

READING SHAKESPEARE TODAY: OR, SIXTY YEARS AFTER*

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But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution.

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

In *Mansfield Park* Henry Crawford and his friend Edmund interrupt Fanny Price who has been reading aloud from Shakespeare. Fanny had quickly closed the volume on hearing footsteps outside the door, but Crawford is able to find the place and reads from *Henry VIII*: Wolsey's speech among others. Crawford praises Shakespeare's ability: "he could always alight at will on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity, or pride, or tenderness, or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty."

Edmund, whom Fanny eventually marries, comments, "No doubt one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree. . . from one's earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody; they are in half the books we open, and we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him in bits and scraps is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly is, perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud is no everyday talent."

This brief episode in *Mansfield Park* seems not only to suggest that "good women" were reading Shakespeare and the Bible, but also that it was quite normal to have a volume of Shakespeare in the library of the educated upper class to delve into at will. The dialogue also reveals that by the early nineteenth century Shakespeare was already occupying the place which would make him "England's national poet." Shakespeare's plays were as good read as acted – if not better. (The characters of *Mansfield Park* go in for theatricals, but the play they choose to act is not Shakespeare's but Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* (1798) as it gives Henry a chance to flirt in public.) Everyone was familiar with Shakespeare but only the

exceptional were able to read Shakespeare well. In other words, if you read Shakespeare well, you were a gentleman. The importance of Shakespeare is amply manifested in English literature courses at Bangladeshi universities – as much as in Indian ones, I am sure – where he is a major author at both undergraduate and graduate levels, with entire courses being devoted to him.

But I would like to go back to *Mansfield Park*: to slightly modify Henry Crawford's quotation, "But Shakespeare I got acquainted with without knowing how." Of course, I am not an Englishman – nor an Englishwoman neither – but in some ways my natal home was like Mansfield Park. We too were proud possessors of Shakespeare's works; in fact, we had not just one but two different editions. One was somewhat smaller, with a blue cover; the other was larger, with a red, embossed cover. It was the second volume that I liked. Not because of the plays themselves, but because of the illustrations. There must have been six of them, but, over the years, I can remember only three: a picture of Ophelia floating on the water surrounded by flowers;¹ a picture of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth, holding the crown up high as if to crown herself; and a picture of Richard II holding out the crown to Bolingbroke. Over these years I cannot remember what the caption of the Lady Macbeth picture was, but I remember the other two – reinforced by later readings. The caption for Ophelia's picture was part of Gertrude's description:

¹ For a discussion of pictorial representations of Ophelia, from 18th-century classic paintings to contemporary pop art, see Kaara Peterson's "Framing Ophelia: Representation and the Pictorial Tradition," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. Winnipeg: Sep. 1998. Vol. 31: 3. Available at gbn.glenbrook.k12.il.us/imc/Odiotti_OpheliaArticle.doc. Accessed July 8, 2009.

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There on the pendent boughs her crownet
weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. (IV. 7)

The caption for the scene from *Richard II* was “Here cousin, seize the crown./Here cousin. On this side my hand, on that side thine” (IV. 1). Though I hadn't read the play – and wouldn't until years later – I felt the pathos of the scene where the king is forced to legitimize the victor as king.

Between those early years and my actual reading of Shakespeare's plays, like other Indian children – though by now, in the “whirligig of time” I was Pakistani – I read *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*. The tales included twenty of Shakespeare's plays: *The Tempest, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Winter's Tale, Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merchant of Venice, Cymbeline, King Lear, Macbeth, All's Well That Ends Well, The Taming of the Shrew, The Comedy of Errors, Measure for Measure, Twelfth Night; or, What You Will, Timon of Athens, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Othello, Pericles, and Prince of Tyre*. Though I did not give it any thought at the time, I realize now that the plays covered all the genres of Shakespeare's plays except the histories: early comedies (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, The Comedy of Errors*), early tragedies (*Timon of Athens, Romeo and Juliet*), middle comedies (*A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night; or, What You Will*), dark comedies (*All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure*), tragedies (*King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Othello*), and late comedies or romances (*The Tempest, The Winter's Tale, Pericles, Prince of Tyre*).

