

UNKNOWN ACCENTS, UNBORN STATES THE RENEGADE SHAKESPEARES OF COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA¹

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In 1924, Kuala Lumpur's elite Victoria Institution, driven largely by the dramatic ambitions of its British headmaster Richard Sidney, staged a lavish full-length production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall. The production was well-received and was also taken on tour to Singapore (*Victorian* 1:2 March 1924, 71). Emboldened by the success of this production, the same school produced Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part One* the following year and took these two productions through an unprecedented tour of Penang, Ipoh, and Singapore (*Victorian* 1:4, December 1924 159-160). In the program to the Ipoh touring production of these plays, the staging of Shakespeare in Malaya is defended on these terms:

It may be asked—"Why do we attempt anything so difficult as the production right through of a whole Shakespeare play? Why not be content with fragments? This is an easy question to answer ... If ... , we are to understand anything of the man who is admitted to be the world's greatest poet we must have a chance of hearing his words intelligently spoken and of seeing his plays beautifully acted on the stage. Is it a small thing that even in Malaya there should be a desire to savour some of the higher graces of life—to think occasionally of what poetry means to a man's life? It is a good thing that the young are given the opportunity while their minds are still able to receive the necessary impression. (qtd in Sidney, 132)

"Even in Malaya," the writer insists, "the desire to savour some of the higher graces of life" can be fulfilled by the appreciation of a Shakespearean play. Shakespeare was thought to be good for the young and perhaps the best

occasion for contemplating poetry's worth in a man's life. That Shakespeare was far removed from the realities of early twentieth century Malaya and indeed from the very lives of his native actors and audiences then mattered little to the British headmaster (and others like him) who passionately championed the performance of Shakespeare's plays, to the officials of the colonial school system that supported the proliferation of Shakespearean performance and pedagogy in educational institutions, and even arguably to the native students themselves who may have been, in part or in whole, mesmerized by the promise of access to "the higher graces of life" promised by Shakespeare.

These early twentieth century performances of Shakespeare in Malaya are but few examples of the significance Shakespeare assumed in the playing out of historical colonialism. The English writer William Shakespeare has been vital in the propagation of Western knowledges throughout colonial regimes. Often held up as the paragon not only of English literature but also of Englishness and therefore, in the convoluted logic of imperial ideologies, of civilization itself, the spread of Shakespeare became synonymous with the "civilizing" mission of colonialism; the extensive study and performance of the bard's "lofty scenes... in states unborn and in accents yet unknown" was a sure marker of imperial superiority and colonial success.² Shakespeare's ubiquity was ensured by its existence as a subject of colonial pedagogy; as printed texts in local translations and adaptations; and as amateur, school-based and even professional performances throughout colonial regimes in the English-speaking world.

Such was the case not only in British Malaya but also in the American Philippines in the early twentieth century where as early as 1904, or only three years after an Education Bureau was established by the American Colonial regime, the teaching of two Shakespearean plays—*The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*—is mandated in all high schools throughout the Islands (Courses of Instruction, 15).³ An important part of the English school curriculum in both colonial territories, publications and performances of Shakespearean plays were produced primarily as an aid to pedagogy. Looking only to colonial education and its official propagation of Shakespearean texts and performances, however, misses crucial and more interesting facets of the dynamics of colonial cultural production that can be gleaned from the history of Shakespearean production and re-production in these colonial territories of Southeast Asia. Indeed, in both the Philippines and Malaysia, colonial education did much to diminish

local cultures in the process of upholding the supremacy of western modernity. What is also true, however, is that in the introduction of the knowledges of modernity, colonial powers were not always or not absolutely successful in containing its effects and assimilations into local cultures.

