Nation vs. world? Global imprints on Shakespeare and the orientation of world literature

MICHAEL STEPPAT

One of the foremost critics in recent decades, Harold Bloom, has asserted that "Shakespeare is to the world's literature what Hamlet is to the imaginary domain of literary character: a spirit that permeates everywhere, that cannot be confined", also calling him "the center of the embryo of a world canon, not Western or Eastern" (1994, 52, 62–63). Is this "world's literature" that which others call world literature? In major discussions of the latter, Shakespeare is mentioned only occasionally and briefly, as if his work and status do not lend themselves to the agenda of such concepts; his prominence in the "world's literature" does not transfer to world literature. Is this just a play on words? Or is there an underlying epistemological problem owing to which world literature is, for some reason, hardly concerned with Shakespeare?

Another approach to the world/Shakespeare nexus declares him to be an "omnipresence worldwide": he is able to "transcend any barrier or class, language, colour or creed", perhaps a symbol of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" with the "fluid, ideas-based economy of the global web", or "a 'rhizomatic' figure – decentered, uncontainable, his roots erupting from many different locations simultaneously" (Dickson 2016). Uncontainable, unconfinable: a dialectic appears to operate between the imprint of Shakespeare on the world and the reverse. It is traceable, too, in the "MIT Global Shakespeare Project", which likewise uses world terminology when it offers information about "international performances that are varying how we understand Shakespeare's plays *and the world*" (emphasis added).

Globe and world are often treated as near-synonyms, apparent in the way "global Shakespeare" is explained by his presence in "many world cultures" (Dickson 2016). Yet *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *world* prominently as "[t]he state or realm of human existence on earth" (I.1.a.), with a temporal dimension (5.b.); *globe* is "[a] spherical representation of the earth" (I.2.) (http://www.oed.com; see also Cheah 2014, 307–308). Accordingly, a geographically global or international Shakespeare is not coterminous with his position vis-à-vis world literature. Does that matter? I will

argue that both concepts need a change of direction to enable a better grasp of these epistemologies – and of Shakespeare's peculiar position.

In contrast with the above appraisals, much of Shakespeare's reception history has built on a national emphasis, which we should trace first in order to balance the world/globe perspective within a notional whole.

NATIVE INSPIRATION AND NATION

When Shakespeare's collected dramatic work was initially released to the world, it was announced with an appeal to the nation itself: "Triumph, my Britain! Thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe" (Jonson [1623] 1974, 66). If the verbs suggest a condition of national ownership, the apostrophe can be regarded as indicating a form of historical progress. Franco Moretti has called attention to the historical phenomenon that European "dis-union" in separate nation states has been vital for the emergence of baroque tragedy (2013, 12). Not long after Ben Jonson, at any rate, we have John Milton creating the impression that Shakespeare owes nothing to foreign learning when the author of "L'Allegro" hears "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child, / Warble his native wood-notes wild" ([1645] 1971, 138). Highlighting the native environment as inspirational imprint on the bard's "fancy" becomes a perception that runs parallel to the national apostrophe. It is greatly elaborated a century later, when the novelist Charlotte Lennox offers several volumes of research on Shakespeare's sources, in which she expressly supports Milton's characterization in arguing that the dramatist owes very little if anything to classical authors, rather using (apart from his imagination) English translations – so that his native wood-notes appear "untaught, and all his own" (1753, 1: 241). What is more, Shakespeare's reputation appears vital to "the Honour of that Nation" which is his "Parent" (1753, 1: vii). Lennox believes he might actually have done well to benefit from foreign learning, but she finds few if any traces thereof.