The purpose in writing these tales from Shakespeare (Charles Lamb worked on the tragedies, Mary Lamb on the comedies) was to make them suitable for children and specially for girls who did not have the run of their father's library as young boys were apt to (another point of difference between me and the audience for whom the Lambs were writing: as the eldest child, though a girl, I had the full run of my father's library). The authors explain their aim in the preface – something which, I am sure, I did not even bother reading when I picked up the *Tales*, but which

today I do and can read, thanks to the internet.

It has been wished to make these *Tales* easy reading for very young children. To the utmost of their ability the writers have constantly kept this in mind; but the subjects of most of them made this a very difficult task. It was no easy matter to give the histories of men and women in terms familiar to the apprehension of a very young mind. For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these *Tales* to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand: and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken; and it is hoped they will find that the beautiful extracts, the select passages, they may choose to give their sisters in this way will be much better relished and understood from their having some notion of the general story from one of these imperfect abridgements; - which if they be fortunately so done as to prove delightful to any of the young readers, it is hoped that no worse effect will result than to make them wish themselves a little older, that they may be allowed to read the Plays at full length (such a wish will be neither peevish nor irrational). When time and leave of judicious friends shall put them into their hands, they will discover in such of them as are here abridged (not to mention almost as many more, which are left untouched) many surprising events and turns of fortune, which for their infinite variety could not be contained in this little book, besides a world of sprightly and cheerful characters, both men and women, the humour of which it was feared would be lost if it were attempted to reduce the length of them.²

² *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare* is available at <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/lambtales/LTPREF.HTM> Accessed July 8, 2009.

In an essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare,”³ Lamb argued that Shakespeare’s plays should be read rather than performed in order to understand his dramatic genius. “It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguishing excellence is a reason that they should be so. There is so much in them, which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye, and tone, and gesture, have nothing to do.” He goes on to note that Shakespeare in performance is leveled to that of other playwrights: “I mean no disrespect to any actor, but the sort of pleasure which Shakespeare’s plays give in the acting seems to me not at all to differ from that which the audience receive from those of other writers; and, they being in themselves essentially so different from all others, I must conclude that there is something in the nature of acting which levels all distinctions.” Lamb cannot appreciate Hamlet’s famous soliloquy beginning “To be or not to be.” He does not know “whether it be good, bad, or indifferent; it has been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it is become to [him] a perfect dead member.” He does not like to see *Lear* acted: “the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted.”

Today, we do not think of Shakespeare’s plays as texts to be read⁴ but also to be performed. And

³ First published in *The Reflector*, 1811. Included in *The Works of Charles Lamb*, 1818, vol. ii, pp. 1-36. Available on the internet at <http://www.opendb.net/ebook/on-the-tragedies-of-shakespeare/1189/read#list>. Accessed July 8, 2009.

⁴ Even though Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be performed rather than read, his first editors, John Hemmings and Henry Condell – also spelled Heminge and Condell – who compiled his writings in what has come to be known as the Folio (1623), addressed “the great variety of readers”: “But it is not our province, who onely gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will finde enough, both to draw, and hold you : for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe : And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can bee your guides : if you neede them not, you can leade your selves, and others. And such Readers we wish him.” Available online [http://william-shakespeare.classic-](http://william-shakespeare.classic-literature.co.uk/william-shakespeare-first-folio.asp)

even in literature classes, most teachers try to get students to watch a play by Shakespeare, on stage if possible but, as happens more frequently nowadays, in a movie version. Better still, of course, is to get students to perform the text, in class or out of it. To really understand plays, one must act in them.

Initially supposed to sit for the Cambridge examination, I had to read *The Merchant of Venice*.⁵ But, before I read the play, I performed in Shakespeare, as Orlando in *As You Like It*. Why Orlando? Because it was a girl’s school and men’s parts were played by girls. I remember nothing of the performance. And I am sure it couldn’t have been good. All I remember was that I got to wear men’s clothes – there was no attempt to have authentic Elizabethan costume. It was sufficient to have on my brother’s shirt and trousers – tight though they were around the waist.

It was when I went to college, however, that I came to know Shakespeare’s plays, not because we studied them, but because, thanks to a teacher who had, as a young woman, taken classes in drama – and rumour was – had even acted on stage – that we got to do one of Shakespeare’s most difficult plays, the “unactable” *King Lear*. This wasn’t the first Shakespeare play I did at college – that was *Twelfth Night* – or the second, which was *The Taming of the Shrew*. When we were having auditions for *Twelfth Night*, we had been given several different passages to read, from various plays. One of them was Cardinal Wolsey’s speech from Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, Act II, Sc 2:

So farewell to the little good you bear me.
Farewell! a long farewell, to all my greatness!
This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes; to-morrow
blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon
him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,

[literature.co.uk/william-shakespeare-first-folio.asp](http://classic-literature.co.uk/william-shakespeare-first-folio.asp). Accessed July 12, 2009.