Shakespearean incursions into local cultures via means other than through official colonial institutions, what I call the “renegade” Shakespeares of colonial Southeast Asia, offer us a case in point. Despite the colonial establishment’s best efforts to enshrine the Bard in accordance with its own agendas, Shakespeare (or Shakespeare-derived forms) nonetheless enters into the print and performance cultures of British Malaya and the American Philippines in ways that flagrantly defy the very colonial authority Shakespeare was meant to shore up. Or put another way: the process of the colonial reworlding of Malaysians and Filipinos into the cultures of the West also meant the consequent reworlding of Shakespeare into Southeast Asia. And, it must be stressed, it is into a myriad of worlds, many of them beyond the reach of colonial power and control, that Shakespearean texts and performances took on Southeast Asian forms.

To begin with, crucial differences between the institutions and executions of colonial systems within Malaya and the Philippines meant that different aspects of Shakespeare were propagated within each colony. One significant difference between colonial education in both territories was language: while the British in Malaya maintained segregated systems of English and education in the vernaculars for the Malays, Chinese, and Tamils, the Americans in the Philippines imposed a uniform system of public education in English throughout the territory. In terms of Shakespearean production this meant that the translation of Shakespearean texts into the vernacular was at least partly controlled by the colonial educational institutions in Malaya while in the Philippines, translation fell outside official control and was subject to the demands of popular taste and the publication market.

The propagation of Shakespeare in Malaya was not confined to English education alone. The Malay Translation Bureau, set up by O.T. Dussek at the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjong Malim in 1924, published the earliest Malay translations of Shakespearean texts. Aside from being tasked with the production of textbooks for use in the Malay schools under the Malay School Series, the Bureau also produced titles under the Malay Home Library series (Roff, 147). These texts, while not included for formal study in the curriculum, were meant for lending libraries in Malay schools and featured an eclectic list

of titles including Shakespeare, Gulliver, and Sherlock Holmes (Regulations for Malay Schools, 1936, 16-17). The third volume published in this series was *Cherita-Cherita (duka) Shakespeare* translated by Zainal Abidin b. Ahmad (Za'ba) and published in 1929. Significantly, these translations were Jawi prose renderings of the four great Shakespearean tragedies (following Bradley's influential paradigm)—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. The selection represents a departure from the more “popular” Shakespearean plays in Malaya up to this point in time, which tended to be the plays recommended by the 1899 Education Code, or plays set for the Cambridge examinations, which were more often than not comedies (with the exception of *Julius Caesar*). The eighth volume in the Malay Home Library Series, *Cherita-cherita suka Shakespeare*, published in 1930 featured Jawi prose translations of *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night* also by Za'ba. Aside from the introduction of Shakespeare to a Malay reading audience, these volumes also effected the introduction of the generic distinctions between tragedy and comedy in drama. Traditional Malay drama, like most traditional forms in Southeast Asia, tended towards an eclectic mixture of both comic and tragic elements; farce existed side by side with melodrama and more serious elements within the same play (Brandon). The introduction of separate volumes of Shakespeare then, organized according to generic distinctions, also introduced Western concepts of pure dramatic forms.

The only Malay translation of Shakespeare as drama published in Malaysia during the colonial period is a translation of *Macbeth* produced by the Translation Bureau at the Sultan Idris Training College in 1934. This is volume number 27 of the Malay Home Library series and translated by O.T. Dussek himself with Muhammad Sa'id bin Haji Husain. This edition is handsomely illustrated and is printed in Romanized Malay. Interestingly, other translations—two comedies and one tragedy—see print during the colonial period outside the auspices of the official education system. They are also prose renditions written in Jawi. The first of these is a translation of *The Merchant of Venice* called *Antonio*, *'saudagar di negeri Venice yang terlalu indah chetranya*, published by al-Kamaliah in Kota Bharu in 1930. The next is a translation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, entitled *Cleopatra dan Antonius*, published in Penang in 1931. And finally, a version of *Twelfth Night*, *Malam yang kedua belas*, published by Geliga in 1957. About these unsanctioned translations, I have little else to say—not being able to read Jawi—except that *Twelfth Night* and

Merchant seem to have been popular plays within the English educational system, having repeatedly been the subject of both Cambridge examinations and school productions over the colonial years. The translation of *Antony and Cleopatra* is a little more curious.