In Shakespeare's early reception we find it asserted that his country's dramatic achievements, prominently including his own, are superior to that of "any other *Nation*" (Langbaine 1688, sig. A3v). This strengthens the accolade already heard early in Ben Jonson's verses, as quoted above. Then in the 19th century, a number of statements closely associate Shakespeare with the nation and its identity. For that period, one might attempt to distinguish between an expansionist direction of nationalist thought and its opposite, and between Britain (as in Ben Jonson) and England, yet valuations of Shakespeare are not always easy to assign to any particular orientation of this kind. A sampling of more or less representative utterances will have to suffice for our purposes. A Dublin magazine in 1852 comments on the French historian François Guizot's estimations of Corneille and Shakespeare, who appear to be characteristic national icons suggesting to this reviewer "what is French and what is English" (Anonymous 1852, 197). Shakespeare becomes a player in the theatre of rivalry between great powers. For the playwright Edward Rose, Shakespeare as "the English poet" appears as "a microcosm of the English nation", in terms of national character and history (1876). The eminent literary historian George Saintsbury speaks of Elizabethan literature, prominently embracing Shakespeare, as occupying "the first

place even among the first class" of the world's literature, with "the super-eminent glory of English" ([1887] 1890, 458–459). The world perspective is clearly present, immersed if not drowned in the glory of the country's language. A related variant of nationalist identification is patriotism, which is sometimes evoked expressly as a literary quality imposed on the Bard, as in cultural historian and poet John Addington Symonds's characterization of Elizabethan literature as "a school of popular instruction, a rallying-point of patriotism" ([1884] 1900, 66).

Yet the lofty esteem of Shakespeare and also some contemporary authors in the nation is at least partly due to a selective vision. This is manifest in the expurgated and hugely popular "Family Shakespeare" edition, which since 1807 imprinted a refined and "modern" sensibility on his works in order to make them palatable. What is more, where the dramatist himself comes closest to representing the nation's concerns as such, viz. in his English history dramas, he dissolves them into situations of ugly feuding and contest between aristocratic factions.

It is not so easy, moreover, to transfer Shakespeare's national status to the colonial and imperial spheres. Poonam Trivedi, co-editor of a major source on Shakespeare's reception in India, maintains that on the Indian subcontinent in the 1830s Shakespeare was shifted from the cultural realm "to the imperial and ideological axis" (2005, 15). Michael Neill, in another postcolonial collection, asserts that Shakespeare's writing was "entangled from the beginning with the projects of nation-building, Empire and colonization", so that his canon of works became "an instrument of imperial authority" (1998, 168–169). Yet we should not overlook the express 19th-century fears that the vaunted moralizing agenda of British rule in India, for instance, would be jeopardized by the homosexuality and pederasty represented in Shakespeare's Sonnets (and from thence in his own personality) if acquaintance with his works were encouraged, let alone made compulsory (Stallybrass [1993] 1999, 144; Mukherjee 2016, 86).

During and after empire, associating Shakespeare with the nation appears to have a weak foundation, seeing that (unlike, for instance, Robert Burns) he "actually delivers very few of the things countries generally want from their national poets"; as the Shakespeare Institute's director avers, enjoying the bard's works is by no means an "innately patriotic activity", since he "long ago outgrew these islands" (Dobson, n.d.).

THE "WORLD" AND COMMON HUMANITY

This brings us back to the larger world, and to where we started: the domain of the world's literature. Surely that is more fitting for any understanding of Shakespeare? His editor Samuel Johnson in 1765 prefigures this perspective:

> His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. (1765, viii–ix)

Appealing to "the world" far beyond "particular places", and perennial humanity rather than transience, is not a 20th-century notion superseding that of national

belonging, since it is articulated soon after Charlotte Lennox's highlighting of native English wood-notes. But is world literature, as the term is later used, a suitable category enabling any form of analysis? Only infrequently has Shakespeare been evoked (briefly enough) in studies of this, as when David Damrosch quotes Bloom (2003, 141) or mentions "the changing fortunes of Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare" (133) – general aesthetic axiology is about as far as this goes.