⁵ One of the questions asked at a school exam was, “Should the title be ‘The Merchant of Venice’ or ‘The Jew of Venice?’” Neither my teacher nor I knew at the time that the title of the play as entered in the Stationers’ Register had indeed been similar: “The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice.” *The Norton Shakespeare* ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 1145.

And, when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
 His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
 And then he falls, as I do. I have ventured,
 Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders,
 This many summers in a sea of glory,
 But far beyond my depth: my high-blown pride
 At length broke under me and now has left me,
 Weary and old with service, to the mercy
 Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me.
 Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye:
 I feel my heart new open'd. O, how wretched
 Is that poor man that hangs on princes' favours!
 There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,
 That sweet aspect of princes, and their ruin,
 More pangs and fears than wars or women have:
 And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,
 Never to hope again.

Somewhere along the way, thanks to a father who, while teaching me English history, had opened Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and had me read Cardinal Wolsey's speech after his downfall, I was familiar with the speech and that was the passage I read. Naturally, after that, any chance of my acting a woman's part was gone. Plus, of course, my size! I was Sir Toby Belch.

The next year, when Sister Francelia chose a play, she chose *The Taming of the Shrew*. Today, I would think that no women's college would stage this play in which an independent minded woman like Katherine is "tamed" and gives a speech acknowledging her husband's complete right over her.

Fie, fie! unknit that threatening unkind brow,
 And dart not scornful glances from those eyes,
 To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor:
 It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads,
 Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds,
 And in no sense is meet or amiable.
 A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,
 Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;
 And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
 Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
 Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,

And for thy maintenance commits his body
 To painful labour both by sea and land,
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands
 But love, fair looks and true obedience;
 Too little payment for so great a debt.
 Such duty as the subject owes the prince
 Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
 And when she is froward, peevish, sullen,
 sour,
 And not obedient to his honest will,
 What is she but a foul contending rebel
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
 I am ashamed that women are so simple
 To offer war where they should kneel for
 peace;
 Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway,
 When they are bound to serve, love and obey.
 Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth,
 Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,
 But that our soft conditions and our hearts
 Should well agree with our external parts?
 Come, come, you froward and unable worms!
 My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
 My heart as great, my reason haply more,
 To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
 But now I see our lances are but straws,
 Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
 That seeming to be most which we indeed
 least are.
 Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
 And place your hands below your husband's foot:
 In token of which duty, if he please,
 My hand is ready; may it do him ease.(V. 2)⁶

How much more antifeminist could Shakespeare be? We can of course tell ourselves that this was the situation of women in Shakespeare's time and that Shakespeare was merely reflecting his time. And why only Shakespeare's time? There are many who believe in Bangladesh that a woman's position is under her husband's feet. The writer Rizia Rahman, for example, in her short story "*Beheshti Khancha*," uses the popular belief that there is a *hadis* which states that the only way a woman can go to Paradise is by serving her husband.

⁶ Available on line at http://shakespeare.mit.edu/taming_shrew/full.html.

Of course, there was one important scene that the HCC production – in common with other productions – left out: the frame story. If we interpret the story of how Petruchio tames Katherine as a dream, Petruchio's achievement and Katherine's complete subservience are what men want and not what Shakespeare is proclaiming to be the essential truth. *The Norton Shakespeare*, by appending the final scene from a play called *The Taming of a Shrew* (1594), in which Sly reappears, suggests exactly this.

Sly Who's this? Tapster?⁷ O Lord, sirrah, I have had
The bravest dream tonight that ever thou
Hearest in all thy life.
Tapster Ay, marry, but you had best get you home.
For your wife will course you for dreaming here tonight.
Sly Will she? I know now how to tame a shrew.
I dreamt upon it all this night till now,
And thou hast waked me out of the best dream
That ever I had in my life. But I'll to my
Wife presently and tame her too,
An if she anger me.⁸

The play of Petruchio's taming Katherine is thus as much a joke as the trick played on the drunken Sly.