In any case, these various Shakespearean translations, whether “school-based” or not, functioned as conduits of cultural transmission and assimilation; they were, ultimately, a means for Shakespeare to reach a wider audience among Malays. Furthermore, translation and publication both inside and outside the school system suggests that Shakespeare did attain some cultural currency outside the English school system.

On the other hand, while performance traditions of Shakespeare in the Philippines were firmly school-bound, textual production took place squarely outside of educational institutions. The publication history of Shakespeare in the Philippines runs counter to logical expectations. For example, despite the prominence of *The Merchant of Venice* in both pedagogical and performance histories, no translations of that play were written until the thirties.⁴ When *Merchant* is finally translated into a Philippine language in 1933, it appears as a Hiligaynon *vida*, a vernacular prose form patterned after the lives of the saints that very often featured admirable or exemplary friendships. This edition, Ricaredo Ho’s *Ang Komersiante sa Venecia* published in Iloilo in 1933, is therefore subtitled “the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio.” Having been adapted into this vernacular form, the text is then made to conform to the norms of this form despite the obvious difficulties of imagining the violently anti-Semitic Antonio as a saint.

In terms of publication history, the most popular play of the American colonial period in the Philippines is one which figures nowhere in its official school documents—not in the initial courses of instruction of 1904 which first prescribes the teaching of *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* in all public high schools, to the expanded list of 1907 that includes *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* or 1908 that names *Othello* or 1914 that includes *The Tempest*. Neither is it to be found in the *Suggested Books for Libraries For Philippine Public Schools*, a bulletin released by the US Department of Education in 1912, that recommended the acquisition of a volume of *Shakespeare’s Complete Works* and Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* for all public school libraries as well as single volume editions of *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Richard III*, *The Tempest*,

and *Twelfth Night* (Racelis 331-335). Missing from all official instructions on the teaching of Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* is nonetheless the most popular Shakespearean play translated into and published in a Philippine language. Like Ho's *Komersiante*, versions of *Romeo and Juliet* appear not as plays but as adaptations into local literary forms.

Practically simultaneous with the official establishment of the public education system in 1901, a Tagalog *awit* entitled *Ang Sintang Dalisay ni Julieta at Romeo* by a G.D. Roke appears on the scene. An *awit* is a metrical romance widely popular at the time. Plots usually revolved around the theme of forbidden love among characters of the ruling classes (typically construed as one between a Christian and an "infidel") that take place in fictitious or exotic European locales and that end with a restoration of order and the triumph of true love usually through a conversion or a magical revelation. These forms are derived from European metrical romances, which through the centuries acquired strong religious-didactic elements, and were the most popular literary forms of the nineteenth century in the Philippines. In this version of Shakespeare's classic then, only about half the lines are devoted to the outlining of Shakespeare's plot. A significant portion of the text takes the form of moralizings on the evils of violence or philosophizing about the nature and power of love. What in Shakespeare's play is a relatively simple street brawl that begins the play, for instance, is in this version a close to twenty page battle.⁵

In 1914, *Julieta at Romeo o Sintabang Dalisay* goes through a second printing—a relative rarity for non-religious literature in Philippine publishing until the early part of the twentieth century—attesting to the popularity of this story. This edition, however, names Gedeere (obviously a pseudonym) as the author of what is substantially the same text. The reason for this change in authorial attribution is unclear, although one may speculate that the evasion of some of authority may have necessitated the change. At least one historian of the theater at the time cites "ecclesiastical prohibitions" against the staging of *Romeo and Juliet* (along with *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*) (Bernad 82). After all, this tale of forbidden love, teenage suicide, and the defiance of parental authority with the complicity of at least one friar would understandably not have sat very well with the conservative Catholic church. In the private scene of reading, however, the story remained popular, hence, a second edition.

