

WHERE IS SHAKESPEARE?
LOCALITY AND PERFORMATIVE TRANSLATION

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There is only one *Mona Lisa*, and (...) it is in the Louvre;
as for *Hamlet* (...) it too has a restricted documentable existence as the
text of the play in the First Folio, the good Second Quarto,
the bad First Quarto, or some ideal combination of these sources.
Jack Stillinger

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Theseus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1. 14-17)¹

It has become *de rigueur* in scholarly inquiries to reconceptualize critical terms and to question commonplace ideas. However, the locality of performative translations of Shakespeare is a logical extension of the worn and hard-pressed question about the nature of Shakespeare's text and its afterlife. There is indeed only one *Mona Lisa*, and its location can be precisely pin-pointed. The existence of canonical drama with an infinite range of (performative) signification is a different story. One of

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Jorges Luis Borges' intriguing short stories could help illustrate this problem. Borges' Pierre Menard sets out to appropriate Cervantes' *Quixote* but ends up composing another *Quixote*. Even though his *Quixote* coincides "word for word and line for line" with that of Cervantes, he confidently locates his *Quixote* within his locality and believes that these two texts can never read the same, because they are composed in different contexts and constitute different localities—with the "history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918" separating them (Borges, 1999, 5).² The reason why Menard's and Cervantes' *Quixote*, though verbally identical, read differently is presented as self-evident. If there are two verbally identical stage productions of the same Shakespearean play, they could well "read" differently. The referential stability of the plays is now recognized as a fiction, but less transparent is the intricate interplay between localities where Shakespearean authenticity and global differences are derived.

"Shakespeare", as a cultural institution and a set of transmuted texts and visual representations, has had a curious presence in modern world cultures. The questions as to what "Shakespeare" is and how "it" functions have been explored from a number of critical perspectives, but relatively under studied is the question of the locality of "Shakespeare" and its appropriations, its "local habitation." Contrary to what one might come to expect of a globally circulating literary artifact, the "restricted documentable existence" of Shakespeare's plays—rather than the plays' afterlife on stage—has become the focal point of contentions in textual transmission, translation, and English and non-English language performances.

In her 2005 essay on textual criticism and the study of adaptation, Margaret Jane Kidnie quotes at length Jack Stillingier's provocative response to James McLaverty's ontological question: "If the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre in Paris, where is *Hamlet*?" She believes Stillingier's comments expose the modern obsession to locate Shakespeare's plays "not just in a variety of non-identical rare books, but in an unspecified range of editorially-mediated modern versions of those books" (101). What Kidnie calls the "ideology of print" (102) reflects the legacy of

early twentieth-century Anglo-American textual tradition that holds the literary text as an object with enough referential stability to constitute its entire existence. Shakespeare's plays, in other words, are firmly located within the bounds of the pages of various English editions and, by extension, translations produced by cultures around the world. This view excludes other factors contributing to the metaphorical and physical presence of "Shakespeare," especially the locality of the very existence of these printed texts, their afterlife on stage, and, for that matter, performative translation.

The dual canonicity of Shakespeare as a text being widely read and globally performed calls for an analysis of the locality of performative translation and how the distance between different cultural coordinates of the plays and their audience is negotiated. In any given performance the additional languages of body, rhythm, sound, costume, gestures would have been added to the lines delivered by actors. Drama embodies the undistinguishable twins of performance and texts, and the play text is only an incomplete half of the drama, or *troué* in Anne Ubersfeld's term.³ Shakespeare's plays exist physically both on the pages and on the stages. Further, the geographical locations where Shakespeare is read and performed complicate the issue of the locality of these plays.