Studies of world literature address interactions of literary cultures that, significant enough for the book/media market, appear somewhat removed from any Shakespearean analysis. To understand why, we should at least cast a glance at influential discussions, without being exhaustive. Erich Auerbach speaks of "historicist humanism", which is concerned with an "inner history of mankind – which thereby created a conception of man unified in his multiplicity" and "a conception of the diverse background of a common fate" ([1952] 1969, 4, 7). This emphasis on multiplicity and diversity is European, yet it emerges from the scholar's own vantage point just outside Europe, detached from a national heritage (9, 17; see also Cheah 2014, 305; Tong 2017, 534). More recently, and helpfully for us, Itamar Even-Zohar has emphasized that "literatures are never in non-interference"; in such impact effects there is "no symmetry" (1990, 59, 62). Franco Moretti has called attention to the world literary system of "inter-related literatures", focusing on the inequality of a situation in which a peripheral literary culture is intersected by a core culture (2000, 56). In the receptive domain, for that matter, a reader does not have to concentrate on a whole text: such features as "devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" can enter the purview of world literature inquiry (57).

Damrosch, like others, employs spatial terms in the study of "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin", which may happen in translation that gives writing a new quality (2003, 4; on translation see also Casanova 2004, 146). Such works are "actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch 2003, 4) – instances are Virgil as well as T'ang Dynasty poetry. Ultimately world literature becomes "a mode of reading", engaging with "worlds beyond our own place and time" (281), in works available in writing and hence mostly print. We might gather that Scottish 17th-century readers of Shakespeare, as well as English players touring Europe at the time, would then begin elevating his work to world-literature level. While world literature "has been theorized mostly in the context of Western literary studies", concepts change "in response to local needs and contexts" (Zhang 2014, 521–522), and we should be aware of a subtle shift: major recent contributions have endeavored to modernize the world literature concept by understanding "world" in a spatial and geographical sense, which does not fully match Goethe's original intention.

Pheng Cheah turns against this kind of spatial reduction, at least when it becomes a dominant category. Though it may seem out of tune with recent conceptualization, the argument strengthens world literature's "normative end" of "revealing universal humanity across particular differences", thus enabling or supporting "a higher intellectual community" – even a "higher spiritual world" (2014, 318; see also 2016). A world in this sense results from worlding, world-making (2014, 323), an ongoing

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process that is temporal rather than spatial, inviting us to re-read Samuel Johnson's judgment on Shakespeare with its lightly temporalized elements. Cheah can build fruitfully on Hannah Arendt's realization that "life […] related to the world" is filled with "events which ultimately can be told as a story", one "with enough coherence to be told" ([1958] 1998, 97).

That puts us in a position to ask what Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winner, may have meant when he called Shakespeare a world-poet or *viśva-kavi* (in 1915, see Gollancz 1916, 320–321; Ganguly 2021). For Tagore, according to literary scholar Supriya Chaudhuri, readers or listeners would aim "to find the world in the self", by an awareness of "poetry as a movement of affect that binds human beings together"; Shakespeare is then "a universal creator, a maker (Greek *poeta*) of the world" (2021, 198, 200). This understanding has a clear affinity to Cheah's, but what does it mean in practice? We learn that a major part of Shakespeare's position in the *movement of affect* is the capacity of his scripts to "present themselves for rewriting", in India and by the same token elsewhere with "an energetic programme of adaptation" – but it is one that makes them "fertile literary compost" for re-use, and thus, we can gather, somewhat decomposes the notion of world literature (209), even re-localizing it.

If we believe this somewhat sobering analysis, Shakespeare's universal potential for forming "fertile compost" makes the loftiness of the world-literature category crumble. Should Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* sound a warning for us here? "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value" (6.41; Wittgenstein 1922, 87). Of course Wittgenstein is not talking about literature, but the collocated world category may not lend itself as quickly to axiological attributions as we might suppose. They may even be beside the point.

RECONSIDERING INFLUENCES AND IMPRINTS

We can gain a fresh perspective by revisiting the early authors, cited above, who write about Shakespeare with an eye to the way his works came about, the influences and imprints acting (or not acting) on him: Milton, Langbaine, and Lennox. Milton and Lennox identify native and hence national influences and sources (if any), and the nation's "Honour", we recall, is at stake in the way the bard warbles his native wood-notes (Lennox). This emphasis gets disputed as students of Shakespeare's works, since Langbaine identifies strong influences from European (and later, even West Asian) literatures from classical as well as more recent times.

