespeare’s The Tempest. And yet Malouf is only able to keep up this form of theatrical hybridity by means of a dialectical bond between his personae and the pre-textual counterparts. And quite fittingly so, for, as the lines from Caliban demonstrate, it is the selected borrowing from Shakespeare that amounts to a low key criticism of occupation and appropriation. As a satire on the politically correct, my final example, David Williamson’s Dead White Males (1995), literally stages Shakespeare’s renaissance when the Bard himself enters to deconstruct a hard-boiled deconstructionist. At the end, a young student and representative of the next academic generation even asks him for advice. Though her line “I need some answers William” (Dead White Males 2, 81) is initially meant to be a challenge, thus reflecting a post-colonial scepticism, the plot eventually seems to reaffirm Shakespeare’s universal outlook. Humorous though it is, this comedy of manners suffers from a number of epistemological flaws that qualify what I take to be Williamson’s otherwise fearless adherence to Shakespeare’s universality.

Overlooking the relevant output of the New English Literatures, the largest corpus of Shakespeare adaptations and rewritings will presumably be found in Canada. Given the specific history and structure of this palimpsest culture as well as its relatively strong Anglo-European superscription (Friesnitz 1999, 33), this response does not really come as a surprise when seen against the development of the nation state up to the 1960s. Throughout those decades Shakespeare productions became theatrical sites marking both coherence and identity with the Shakespeare Festival at Stratford (Ontario) as the late climax of a national signifying practice that embraces Shakespeare’s iconicity. During the last thirty years Shakespearean adaptations have even occupied the position of “a distinct subgenre in Canadian theatre” (Fischlin 2002, 321), and it is one of the achievements of Albert-Reiner Glaap’s contribution to give shape
to this subgenre. Following a useful list of some twenty adaptations, Glaap discusses three more recent and less known plays that reflect three different approaches to translating Shakespeare into a contemporary Canadian context and these are: Richard Rose et al., *Hysterica* (2000), Michael O'Brien, *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995), and Djanet Sears, *Harlem Duet* (1997). For Glaap, *Hysterica*, a collectively created, matriarchal version of *King Lear*, is to be seen as a dark domestic comedy that transfers Lear's dilemma into the modern world of the baby-boom generation quarelling about its inheritance while at the same time debating its responsibility for parents needing permanent nursing care. This "restaging" of the *Lear* story into a recognisably Canadian setting forms the first of Glaap's categories. The second is termed "retooling" and it classifies plays like Michael O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle* when they attempt to take on the canon. The play is both a bold comedy and a permanent nursing care. This *textual presence* in poems, essays and novels. The list of authors is indeed impressive: It includes, among others, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, David Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips, and Marina Warner. As Helge Nowak points out in his article "The Empire of Shakespeare in India: Deglamourised, Transformed, Greatly Shrunk," where she discusses the work of three contemporary theatre directors, i.e. Salim Ghouse (Bombay), Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (Trivandrum), and Annette Leday (France, India), within a prevailing transcultural framework. Building on the findings of Pratt, Bhabha and Balme, Sanditen suggests that in this, the Indian context, Shakespeare's plays ought to be seen as a contact zone, a theatrical site on which, as Mary Louise Pratt put it, "disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, 137). While hybridity thus marks a process of negotiation between cultures in what Bhabha aptly terms the "third space," syncretism is here primarily understood as a mode of theatrical appropriation, very much in line with Christopher Balme who argues that syncretic theatre "result[s] from the interplay between the Western theatrical-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture" (1999, 147).

In focussing on these indigenous performance forms, this article serves to narrow the divide between theory and practice whilst simultaneously providing us with a first-hand account of contemporary Shakespeare adaptations in India. In his versions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Salim Ghouse, founder of *The Phoenix Players*, offers a universal reading of the Bard when he foregrounds aspects of personal isolation. Narayana Panikkar's production of *The Tempest*, however, reduces the plot in a way that cuts out any political subtext in favour of highlighting the essence of the relationship between Ariel and Prospero. Though Panikkar's syncretic approach makes full use of indigenous techniques and traditions, such as Indian-style music, facial masks, *Tantra* *magic*, *mudras* and *rasa*, where gestures represent the essence of things, his indigenous appropriation of Shakespeare is not to be mistaken for the classical dance drama called *Kathakali*. This performance tradition has become the trademark of Annette Leday's *Dance Company* and its *Kathakali-productions* of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. It is, no doubt, one of the merits of this article that it suggests that in this, the Indian context, Shakespeare's plays ought to be seen as a contact zone, a theatrical site on which, as Mary Louise Pratt put it, "disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, 137). While hybridity thus marks a process of negotiation between cultures in what Bhabha aptly terms the "third space," syncretism is here primarily understood as a mode of theatrical appropriation, very much in line with Christopher Balme who argues that syncretic theatre "result[s] from the interplay between the Western theatrical-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture" (1999, 147).