Furthermore, despite possible prohibition, an even greater proof of the *awit's* popularity is that one of the few Shakespearean performances in a local

language during the American colonial period is a Cebuano *linambay* called *Romeo ug Julieta* staged in Carcar in 1917 (Mojares, 63).⁶

A year later, in 1918, a version of *Romeo and Juliet* is published, this time as a *nobelang tagalog* or Tagalog novel. Pascual de Leon's *Bulag ang Pagibig* (Love is Blind) is a more faithful rendition of Shakespeare's text, albeit in the form of a novel. Curiously, though, this edition features a rather lengthy Afterword wherein a prominent novelist and nationalist defends the translation of foreign literature into the native tongue. The tone of the Afterword seems almost overly protective, even aggressive, making one wonder about the perceived necessity of such a passionate defense. Does it, for instance, suggest that translation entailed an attendant "guilt?" Could the translation of foreign texts, in some sense, have been perceived as a transgressive act? Also appearing at the end of this book are several dedicatory poems extolling the virtues of the author's previously published work. Significantly, there is one poem written by the revered Tagalog poet, Jose Corazon De Jesus, inspired by De Leon's translation of Shakespeare's play.

Later on, in 1931, a short story based on another unsanctioned play appears. *Ngipin sa Ngipin*, (Tooth for a tooth) a short story version of a portion of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* appears in a Filipino magazine (Antonio 38). This time Shakespeare is adapted for consumption in the more popular form of short fiction for a wider, more domestically-oriented reading public.

Tracing the patterns of development of the "bestsellers" of each historical period, Patricia May Jurilla's masterful history of the book in the Philippines tells us that the most popular forms of literary production moved from the religious (novenas, *pasyons*), to the quasi-religious (*vidas*, conduct books) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the metrical romances which dominated the nineteenth century, to novels which were widely produced from the turn of the century until the 1930s when magazines and comics—more economical, and more efficient publications—came to the fore. This line of progression is telling when looking at the publication history of Shakespeare in the Philippines. It would appear that despite the best efforts of the American colonial educational institutions to enshrine specific Shakespearean plays, the plays that were translated, adapted, published, and circulated among the wider mass culture were plays in keeping with local tastes and market demands anyway. In a sense, Shakespeare did get a life of its own in the vernacular—quite apart from the official colonial Shakespeare propagated in schools.

The escape from colonial cultural control and the native assimilation and appropriation of Shakespearean culture are even more starkly exemplified by the *bangsawan* or the Malay Opera. Derived from Parsi theater and originating in Penang in the late nineteenth century, this hybrid form utilized stories and elements from a range of sources—Chinese Operas, Indian mythology, Malay legends and folklore, Arabic fairy tales, and Shakespearean drama. Primarily commercial, these *bangsawans* had to appeal to audiences from a variety of class and racial backgrounds that probably accounted for the diversity of the form. Elements from various sources were freely adapted and improvised upon by talented actors who worked with no fixed scripts, only with fixed styles of speech, character, and scene types. Being so loosely structured, performances began around eight or nine in the evening and ran into the early morning hours if audiences seemed to be appreciative of the actors' improvisational efforts.⁷

Expectedly, Shakespearean plays adapted for the *bangsawan* departed radically from the originals, usually in response to cultural sensitivities, audience tastes, and the exigencies of performance. For example, R.O. Winstedt reviews a 1908 performance of a *bangsawan Hamlet* and notes “scenes that offend Malay taste or superstition like the grave-digger scene or the scene where Hamlet upbraids his mother... are banished from the boards of the *bangsawan*.” The absence of Western generic distinctions and the mixing of tragedy and comedy characterized the form. In various versions of *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears not to soldiers but to clowns whose frightened antics amused the audiences to no end. Vigorous and physical acting styles turned tragic scenes into comic ones. A review of a 1932 performance of *Hamlet* described King Claudius's death scene where “he pranced around like a scalded cat and delighted the little boys with some really superb face-pulling before he was allowed to die.” (Tan 124) Stage violence also figured in the rejection of Ophelia. In a 1912 performance, the reviewer takes note of Hamlet's excessive violence,