Contemporary productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* take into account the frame story and also treat the scene very differently. In 1978, for example, a production of the play directed by Michael Bogdanov, depicted the play as showing the repression of women by a capitalist society, where women were bought and sold. Bogdanov, like many of his generation, was influenced by Jan Kott, a writer whom I came across only after I had completed my MA. In the late twentieth century, feminism played an important role in Shakespearean interpretations as did issues of gender. Both these have subsequently influenced stagings of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In Shakespeare's time, all roles were played by male actors. In 2003 Shakespeare's Globe started an all-female troupe called the Company of Women. In its inaugural season, the company performed *The*

Taming of the Shrew. Directed by Phyllida Lloyd, the production did not feminize the story or the characters. The patriarchal structure remained, with the male characters exaggerating their maleness. Petruchio, for example, urinated on a pillar. Kate's final speech was, however, presented as satire. She leapt on to a table and lifted up her dress – showing the softness which Katherine mentions in her speech as a woman's lot.⁹

There was none of this in the HCC production – and no thought of it either. Meanwhile, in my male role, I strutted about the stage, throwing my arms and legs about in a way that I could never have in real life as a woman.¹⁰

While Sister Francelia believed in staging comedies, Sister Joseph Mary believed that if there was a good actor/actress, she could choose a tragedy for the annual play. Therefore the next year we did *Antigone* – and though we had not studied the play, and though I would not read the play as part of an academic course for twenty years, I learned as much about the Greek theatre as I did about the Elizabethan one by acting in it.¹¹

And after *Antigone*, Sister Joseph Mary chose *King Lear*. I do not know how the audience responded to *King Lear*. All I remember is the intake of breath that greeted me when I came in as Lear with the dead Cordelia in my arms. The heath scene with the mad Lear running about in sack cloth spouting “Blow winds and crack your cheeks, rage, blow” – I still remember the lines now – had been rendered ridiculous when the white powder that the amateur make-up artist had liberally used to whiten my hair had flown up in the strong lights. The bursts of laughter that had greeted me had hurt – until years later when I understood the importance of comic relief and the fine line that separates tragedy from comedy. Shakespeare provides comic scenes because the audience cannot maintain that intensity

⁹ Chicago Shakespeare Theater, www.chicagoshakes.com/main.taf?p=2,44,3,10. Accessed July 8, 2009.

¹⁰ So convincing was my portrayal that the province's Director, Public Instruction (DPI), who was in the audience, thought that the sisters had got an actor from Notre Dame to play the part. My masculine name did nothing to convince him otherwise. When he was finally convinced, he very kindly gave a silver medal to Miss Niaz Ali for playing Petruchio.

¹¹ Sister Joseph Mary was so meticulous that she had an altar to Dionysus placed on stage to remind us of the religious background of the Greek theatre.

⁷ In the *The Taming of the Shrew* it is the Hostess.

⁸ *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 200. This scene is not included in the on-line version at http://shakespeare.mit.edu/taming_shrew/full.html

of emotion that is required in the tragic scene. That last scene, however, to me at least compensated for the earlier lapse. In his farewell to Cordelia, Lear uses the word “no” three times and “never” five. Reading the speech one is apt to blur over the repetition, but saying it convincingly on stage required voice modulation, required me to express the anguish of an old man whose daughter had been lost forever.

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no
more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips.
Look there, look there. (V.3)¹²

In 1961, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* was eight years old – if we take the French premiere on 5 January 1953 in the Théâtre de Babylone. It would not be for another five to six years that Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* would relate *King Lear* to Beckett’s *Endgame*, but in Sister Joseph Mary’s explanation of the importance of the Fool, the germ of the similarity between Shakespeare and Beckett was there had I but eyes to see it then. Sister Joseph Mary was of course a Catholic and a nun, one to whom the earth and all it contained had a meaning. Strange, was it not then, that she should have chosen to produce one of Shakespeare’s bleakest play?

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods/ They kill us for their sport” is perhaps as relevant to Sophocles Oedipus as it is to Shakespeare’s Lear and Gloucester, who says this line in the play after he has been blinded for his kindness to Lear. Afterwards, studying and teaching *Oedipus*, I would be conscious of the parallel between Gloucester’s blindness and Oedipus: both were blind when they had eyes. In the mid- twentieth century something happened that made this line irrelevant by removing the gods or God from the

¹² This is the conflated text as in *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2552, which combines the Folio and the Quarto. The lines that do not appear in the Quarto text have been italicized in the quotation. For further reading, see Christie Carson, “The Quarto of *King Lear* – representing the early stage history of the play?” *Treasures in Full, Shakespeare in Quarto* at the British Library. Available at <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/lear.html>. Accessed July 8, 2009.

equation – though it did not make the despair any less true.