As a critical category, locality encompasses a number of related ideas, including the fictional setting of a drama, the physical and cultural location of a given performance, the geo-cultural and political coordinates of particular groups of audience, as well as the various layers of meanings embedded in the performing venue. For example, Stratford-upon-Avon and the reconstructed Globe Theatre represent "authentic" and historical venues for the presence of Shakespeare (Bennett 3) that fuels what Barbara Hodgdon calls "fantasies of origin" (Hodgdon 191-240). The world-wide Shakespeare industry has also constructed competing venues for the authentic presence of Shakespeare, including filming location, performing venue, and the symbolically victorious return of a stage production to the "authentic" location where the play is set. Examples abound. Laurence Olivier's

1948 *Hamlet* was filmed in Elsinore, Denmark. When invited to participate in the Hamlet Sommer festival in Elsinore in 2002, the Chinese-Singaporean director, Ong Keng Sen, insisted that he would only stage a work there if he could do a “site-specific version [of *Hamlet*] at Kronborg, in its different rooms.” A Chinese *kunju* opera adaptation of *Macbeth* by the Shanghai *Kunju* Theatre Company titled *The Story of Bloody Hands* [*xie shou ji*] toured Scotland and other cities in the UK and Europe in 1987.⁴ Most recently, in 2005, a *jingju* [Peking opera] *Hamlet* was staged in Denmark by the Shanghai *Jingju* Theatre Company, again advertised as a victorious “return” to Hamlet’s land and the most authentic venue.⁵ What is being translated in performative terms is not just the Shakespearean play, but also the currency of locality.

A closer look at each of these events reveals that different but related ideologies are at work in each of these performances and in the justification statements made by the artists involved. Partly due to Olivier’s reputation and partly due to the setting, Olivier’s performance on screen has long been regarded a classic, “authentic” representation of the Danish prince. Ong’s project, *Search: Hamlet*, takes on interesting dimensions because of the performing venue. Like Stratford-upon-Avon, Kronborg Castle in Elsinore has been the locus of fantasies of origin and authenticity. Ong and his TheatreWorks, an independent, non-profit Singaporean theatre company, staged *Search: Hamlet* as an indoor and open-air “dance-theatre event, a free interpretation” of *Hamlet* in what most tourists take as (albeit knowing it a fiction) Hamlet’s castle. Ong argues that “locating [his production] at Kronborg would raise all sorts of cultural issues, such as cultural authenticity and possession”, that would help his audience rethink a set of questions, including “Should globalization develop specificities to take into account different localities, different contexts, different individual circumstances?” (18). Ong’s casting list, a diverse group of artists from China, Japan, France, Sweden, Thailand, USA, Indonesia, Denmark, and other locations, is true to his intention to tackle the issue of globalization in intercultural theatre. *Search: Hamlet* is the last part of

Ong's Shakespeare trilogy, preceded by a pan-Asian *Lear* (1997) and an avant-garde *Desdemona* (2000), in which Ong attempts to counter the common homogenizing effect of intercultural theatrical borrowings by staging a site-specific performance. In other words, he is less interested in borrowing and mingling different cultural elements and performing traditions than in locating *Hamlet* and the specificities of his *Hamlet*. In an interview, Ong states:

Audiences in Tokyo, Berlin, New York, Singapore and Denmark are not the same. You cannot produce one work and tour it to five cities with an identical production. The fact that we are site specific at Kronborg forces us to tailor it to Denmark, which I think is very important in this floating space of international performance. Kronborg is an important root to make us specific. (45)

What Ong does not elaborate on is the obvious question of why Kronborg and not any other venues, and why *Hamlet* in Kronborg and not any other play. Of course the requirements and contexts of the Hamlet Sommer festival would provide an answer to the logistical aspect of this question, but not the aesthetic aspect. One has to wonder whether Kronborg holds special magic and appeal to audiences and directors who are eager to find a stable and enticing point of reference for the physical presence of Shakespeare's plays, in a similar fashion to how textual scholars locate the plays within the bounds of the printed pages.