Nonetheless, down to our own age this time-honored line of questioning has operated as a submerged anchor for giving priority, whether consciously or less so, to the national domain. It is already Langbaine who offers an initial account of the "*Basis*" on which Shakespeare's dramas are built, in order that the reader "may be able to form a Judgment of the Poets ability in working up a *Dramma*, by comparing his *Play* with the *Original* Story" (1688, sig. A4). This procedure becomes a matter of "national pride" (Kewes 1997, 10). As with other English dramatists, it is Shakespeare's own "ability" in transforming extraneous materials, often foreign ones,

and imprinting on them his own superior talent that is the object of attention: like Virgil he "add[s] to the beauty" of whatever he copies or takes over from elsewhere (Langbaine 1688, sig. a2r).

This description's signifying import has remained almost unchanged since Langbaine's time. In his multi-volume collection of *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Geoffrey Bullough asserts that, without knowing the material that was available to Shakespeare for his own compositions, "neither his debts nor the transcendent scope of his creative energy can be assessed" (1957, 1: xii). Scholars are accordingly obliged to study how he makes use of earlier materials in order to bring forth works which are not only "for an age" but also "for all time"; the reason one studies the earlier materials is to see the bard's own "creative process in action […] his constructive powers in operation" (Bullough 1975, 8: 344, 8: 346). The Shakespearean scholar Kenneth Muir expresses the same idea (1964, 35). With the attribution of "transcendent scope" together with "constructive powers", the dramatist appears in ideological terms as "intentional agent", and is then placed in the realm of the small number of "haves" with their "wealth and acclaim" as against authors of minor works that are merely "social products" (Clayton and Rothstein 1991, 16). With this orientation, the scholarly obligation identified by Bullough feeds into his own research practice. We find it in his declaration that (for instance) Shakespeare's "main and perhaps sole source" in composing *Romeo and Juliet* is an English poem, Arthur Brooke's *Tragicall Historye*, a translation from Boaistuau's French (Bullough 1957, 1: 274). Any other renderings of the story, of which there are a larger number on the European continent preceding Shakespeare's, appear insignificant (let alone non-European ones). There are grounds for such an assumption, of course, but they have been disputed. While it does not by any means represent the whole of Bullough's work on the Bard's sources, it could easily be read as illustrating the recent finding that Shakespearean source study is "a product of 19th-century nationalist criticism", a perspective from which it is "implicated" in a particular "model of cultural history", one which is "teleological, axiological, nationalist" and which also assumes that "the riches of world culture were fulfilled when Shakespeare exploited them" (Newcomb 2018, 27).

Is this relation to "world culture" the dark underside of Bloom's assertion that Shakespeare "permeates everywhere" regarding the world's literature? Cultural markets are then, by extension, liable to becoming "progressively Westernized", with a universally consumable Shakespeare "imposing Western values over other cultural traditions" (Massai 2005, 4), a major case of cultural diffusionism.

At this juncture we might begin to realize that, thus far, ideas of world literature and the world canon have a characteristic shortcoming in relation to Shakespeare (and perhaps other authors). When they do not speak only in terms of critical reviewing and philological work, they mention "the changing fortunes of Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare" (Damrosch 2003, 4) or the way Shakespeare "was read throughout Europe in Le Tourneur's translations" (Casanova 2004, 146). The European purview apart, the point here is that they tend to devote attention to a corpus or corpora of existing and completed literary pieces that, having acquired their

final and printed state, then circulate beyond their original cultural environment – as finished compositions that become forces in a "creation of the world". But is there no "world" involved in the way they come into being, their evolving composition process?