By the time Jan Kott came to write his seminal book, the Second World War had been fought – and won or lost depending on whose side one was on. The First World War had earlier removed the class distinctions – in modern warfare, the sons of rural aristocracy died as ignoble deaths in the muddy trenches as did the most ordinary recruit. During the Second World War, the horrors of Nazi concentration camps made one wonder if human beings were indeed civilized. Perhaps more than anything else, the nuclear bomb made human beings aware of how little God was needed to bring about the end of the world. Without understanding these historical events, it is difficult to understand how the world changed and with it how we read literature today

However, when I started my studies at the University of Dhaka in 1961, we were still in many ways in a time warp. The critics we studied – apart from reading what earlier critics like Jonson, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt had to say about Shakespeare – were critics who had been writing in the thirties and forties: A. C. Bradley *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1909); G. W. Knight *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (1930), *The Imperial Theme* (1931), *The Shakespearean Tempest* (1932), *Principles of Shakespeare’s Production* (1936), *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Final Plays* (1946); E.M. W. Tillyard *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942) and *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (1944); Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery* (1935); Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes* (1930); Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1935), John Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare: A Biographical Adventure* (1932) and *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (1944). Yes, even in the early sixties, students could rely on note books, but those of us who read these recommended texts had a thorough grounding in Shakespeare’s world – still with its mediaeval world view – and his texts. With Bradley we studied the tragic characters of Shakespeare – and learned how Elizabethan tragedy differed from Greek and mediaeval tragedy. But, above all, with Knight and Spurgeon we learned to read the text closely, interpreting the images and what they meant for the character, the setting, the theme. We were expected to have a

holistic picture of Shakespeare, and I still remember writing a tutorial essay on The Fool in Shakespeare – for which, needless to say, my experience in *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *King Lear* came in very useful.

The English Department at the University of Dhaka didn't have a drama club at the time. However, I did belong to an amateur drama group and among our many performances were a dramatized play-reading of *Othello* and an ambitious performance of *The Winter's Tale*. Both these plays were directed by David Bradley, who worked at The British Council. He happened to be in Dhaka during the celebration of Shakespeare's quatercentenary and chose *The Winter's Tale*. The early part of the play resembles *Othello*, with Leontes, like a white Othello, accusing his wife, Hermione, of adultery. Leontes' son, shocked at this accusation, dies and Hermione herself appears to die. The middle parts, breaking the rules of neo-classicism, would have horrified Sir Philip Sidney, had he been alive to see them. Sidney had declaimed against the abuse of time: "For ordinarie it is, that two yoong Princes fall in love, after many traverses she is got with childe, delivered of a faire boy: he is lost, groweth a man, falleth in love, and is readie to get another childe, and all this is in two houres space. . . ." He had also decried the mingling of tragedy and comedy by Elizabethan playwrights: "all their Playes bee neither right Tragedies, nor right Comedies, mingling Kinges and Clownes" as "a mongrell Tragicomedie."¹³ Even in his dark comedies, Shakespeare had not had an actual death as he did in *The Winter's Tale*. This play is also the one play where Shakespeare does not let his audience in on a secret – that Hermione is alive. It was done to very good effect, however, as we learned when the play was staged and the statue of Hermione came to life.

Had we known about Bakhtin then, *The Winter's Tale* would have been an apt vehicle to display the carnivalesque – as would have been *Twelfth Night* and *The Taming of the Shrew* – but we didn't. Nevertheless, we who acted in the play and hopefully those who saw the play, saw how

¹³ Sidney, Sir Philip. *The Defense of Poesie*. London: Ponsonby, 1595. Reprinted in facsimile by The Scholar Press, Menston, 1968. Available on-line at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/defence.html>. Accessed July 11, 2009

Shakespeare blended the high and the low, the court and the countryside in a rich polyphony. In those days, the British Council had not become the English language teaching and testing centre that it is today and those of us who acted in the play were fortunate to have our pronunciation corrected – learning for example, that the "a" in "Apollo" is not the same as the "a" in "apple."

