

Editorial

During one of those serendipitous visits to the library (you know the kind – you head to the archives to find one thing and stumble across another altogether), I recently found myself reading an item in the July/August 1996 issue of the sadly short-lived *Southern African Review of Books*: a “Letter from Wits” by Leon de Kock. At the time, De Kock was a visitor to the University of the Witwatersrand; with some relish, I took the article up to his office – which is just around the corner from mine – and asked him if he had then imagined that, a little over a decade later, he would return to the campus as Head of the School of Literature and Language Studies.

A lot, it would seem, has changed in fourteen years.

The reason for De Kock’s visit in 1996 was the “Shakespeare–Post-coloniality” conference organised by Martin Orkin and others, which drew such luminaries as Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Terence Hawkes and of course Ania Loomba, with whom Orkin would subsequently edit the seminal collection *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (which had its genesis in the conference). The presence of these international scholars, De Kock observed, exposed the pettiness of many a “mean little squabble” (19) between local academics and “intellectuals” on the basis not only of ideological disputes but also of personal gripes.

To read this account is to be reminded that, under apartheid, during the country’s transition to democracy and in the early years of post-apartheid South Africa, the clash of “-isms” – Marxism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Nationalism – really seemed to matter. Not only that, but one was apparently forced to choose a camp on one or the other side of various “battle-lines”, from which position one was expected to clash head-on with opponents from the other camp/s.

De Kock’s letter looks forward to a time when literary debate in South Africa would be characterised by “a more friendly capaciousness”, an inclination towards un-antagonistic “dialogue” that “still seems to be lacking in South African cultural studies, which remain scarred by the bitter rivalries of our political history” (20). Noting that the conference was not very well attended by members of the public (“generally just the speakers and a sprinkling of others appeared at all interested in the conjunction of Shakespeare and post-coloniality”), De Kock went so far as to suggest that “perhaps this tells us that we’re mostly fighting among ourselves, and that if we learn to like each other more, and translate our ideas more compassionately, more understandably, maybe other people will begin to like us too”.

Circa 2010, it is rare that local scholarly debates about literature (Shakespeare in particular) get very heated. This is perhaps both a good and a bad thing. Certainly, as “the global has fully entered South African literary culture” (De Kock 19) and vice-versa, we have been unable to “regard ourselves as quite so important” and “our own fights [have been] absorbed into the larger context”. This is indeed a useful “lesson in humility”, as De Kock dubs it. Moreover, while in recent years we have seen occasional literary spats over depictions of race, or accusations of plagiarism, or other contested topics, for the most part South African literary scholars seem content to ‘live and let live’.

Yet it may also be the case that we have lost a sense of conviction; if we are less emboldened, less certain about our significance (as a nation, or as an academic/literary ‘community’ within that nation), does that also mean we undermine the potential vitality and importance of South African literature, and literature in South Africa? More pertinently, for readers of and contributors to this journal: have we been able, since 1996, to make Shakespeare in South Africa more than a marginal concern? De Kock describes various disagreements – but one thing shared by all those attending “Shakespeare–Post-coloniality” was a desire for a relevant, engaging postcolonial Shakespeare.

Implicit in De Kock’s letter is a sense that the state of Shakespeare studies in South Africa could be seen to function as a barometer of South African literary studies more broadly. During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Anglophilic tendency of a particular strand of ‘literariness’ in this country – arguably the dominant strand, given its prominence in

education, media and publishing spheres – meant that Shakespeare was understood to stand metonymically for all ‘English’/literary studies. This is certainly not the case today; still, Shakespeare has been unfairly tagged as ‘representative’ of a certain form of (neo)colonialism or even complicity with the cultural chauvinism entrenched under apartheid.

Those who have read past issues of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* will know that the journal has long distanced itself from both of these views. Nevertheless, in what we are told (and not just by FIFA) is a ‘watershed year’ in our country’s history, Shakespeareans could do worse than to reformulate De Kock’s closing question: how can we “translate our ideas more compassionately, more understandably” so that “other people will begin to like [Shakespeare] too”?

Perhaps, after all, not much *has* changed in fourteen years.

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This is the second volume of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* that I have been privileged to edit. As usual, it contains both scholarly articles and reviews (or review essays); this is a balance that is difficult but important to maintain, as the journal aims to fulfill its role as a vital repository of academic research while providing a platform for lively responses to recent Shakespeare-related publications and productions.

Readers may discern intriguing parallels – felicitous instances of an uncontrived ‘resonance’ – between different contributions. Brian Lee’s article on the often-overlooked part of Sossius in *Antony and Cleopatra* makes various observations about the play that correspond or conflict with those expressed by Sandra Young in her review of a recent production in Cape Town. Pier Paolo Frassinelli’s combined review of three critical books has something in common with Gerald Gaylard’s reading of the latest novel by John Eppel: both discuss (albeit in different ways) the implications of viewing Shakespeare as emblematic of English studies, of ‘Englishness’, or even of literature more broadly. Thomas Jeffery, reviewing another novel inspired by Shakespeare, may be usefully cross-referenced with Frances Ringwood in her piece on *Women as Hamlet*, and with Brian Pearce and Kevin Duffy in their article on “rational and emotional units of meaning” in *Hamlet*.

The latter, it should be noted, represents an anomalous – if not unique – collaboration between a literary-dramatic scholar and a mathematician. Readers whose interest in the *geisteswissenschaften* inclines more to the arts and humanities than the ‘science’ of social science may cry, “Positivism!” Yet theirs is both an empirical and a conceptual study of the play (arguably achieving the blend of science and literature posited in publications like Richard Dawkins’s *Unweaving the Rainbow* more effectively than Dawkins himself conceives).

In my introduction to Volume 21, I promised “a strong focus on Shakespeare in performance” in Volume 22 – anticipating the publication of articles stemming from a conference planned by the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa around that theme. This did not materialise, but the present volume keeps that promise nonetheless. I have introduced a new feature (which, depending on reader interest, may or may not become regular) that attempts to bridge the gap between “production and reception” of Shakespeare’s plays in South Africa. In this case, we have Nina Lucy Wylde and Mary Jordan giving their ‘takes’, as director and critic respectively, on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that was aimed primarily at school-going audience members. (Here a further example of simultaneous convergence and divergence may be noted – consider Simon van Schalkwyk’s appraisal of the widely-feted dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Dada Masilo.) In addition to the reviewers already mentioned, Donald Powers and David Smith assess other contemporary manifestations of Shakespeare on stage and screen.

Marc Duby, in his account of a staging of Roberto Bonati’s *The Blanket of the Dark* – a jazz adaptation of *Macbeth* – provides numerous insights into the musical performance of Shakespeare. Arlene Oseman’s article on the Machiavellian Prince in *The Tempest* looks at an altogether different kind of ‘performance’: the attainment, exercise and abuse of power by various characters in Shakespeare’s meta-theatrical final play.

Readers can look forward to more of the same in Volume 23. On my desk I have a pile of Shakespeare-related books (by both local and international authors) awaiting review, and the year ahead will see exciting or contentious new productions of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies and histories: versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet* and *Richard III* will be on South African stages in July and August, and there will no doubt be various others to follow. More significantly, however, 2011 will see the publication of a special issue in which guest editor Tony Voss brings together articles on the theme of "Banishment, Xenophobia, Home and Exile in Shakespeare".

Chris Thurman
Editor

WORKS CITED

- Dawkins, Richard. *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- De Kock, Leon. "Letter from Wits". *Southern African Review of Books* (July/August 1996): 19-20.