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Midsummer Night's Dream (1995) and Toi Whakarari's (the New Zealand Drama School's) version of Troilus and Cressida (2003), any substantial post-colonial reading of the individual play may find it hard to resist the scenic subtext of decorative exoticism. Hence, by virtue of its general appeal, the Pacific setting is prone to undermine the counter-discursive quality of the play. With Romeo and Tusi (1997) by Samoan-born Oscar Kightley and Erolia Ifopo, however, the author is able to identify an irreverent approach to Shakespeare's parent-text. Coinciding as it does with elements of parody, satire, and slapstick, the theme of this rewriting is still a serious one as it covers racial issues, albeit in a mode of (ruthless) humour. In this, its comic mask, the play pays tribute to a specific tradition of clowning in Samoa, i.e. fale aiu, where comedy sketches are the only accepted vehicles to criticise those in authority. Interestingly enough, the racial antagonism, which the play discloses around its meta-theatrical structure, does not involve Pakeha's prejudices, but it derives from tensions between the indigenous Maori and immigrant Pacific Islanders. Seen that way, Romeo and Tusi stands out as a unique rewriting of Shakespeare, precisely because it has the courage to break new ground within post-colonial discourse. Indeed, it is the implication of this play that the dialectic of self and Other is not embedded in one petrified hierarchical relationship. Where the notions of self and Other tend to suggest a binary homogeneity, Romeo and Tusi brings into being a situation in which the Other itself produces similar relations of discursive conflict.

The remaining two plays that Lisa Warrington analyses in detail are both adaptations of Hamlet. The first example, Jean Betts' Ophelia Thinks Harder (1993), foregrounds the self-discovery of Ophelia-as-Hamlet on the basis of an unambiguously feminist agenda. Given the gender-related reclaiming of Shakespeare's master text, Ophelia now becomes the main character whose journey towards autonomous thought involves processes of physical, spiritual and intellectual purging. According to Lisa Warrington the protagonist's quest and her gradual awakening include sophisticated moments of controversy, especially when religion's constraint of women comes to the fore. It is to this and the related exposure of organised religion as a convenient male construct that Lisa Warrington refers when ascribing a new sense of thematic maturity to the playwright's work.

In contrast to Jean Betts' feminist rewriting of Hamlet and its universal claim, Lisa Warrington's second case in point, Richard Huber's Hamlet: He Was a Grave Digger (1998), has an additional regional target. This play is what Lisa Warrington aptly terms a larrikin piece, a parody of Australia, a postmodern pastiche, and a far from serious dramatic eulogy. Its hero is Chips Rafferty (1909-1971), the well-known film and television actor, generally considered to embody the Australian outback type. When this taciturn and beer-drinking Hamlet finds himself in the midst of a "digger" chorus of exaggerated 'Aussie' stereotypes, Shakespeare's text is finally turned into an Antipodean farce, an iconoclastic attack on cultural authority and supremacy. Yet, taking into account the 'kiwi'-perspective, I would like to add that this specific decon-struction of Shakespeare is also very much the locus for displaying and debunking the iconic stereotypes of New Zealand's northern neighbour. Within this deployment of the Bard's work, issues of the centre and the periphery thus overlap with an Antipodean map that is eager to enhance regional oppositions.

Arguably the most heterogeneous area is covered by Rüdiger Ahrens' contribution on "Shakespeare in Southeast Asia," where he discusses Shakespeare's theatrical presence in the former crown colony of Hong Kong vis-à-vis his impact on both Chinese as well as Japanese culture. Given the specific geopolitical frame of reference, his comparative approach sets out to sketch the diachronic process of what K.-k. Tam has recently called the "Asianization of Shakespeare" (2002, 8). Needless to say, concepts of post-colonial discourse now fall behind an even larger epistemological orientation addressing globalisation-phenomena (Robertson 1995, 25-44) and their cultural manifestations. Seen that way, Rüdiger Ahrens is right to point out that the reception of Shakespeare in Southeast Asia involves the assimilation of his work into Asian traditions as much as granting the Bard a pivotal role within the process of cultural transnationalisation.

By 1949, the year the communist regime came into power, thirty-one plays of Shakespeare had already been translated into Chinese. Chinese interest in Western drama did not wane until the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and its ban on foreign literature, a ban that was part of an overall policy of suppression of literature and the arts. Rüdiger Ahrens' main focus, however, is not so much on aspects of translation and theatrical conventions. His aim is to draw the reader's attention to the blossoming Shakespeare criticism from the early 1980s onwards. Ever since the 1983 publication of the manifesto "Learn from Shakespeare" in the People's Daily, a politicised Shakespeare has undergone a critical renaissance with none other than Karl Marx as his well-meaning witness.

The situation in Hong Kong is, of course, of a different nature. Up to 1997, when the hand-over to the Chinese government took place, a few noteworthy productions were staged in English by amateur groups, presumably the earliest recorded reference going back to the year 1867 when a burlesque version of The Merchant of Venice was performed in Hong Kong. As Rüdiger Ahrens points out translated versions had a relatively late start. It was only in the mid nineteen-fifties that Cantonese productions became a stage success, and there is no question that a good deal of their popularity resulted from the practice to rely on ancient and colourful Chinese costumes.

Coinciding as it does with the end of the current volume, Rüdiger Ahrens' chapter on Japan once again underlines the wide range of Shakespeare's legacy and quite fittingly so, since it opens up the view towards regions not affected by former British hegemony and colonial enterprise. As is the case in Germany, Japan looked at the Bard very much in terms of a national playwright (Mullin 2002, 96) who after the first receptive breakthrough at the end of the nineteenth century is currently the master mind behind numerous adaptations ranging from rock opera to kyogen and noh drama. If this amalgamation with indigenous theatre techniques and aesthetics represents a localised Shakespeare, Rüdiger Ahrens' contribution implicitly proposes a comparative study

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4 Non-Maori New Zealanders, often those of British descent.
that explores the Bard's role when national identity formations, both inside and outside the post-colonial world, have been negotiated.

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