Thanks to the Shakespeare quatercentenary, the Peter Alexander text¹⁴ became available in an inexpensive edition, bringing home to us how the Shakespeare legend had got footing shortly after his death. Though Shakespeare hadn't edited his plays for a reading public as Ben Jonson had, Heminge and Condell, while acknowledging Shakespeare's greatness, noted that these plays were meant for readers. The Alexander text gave readers a brief introduction to Shakespeare, but was devoid not only of illustrations but also of a discussion of the times and the impact of his time on Shakespeare. With an absence of notes, the text was useful only – at least for me – for its preliminary matter. To teach Shakespeare's plays, I would have to resort to individual editions of the plays.

In the mid-sixties, the real world did not impact upon our study or teaching of Shakespeare. And then, in 1969, when I was teaching at Chittagong University, my colleague Osman Jamal lent me a book and told me I must read it: Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Here was a book by a Polish Jew, written as if the world was in many ways back in the 17th century. The horror of politics or the nightmare of history was not reserved for the pages of Shakespeare but was part of life. Since its publication, the book has influenced many Shakespeare productions, such as Peter Brook's film *King Lear* and Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (both made in 1971). It also adumbrates the 1995 film adaptation of *Richard III* starring Ian McKellen in the title role. Set in the 1930s, the movie portrays the events of the 16th century in a 1930's fascist setting.

In 1971, we in Bangladesh lived through our own nightmare of history. On December 16 Bangladesh was liberated. The next year, with the return of Bangabandhu from captivity in Pakistan, victory was complete. There was a whole new world to

¹⁴ This text was chosen by the BBC for its productions of Shakespeare's plays.

discover in our own language, literature, and culture. Over the decades, English literature and Shakespeare seemed to take a backstage. But both English language and literature have returned. In the international schools and tutorials where children are preparing for the O' Level, Shakespeare forms a part of the syllabus. His plays – partially paraphrased – are compulsory reading for all children in Class 8. Many do not opt for English literature as an O' Level subject. Nevertheless, all of them get to have an introduction to Shakespeare.

Originally the University of Dhaka had a Shakespeare course at the undergraduate as well as at the graduate levels. Today the University of Dhaka as well as other public universities have omitted the undergraduate Shakespeare course, though at least one of Shakespeare's plays is taught in an introduction to drama course and two in a course on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. However, private universities which have English departments would as likely as not have a course on Shakespeare at the undergraduate level. When students struggle with Shakespeare, why is Shakespeare so important? Because he adds prestige to a programme, validates the curriculum, because Shakespeare is English Literature.

Part of the aura of Shakespeare lies in his greatness – but much of the importance of Shakespeare is part of our colonial legacy. This was not an issue we thought of sixty years ago. However, in the new critical atmosphere, we not only ask questions about *why* Shakespeare is important but also about *how* he has been made important.

To understand Shakespeare's importance for us in Bangladesh today we must realize the unique place that Shakespeare occupied in India. As Parmita Kapadia says, "Originally a colonial import, Shakespeare took on an iconic and transcendental status in India that was cemented through the passage of the Indian Education Act of 1835 that mandated an English language curriculum. English literature became a key component of the colonial project."¹⁵ Shakespeare, whether in the original or

as transformed by Charles and Mary Lamb in their *Tales*, occupied a unique position in India. Though Indians were not allowed into the early theatres, Hindu College boys were reading and acting in Shakespeare as early as 1827. Five years earlier, Henry Derozio – who had a lot to do with this – then a boy of thirteen studying at Drummond's Dharomtola Academy, was commended on his performance of Shylock by the *Indian Gazette* on 31 December 1822: "A boy of the name of Derozio gave a good conception of Shylock."¹⁶

Originally a colonial text that the British imported to India to illustrate proper "moral" behavior to their Indian subjects, Shakespeare was soon appropriated in India. Shakespearean plays were translated and adapted to suit the Indian stage. As Professor Kabir Chowdhury notes, the translators did not keep the original titles and these adaptations often showed influences of Sanskrit drama.¹⁷ And as Nazmul Ahsan points out, they often added songs – in the *jatra* tradition – even to *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* (57). It was only from the late nineteenth century that translators retained the original titles of the plays and tried to keep as close to Shakespeare's plays as possible. For example, Kaliprasanna Chattopadhyay's *Othello* (1893), Lalit Mohan Adhikari's *Hamlet* (1893), Chandiprasad Ghosh's *Hamlet* (1893), Hemchandra Bandhupadhyay's *Romeo-Juliet* (1894), Girish Chandra Ghosh's *Macbeth* – though he too added five songs in his translation (Ahsan 66). According to a survey undertaken by the Indian National Library in Kolkata, the number of Shakespeare translations and adaptations in Indian languages up to 1964 were 670: Bangla led with 128,¹⁸ followed by Marathi (97), Tamil (83), Hindi

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 93. Sample pages available at <http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=8yMXjEITfw0C&dq=isbn:0754662969&hl=en>. Accessed July 9, 2009.