In Shakespeare's case, the imprint of a world beyond the native wood-notes has of course entered into the perception of his achievement. In the 17th century, Gerard Langbaine compiled an overview of influences that includes continental works, and in 1746, John Upton highlighted Shakespeare's age as "learned", stressing that for improved cultivation other English writers too should "go abroad; and from the Attic and Roman flowers collect their honey" (13, 40). Much later Kenneth Muir, among others, in surveying Shakespeare's sources highlighted his classical learning and seeks to do justice to his use of classical authors (1977, 1). Hence, along with historical works and *novelle*, the continental "world" has been found to contribute to the imprints on the scripts' initial constitution. This is significant, for it is on such foundations that Bloom, for one, attributes a universal spirit to Shakespeare as central to the world canon – an axiological process for which the de-facto European world that writes its traces into its major poetic (and English) product is the world. This is not to claim that Bloom single-handedly invented such a manner of appraisal. Goethe had already declared that Shakespeare joined the world spirit in permeating the world, just as England is everywhere ("Shakspeare gesellt sich zum Weltgeist: er durchdringt die Welt wie jener […] Ueberall ist England […]"; [1813] 1881, 31: 297); Schlegel affirmed that Shakespeare belongs to the Germans as much as to the English, being "wholly ours" ("man darf kühnlich behaupten, daß er nächst den Engländern keinem Volke so eigenthümlich angehört, wie den Deutschen […] wir brauchen keinen Schritt aus unserem Charakter herauszugehn, um ihn ganz unser nennen zu dürfen"; [1846–1847] 1971, 7: 38). In the later heritage of such judgments, cultural nationalism merges with a continental domain, without always becoming entirely invisible; an English "Eurostar" can be celebrated (Hoenselaars and Calvo 2010), while notable translators have understood Shakespeare as "a universal classic of world literature" in a Europeanizing sense (Durić 2014, 65).

A WIDER WORLD

Fresh research proposes and demonstrates that Shakespeare is apt to disrupt such a notion of the world's literature (not only in the shape of a compost heap). Here the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, cited above with Bullough's analysis, deserves revisiting. In the early 19th century, a strong Arabic influence on troubadour and courtly style was controversially proposed (Sismondi 1823, 1: 42, 102–103). More recently it has been plausibly argued that the Islamic Sufi "conception of the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*)" together with further principles of this tradition's "spiritual philosophy" actually "provide the most suitable framework for understanding" Shakespeare's well-known tragedy, which "belongs to the tradition of the tragic, Oriental love romance" from Nizami to Khany (Al-Dabbagh 2000, 73). In this genuinely transcultural genre inquiry, it is a West Asian framework that enables us to see Shakespeare's tragedy as "the most renowned example in world literature" of "tragic romance as

a genre" – a "universalist perspective" that potentially recasts the world-literature idea from within (80).

In recent work making use of transgeneric narratology, the 8th-century Arabic story of Layla and Majnun (inspired by the poetry of Qays ibn Al-Mulawwah) and the 12th-century Persian adaptation by Nizami Ganjavi have been "considered major or even primary sources" of Shakespeare's tragedy, on account of a range of thematic, actional, and verbal parallels (Elhanafy 2020, 92, 131, 138). Innovative explorations of this kind deserve some serious attention, keeping in mind that probability rather than certainty remains a chief criterion in assessing sources and influences. It does not seem unlikely that the lofty notion, cited above, of world-in-the-self merges to a significant degree with geographical-global transfer from beyond Europe to form an imprint on the coming about of Shakespeare's drama. The wider world, as it were, is active in contributing to the literary work's constitutive process, a mobile and vectorial dynamic close to Ottmar Ette's manner of analysis (2021).