Hamlet was as mean as he could be to her (Opeelyer). It was purely in mistake that he slew her father, Tungku Polonius, but he was quite deliberate in snatching back the diamond solitaire engagement ring he had given her in knocking her about. He knocked her down 8 times—we counted. Fortunately she fell right on a soft part, each time, or she'd never be able to go on acting. As it was, it made her

real mad, and after announcing her intention in 19 verses to the air of “A che la morte”, she plunged into the sea...” (*Times of Malaya*, 11 January 1912; cited in Tan 126)

And it was a sea nowhere near Denmark or England. The review describes Ophelia’s suicide sea as a sea “on the shores of which coconuts grew and marble mosques and things.” (*Times of Malaya*, 11 January 1912; cited in Tan 128). Local backdrops were often used in *bangsawans*.

[B]ackdrops used in the various scenes usually included paintings of some local building, tree, or plant. As one reviewer stated, ‘stock sets’ consisting of Western “palatial halls” and gardens usually included ‘a view of Singapore with St. Andrew’s Cathedral looming large in the background’ (Tan 128)

Beyond scenery, local color also made its way into the plays in the additions of scenes or sub-scenes. The same 1912 performance of *Hamlet*, for example, featured a scene where locals of varying ethnic backgrounds bought tickets for the play within the play.

A tokway and his nonia had to pay. The ticket seller at the door said that satu [one] class was satu ringgit [one dollar], dua [two] class dua ringgit [two dollars] and so on. A Malay fisherman and an Indian lady got in for 20 cents each, but so far as we could understand, that was due to favouritism. The ticket seller, a handsome youth had a penchant for the Indian lady. The Malay seemed rather annoyed about it Even a blind Sikh tapped his way in and the human ticket seller mocked his blindness...” (in Tan 127)

In one performance, the reviewer notes that Hamlet “knocked Ophelia down eight times.” (Tan 124) Winstedt similarly reports that in the version he viewed featured excessive violence, in this case brought on by the rivalry between actresses playing Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet strolls on to the stage and hotly refuses to marry the lady, singing of his dislike and finally spitting at and spurning her. This scene is very spirited and effective, as the ladies playing the parts of Hamlet and Ophelia are rival prima donnas and jealous.

The *bangsawans* also employed “extra turns”—songs, dances, comedy routines, magic acts—at random intervals during the performance. A 1932 *Hamlet*, for instance, featured the following “entertainments” within the play.

After the love scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, a Court Lady glided in and sang: “What are you waiting for now?” ... [Then the audience was given] ... a unique insight into life at the Danish Court; seven ladies of high degree cam and gave exquisite shimmy; Ophelia sang appallingly in her private apartments, and Horatio with a few waves of his hands made a lady float in mid-air and passed a golden hoop round her to show that there was no deception. (*Straits Echo*, 5 October 1932; cited in Tan 127)

Whereas colonial educational institutions held up Shakespeare as the apogee of British culture, on the *bangsawan* stage Shakespearean drama was liberally modified to suit Malay tastes. Just as Shakespearean translations in the Philippines molded Shakespearean drama into local forms, the *bangsawan* stage freely adapted Shakespeare with stunning disregard for the cultural icon. Indeed, Winstedt characterizes the *bangsawan Hamlet* as “a perverted example of Shakespeare’s world-wide popularity.” What seemed to be perversion to Winstedt, however, was obviously perceived as improvement by native theater practitioners and was enjoyed as such by local audiences.