¹⁶ Quoted in a footnote by Nazmul Ahsan in his doctoral dissertation, *Shakespeare in Nineteenth Century Bengali Dramatic Literature: An Analytical Survey*, the University of Dhaka, 1989, p. 50. Though the dissertation was subsequently published by the Bangla Academy, I was unable to get a copy of the book.

¹⁷ "Bangla Nataker Bikash Dharaye Anubad-Anulekhoner Bhumika," *Translation: Theory and Practice*, edited by Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: APPL, 2004), p.106.

¹⁸ Among the early adaptations/ translations of Shakespearean plays were the following: Harchandra Ghosh's *Bhanumati Chittabilash (The Merchant of Venice)*, 1853) and *Charumukh Chitahar (Romeo and*

¹⁵ Parmita Kapadia, "Jatra Shakespeare: Indigenous Indian Theater and the Postcolonial Stage," in Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage*

(70), Kannada (66) and Telugu (62). Reviewing *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance*, edited by Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomusz

(Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), Madhavi Menon refers to India taking possession of Shakespeare. In many ways, however, it is not only India but the world.

Even though Shakespeare does not hold the same place in the American imagination and culture as he does in Britain, one of the best places to undertake research on Shakespeare is the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C., which has the world's largest collection of the printed works of William Shakespeare. It is also a primary repository for rare materials from 1500–1750.¹⁹ The other American contribution to Shakespeare is Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, a reconstruction of the original Globe Theatre, where Shakespeare's plays were staged. In 1970 an American actor and director, Sam Wanamaker, founded the Shakespeare Globe Trust and International Shakespeare Globe Centre with the objective of building a faithful recreation of Shakespeare's theatre. The theatre opened its doors in 1997 and now stages plays every summer.

Juliet, 1864), Sayendranath Tagore's *Sushila Birsingha* (*Cymbeline*, 1868), Kanti Chandra Bidyaratna's *Sushila-Chandraketu* (*Twelfth Night*, 1871), Yogendra Narayan's *Ajaysingha O Bilashbati* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1878), Radhamadhab Kar's *Basanta Kumari* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1878), Nagendranath Basu's *Karnabir* (*Macbeth*, 1885), Chandrakali Ghosh's *Kusumkumari* (*Cymbeline*), Tarinicharan's *Bhimsingha* (*Othello*), Benimadhab Ghosh's *Bhram-Kautuk* (*Comedy of Errors*), Haralal Ray's *Rudrapal* (*Macbeth*), Pyarilal Mukhapadhay's *Surlal* (*The Merchant of Venice*), Annadaprasad Basu's *Anga Rangini* (*As You Like It*), Charuchandra Mukhapadhay's *Prakriti* (*Tempest*), Hemchandra's *Nalini-Basanta* (*Tempest*), Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's *Bhranti Bilash* (*Comedy of Errors*, 1869). Kabir Chowdhury, "Bangla Nataker Bikash," p. 106.

¹⁹ The library was established by Henry Clay Folger in association with his wife, Emily Jordan Folger. It opened in 1932, two years after his death. It contains 79 copies of the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio, as well as many quartos. The library offers advanced scholarly programs; national outreach to K–12 classroom teachers on Shakespeare education; and plays, music, poetry, exhibits, lectures, and family programmes. It also has several publications and is a leader in methods of preserving rare materials.

It has a thatched roof – it was the first thatched roof building permitted in London since the Great Fire of London in 1666 – and a thrust stage, as in the original Globe. There is a large pit in the centre, open to the skies – plays go on even in the rain and no sitting down is permitted. The pit has three tiers of seating on three sides – hard seating, though one may, for a small fee, hire a cushion. Seating capacity is 1,380, with a further 500 "groundlings" standing in the pit, making up an audience about half the size of a typical audience in Shakespeare's time. In order to see Shakespeare's plays much as they were performed, in an area close to the original Globe, one has therefore to thank an American.