The 19th-century critic William Watkiss Lloyd compared Shakespeare with Arabic literature's greatest contribution to world literature, *Alf Laylah Wa-Laylah* (*The Thousand and One Nights*) by finding similarities between the tale "The Three Apples" and *Othello* (Lloyd [1856] 1875, 454, 456). The Iraqi scholar Fawziya Mousa Ghanim strengthens this argument in his recent study (2015). Beyond the Arabic narrative collection, much of which was known across early modern Europe, we now have reasons to assume that the history of the 6th-century Arab-Ethiopian poet-warrior Antarah ibn Shaddad al-Absi has such unmistakable resemblances to Shakespeare's depiction of Othello (Hamamra 2019; Hennessey 2020) that one can surmise an influence. Channels of transmission of such cultural knowledge toward Western/Northern Europe can be traced, though not without effort. In this immensely fruitful historical constellation, Western Europe (and England) has no metropolitan or hegemonic position.

Turning to Africa, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents its spirit rulers as engaged in a status quarrel, fundamental to the thematically grounded action, that turns out to be remarkably similar to what is poetically depicted in an ancient West African myth about the relationship between the lord of the earth Ajàláyé and the king of heaven Ajŕḷọrun. Passages in classical European literature that have been proposed as source materials are not quite so close as this to the drama script (Steppat 2020, also 2023). We now know that by the time of Shakespeare's active period there was a considerable community of people with African origin and descent in London and in other cities in England, playing a role in the cultural activities of the English metropolis (Habib 2008).

Continuing inquiries like these now give us better insight into the extent to which imprints from the wider world outside Europe contribute to shaping significant portions of Shakespeare's oeuvre, intervening, as we may surmise, in the constitution of drama scripts. The process is not irrelevant to an understanding of world literature, the major concepts of which have been taking chiefly the finished product as their point of departure in studying circulation. There are exceptions (as in Dam-

rosch 2003, 44, 270; Casanova 2004, 295), of which more could be made. "Worlding a peripheral literature" (Juvan 2019) can happen from a new perspective: the regions now called SWANA (South West Asia/North Africa) are anything but a periphery in the fruitful historical moment we have been considering.

CONCLUSION

From these concepts, we can pick up the emphasis on inequality from Moretti, as in the case of a core culture's intersecting a peripheral culture; where necessary we can reverse its direction. We can also take up Damrosch's highlighting of a circulation of textualities beyond their culture of origin. When we then attempt to read their mobility, with textual intersections or encounters across cultural boundaries, we will not forget that their meeting ground is a site of power asymmetry – nowadays paradoxically the global and canonical esteem (and commodification) of Shakespeare greatly outweighs that of *Layla and Majnun* or West African mythology. But should it?

Once we consider the dynamics of encounter, literary genres as well as the channels and methods of transmission will cross paths, enhancing their transformative impact. Consequently, when an oral or written text enters a new cultural environment, it leaves a trace within emergent textualities which gain hegemonic dominance due to historical power shifts. We can rediscover and reveal the transmitted text's interference, its active presence. Such encounters bring about new opportunities to grasp a "universal" humanity (Cheah 2014) in productive reception. Investigating textual correspondences enables an awareness of disparate and rival cultural imprints that set analogies as well as contrasts against each other, operating in the same textual and structural constitution and acting not independently but mutually. For such developments, Susan Arndt has proposed the term "trans*textuality" (2018, 400) which conceivably opens a pathway for a new direction in considering world literature vis-à-vis Shakespeare. This line of questioning can also potentially invite consideration of other writings, authors, and their conditions of creative inspiration, for the early modern age as much as for modern and contemporary literature.

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Nation vs. world? Global imprints on Shakespeare and the orientation of world literature

William Shakespeare is said to be uniquely omnipresent in the world's literature, yet world literature concepts only devote marginal attention to him, so a conceptual change of direction is necessary for an understanding of his peculiar position. Whereas reception history has long highlighted the nation as the main critical framework, transcultural inquiries are now (re)discovering submerged imprints from regions such as Southwest Asia and West Africa on the initial formation of Shakespeare's texts. These enable a reorientation in theorizing world literature, to grasp the nature of his achievements and to apply this new direction to other authors.

Prof. Dr. Michael Steppat
Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies
University of Bayreuth
Faculty IV, GW1
95440 Bayreuth
Germany
michael.steppat@uni-bayreuth.de
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4278-1578