“Renegade” Philippine translations and Malay *bangsawans* vividly illustrate the uncontainable dynamics of colonial cultural production. While it is true that colonial education sought to impose Western standards of culture in these Southeast Asian territories, it is also true that colonial education was not always received by the colonized as envisioned by the colonizers. The facile dismissal of Shakespeare as a colonial icon, therefore, attributes too much to elite institutions like colonial education in English, granting it too much agency without consideration of how other cultural forms, primarily popular cultural forms, may have reworked elements of colonial cultures not necessarily transmitted via its educational systems. Even as colonial regimes sought to regulate native populations through a variety of means—significant among them the formation of a “civilized” citizenry via colonial education—the cultural field provides ample proof that absolute regulation was impossible.

“How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,/ In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!” boasts Casca in *Julius Caesar*—a boast

that could very well have been echoed by smug colonial schoolmasters taking pride in the spread of Shakespeare in its civilizing mission. What we should not forget, however, is that the “lofty scene” spoken of here is the end of imperial ambitions in the killing of Caesar.

Notes

1. This essay presented at the conference, Rewor(l)dings: Contestations and Reconfigurations in the Literatures and Cultures of the Asia Pacific Region, in November 2007 represents the early stages of the research on the history of Shakespeare in the Philippines and Southeast Asia originally embarked upon by the author as an Asia Fellow of the Asian Scholarship Foundation in Kuala Lumpur in 2005-2006. Further research on the subject has been subsequently refined and published. For a more nuanced comparative perspective on Shakespeare in Southeast Asia, see “Shakespeare, (South)east Asia, and the Question of Origins,” *Shakespeare in Culture*. Ed by Perng Ching-Hsi and Lei Bi-qi. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2012, 219-243. For a more comprehensive view of the translation history of Shakespeare in the Philippines, see “The Undiscovered Country: Shakespeare and Philippine Literatures.” *Kritika Kultura* 21/22 (2013) n. pag. Web. 4 September 2013. [url:<http://kritikakultura.ateneo.net/issue/no-2122/special-section-on-translation/the-undiscovered-country-shakespeare-in-philippine-literatures>]

2. The master text on the role of literary education in colonialism remains Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest* where she asserts that by championing the literary/intellectual products of the colonizer’s culture, colonial literary education created “a split between the material and cultural practices of colonialism” where the colonizer’s “material reality as subjugator and alien ruler is dissolved in his mental output.” (20) The ideal and exalted content of colonial literature and the fact that it was produced by the colonizer’s culture, in a sense, authorizes colonial control. On the specific use of Shakespeare in the “civilizing” mission of colonialism, see Jyostna Singh’s *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues*, specifically the chapter, “Shakespeare and the Civilizing Mission” and Ania Loomba’s “Hamlet In Mizoram,” and the introduction to her volume, *Postcolonial Shakespeares*.

3. A more detailed, albeit still partial, history of Shakespeare in the Philippines is found in my “Ilonggos, Igorottes, Merchants, and Jews” and “Local Shakespeares, Shakespearean Locales.”

4. After its official introduction into the curriculum in 1904, Merchant becomes the most widely-taught and performed Shakespearean play of the period. The earliest performance of Merchant is put on by the Ateneo De Manila in 1910. (Bernad, 4)

5. The seminal work on the *awit* (and *corrido*) in the Philippines is Damiana Eugenio's, *Awit and Corrido: Philippine Metrical Romances* from which I draw this brief explanation.

6. The *linambay* is the Cebuano version of the Tagalog *komedya*, essentially the dramatic rendition of the metrical romances, the *awits* and *corridos*. Ressel Mojares writes a finely detailed account of the *linambay* in *Theater in Society, Society in Theater*. For more general accounts of the *komedya*, I am indebted to the work of Tiongson, Fernandez, and Rafael.

7. Tan Sooi Beng's work on the Malay *bangsawan* was an invaluable resource in the writing of this paper.

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