On a final note today when I teach Shakespeare's plays, I take help of individual texts, but the complete volume of Shakespeare that I use is not an English edition but an American one: *The Norton Shakespeare* of which Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of "new historicism," is the main editor.²⁰ Like Edward Said, Greenblatt saw the relationship between literature and history as well as the fact that past works grew out of conditions long past: "My deep, ongoing interest is in the relation between literature and history, the process through which certain remarkable works of art are at once embedded in a highly specific life-world and seem to pull free of that life-world."²¹ In the introduction to the volume, Greenblatt discusses the cultural and theatrical practices of the time, revealing how Shakespeare's plays were both "a social process as well as individual act."²² The illustrations from 16th and 17th century sources not only vividly pictorialize the period, they also suggest the contemporary relevance of the themes of Shakespeare's plays.

The Peter Alexander text followed the arrangement of the Folio. *The Norton Shakespeare* arranges the plays as the editors believe they were written. In addition, they include *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which Shakespeare wrote with John Fletcher, with whom he also collaborated on *Henry VIII* – which

²⁰ *The Norton Shakespeare* follows the *Oxford Shakespeare* for the text of Shakespeare's plays but with occasional changes.

²¹ "Greenblatt Named University Professor of the Humanities." *Harvard University Gazette* 21 Sept. 2000. 2 Feb. 2006. Available at <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/09.21/greenblatt.html>. Accessed July 9, 2009.

²² Stephen Greenblatt, General Introduction, *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 72.

they include under the title *All is True*. Again, unlike Alexander they provide a sense of how difficult it is to actually know Shakespeare's final version of a text. Though limited by space from providing all the variants, the volume suggests the different versions that co-exist. For example, it provides both the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear* as well as a conflated text. In the case of *Hamlet* – which had three versions, Q1, a “bad” quarto (1603), Q2, a good Quarto (1604), and the Folio (1623) – the editors used the Oxford version, based on the Folio, but added the scenes and speeches that had been left out by the Oxford editors because they were from Q2, though in a different font and indented. (One of these is Hamlet's soliloquy from Act IV, Scene 4: “How all occasions do inform against me.”) By providing additional scenes and passages, they also help in reinterpreting plays. For example, by appending the final scene from a play called *A Taming of the Shrew* in which Sly reappears, the message of *The Taming of the Shrew* is not simply about taming a wife. Instead, it suggests that the play of Petruchio's taming Katherine is as much a game as the trick played on the drunken Sly. The last lines of Sly that he will go home and tame his wife if she angers him must have been received by gales of laughter.

The Norton Shakespeare makes it amply clear that Shakespeare no longer belongs just to the English – a point also emphasized by the cover illustration dating from 1620 of a motley fool wearing a map of the world on his face. An explanation on the credits page explains the significance of the picture: the fool evokes “an Erasmian vision of universal folly frequently voiced by Shakespeare's comic characters,” while the map of the world suggests “the astonishing worldwide success of Shakespeare's drama.”

May we not, however, also read another significance into this illustration? It is not of the bard himself, nor of his most famous character. Instead it is of a minor character, one who serves as Feste does in *Twelfth Night* or the Fool in *King Lear* at their master's pleasure but who is also the only one who can express the truth. But I also believe that this displacement is significant, suggesting the inversion of *Hamlet* that Tom Stoppard creates in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In this absurdist tragicomedy, first staged at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966, the minor characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

are focused while Hamlet is relegated to the background.

From Bradley to Greenblatt is almost a century. We cannot ignore Bradley. Like Aristotle, who lived 25 centuries ago, but whose ideas of the tragic hero are still relevant, Bradley's ideas are still relevant to a study of Shakespeare. Despite Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, the importance of character cannot be dismissed. But we cannot ignore Kott, Bakhtin, or Greenblatt. To modify Eliot's comment from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919): The existing monuments of literary criticism form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of literary criticism among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of literary criticism toward the whole – and the work of art itself – must be re-readjusted. In his essay Eliot had restricted works of art to those of Europe and England. There was nothing outside it. Today we would have to include not only what has happened to Shakespeare in England but what has happened to him all over the world – and to the world itself. The study of Shakespeare today is far more complex – but perhaps for that, all the more interesting – than it was sixty years ago.

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