In contrast to Ong's conscious maneuver to move away from the possibility of gaining additional purchase of location-derived authenticity, the Chinese reception of the international tours of the two productions, registered by audience responses and media coverage, demonstrated an obsession with the authenticity of the, ironically, fictional settings of Shakespearean plays—hence the pride and sense of achievement when a *Macbeth* made in China toured Macbeth's "home land", Scotland, and when a native Chinese *Hamlet* is invited to perform in Denmark. The director of *The Story of Bloody Hands*, Li

Jiayao, proudly referred to the tour abroad as the highest achievement of *kunju* opera in its time-honored history and the highlight of his acting and directing career (Li, 2005). The currency of locality was perceived to be gaining additional aesthetic values for these productions, even though they were sinicized versions of the plays. *Bloody Hands* retains the main plot line of *Macbeth* but relocates the setting, characters' names and other aspects of the play to a fictional feudal kingdom in ancient China. *The Revenge of the Prince* also reframes *Hamlet* in the contexts of Chinese *jingju* performing idioms and the more traditional genre of storytelling and nationalist discourse. The performing venues, Scotland (Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness) for *Bloody Hands* and Kronborg for *Prince*, are perceived to play a key role in authenticating the performances that are interestingly not site specific. The same productions were staged in China to a predominantly Chinese audience before and after they toured the UK and Europe.

This unusual rupture—or rather seamless transition, from the Chinese perspective—between the play's sinicized, fictional setting and the authentic performing venue is in fact symptomatic of the mainland Chinese tradition of appropriating Shakespeare. A wartime production of *Hamlet* is a case in point. Chinese Shakespearean performances oscillated between the two poles of “exoticization” and “localization,” between the options for preserving the foreignness or highlighting contemporaneous social relevance. Toward the end of the 1930s, with the advent of the civil war (between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party), a full-scale Japanese invasion (launched on 7 July 1937), and the Second World War (1939-1945), local calls for literary utilitarianism of theatre re-emerged. Performances had to be relevant to “our country and our time.”⁶ Therefore, directors in the 1940s sought out a different approach to staging Shakespeare, responding to both the financial restrictions and new ideological needs. Against this backdrop of war-time financial restrictions and the increasing demands for a war-time theatre that would fashion vigilant and patriotic citizens, Shakespearean performances in the 1940s opted for immediate social relevance and employed minimalist stage sets

and costumes. In other words, the locality of the Chinese audience was given primacy. Performances during this period stayed away from lavish style and elaborate stage design. Directors and audiences highlighted the allegedly relevant themes of the plays.

A 1942 *Hamlet* staged by the National Drama School [Guoli xiju zhuanke xuexiao],⁷ for example, was said to have represented a “progressive revolutionary spirit.” This spirit was “exactly what the Chinese people need to resist the Japanese invasion.”⁸ This production was staged in Jiang’an county in Sichuan, five years after the fall of Nanjing under the Japanese invasion. Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government established a temporary capital in Chongqing in Sichuan. Many schools, universities, and members of the literary circle including dramatists relocated to Chongqing with the Nationalist government. Their low morale was exacerbated by backward economic conditions and the Japanese bombing. Under these circumstances, theater performance—a luxury in any war-time country—was not only conceived as a form to entertain the public but as a tool to boost their morale and maintain their dignity. Being able to put on a play—an important part of cultural life—was no doubt already a sign of victory, a sign posted to the outside world that China survived with cultural integrity. Yu Shangyuan, Principal of the drama school that staged the 1942 *Hamlet*, enthusiastically supported the idea. According to Yu, the staging of a Shakespearean play proclaimed China’s cultural sophistication:

Those countries that have performed most Shakespearean plays and produce the best performances are the countries with the highest cultural sophistication and artistic standard. [...] To catch up with them and to take part in world culture, China must introduce and stage Shakespeare’s plays.⁹

From Yu’s comments, it seems that any Shakespearean play would do. However, the specific context of the Anti-Japanese War prompted the director, Jiao Juyin (1905-1975), to look for a play that could rouse patriotic feelings. Jiao Juyin, who had just earned his doctorate in theater

in France, in his speech to the actors, directly related the conditions in *Hamlet* to the war: "Hamlet contains a lesson to us people who live in the time of the Anti-Japanese War." He delineated this "lesson" from Hamlet's procrastination: "Our victory over the Japanese depends on (...) our taking immediate actions without hesitation." Jiao then commented on the difficulties of staging a play at the time because of the lack of skilled actors and resources: "[However], actors' skills or the conditions of the [performance space] are less important". More important was the "lesson" the actors and their audience would draw from *Hamlet*: "We Chinese people are too cautious and (...) in the end we accomplish nothing."¹⁰

The most intriguing aspect of this production is that the performance took place on the balcony in front of the hall where the shrine of Confucius was located in a Confucian temple with two wings on the side. The audience watched from the courtyard. The physical setting brought an allegorical layer to the production. In the nunnery scene, Hamlet exited slowly toward the hall. While the shrine of Confucius was not part of the set, the audience knew that when Hamlet existed, he headed toward the shrine. Buried in his thoughts, Hamlet appeared to be seeking advice from the Chinese sage. The question of "To be or not to be" acquired an urgency for war-time China.¹¹ All of a sudden, the remote world of Elsinore, Elizabethan skepticism, and Hamlet-like procrastination crossed the vast historical and geo-cultural distance to form a "patriotic" play. When these themes emerged in the Confucian temple, the "foreignness" of Hamlet and his outlandish story became the most apt expression of the mind of the Chinese audience.

Ultimately, the question "where is Shakespeare" is connected to the question "where is the reader". As was shown by these cases, the interplay between the self-syndicated, historically "authentic" venues for the presence of Shakespeare and a group of replicated or mystified venues produce and sustain a desire for "Shakespeare". The geographical and cultural boundaries share ambiguous relations to the presence of Shakespeare in world cultures. Martin Heidegger argues that "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks

recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing" (Bhabha 1). Indeed these historical and imagined boundaries constitute the very "venue" and instances from which "Shakespeare" as a locus of discourse begins its presencing.

Notes

1. As the play comes full circle, Theseus discusses with Hippolyta the strange tales the lovers tell them. All quotations of Shakespeare not otherwise attributed in this essay follow *The Riverside Shakespeare Second Edition*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).
2. I thank Djelal Kadir for bringing to my attention the parallel between Borges' story and the paradoxical reproducibility of Shakespeare's plays as texts and as performances.
3. Quoted in Susan Bassnett, "Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre," *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1998): 120.
4. *The Story of Bloody Hands*, Shanghai Kunju Theatre Company, adapted from *Macbeth* by Zheng Shifeng, directed by Li Jiayao, Shen Bin, and Zhang Mingrong; artistic director, Huang Zuolin, premiered in Shanghai in 1986.
5. *The Revenge of the Prince* [*Wangzi fuchou ji*], Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company, directed by Shi Yukun, adapted by Feng Gang, stage design by Chen Yina, Kronborg (Hamlet Sommer), July 30-August 2, 2005. Featuring Fu Xiru as Zi Dan (Hamlet), Zhao Huan as Yin Li (Ophelia), and Chen Yu as Yong Shu or Uncle Yong (Claudius).
6. Li, Ming, "Luomi'ou yu Zhuliye—gongyan hou de pingjia [A review of the production of *Romeo and Juliet*]," *Da gong bao zengkan* [*Dagong Daily Supplement*], 8 June, 1937: 14.
7. The school was relocated to Chongqing, Sichuan, the temporary capital during the war.
8. Yu Shangyuan, quoted in *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* [A comparative history of modern Chinese drama], eds. Tian Benxiang, et al. (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1993): 453.

9. Quoted in Cao Shujun and Sun Fuliang, *Shashibiya zai Zhongguo wutai shang* [Shakespeare on the Chinese Stage] (Shenyang: Harbin chubanshe, 1989): 105.
10. Jiao Juyin, "Guanyu *Hamuleite* [About *Hamlet*]," *Jiao Juyin wenji* [Collected writings by Jiao Juyin] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988) 2: 167.
11. Jiang Tao, "Lun Zhongguo shaju wutai shang de daoyan yishu [Directing arts of Shakespearean performance on the Chinese stage]," *Xiju* [Drama] (Beijing: Zhongyang xiju xueyuan, 1996) 3: 107.

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