

Letter from President Suzanne Gossett, January 2012

Over the past few months I have been witness to the globalization of Shakespeare. During the spring and summer of 2011 I went to Shakespeare's Globe in London, where I "set the scene" for *All's Well*; to the "Globe Theatre Roma," purpose-built in 2003 in the Borghese Gardens in Rome, where I saw *La tempesta* mounted by the well-known Italian director Gigi Proietti; and to two different outdoor courtyards in Prague during the World Shakespeare Congress, to see *Henry IV* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. In the fall we had Globe London productions on the big screen in Chicago, as well as the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in lights on Navy Pier.

As we all know, Shakespeare "adapts" very well. In London, at *All's Well*, which I have been editing, I enjoyed noticing the fine details typical of English performances of Shakespeare, like the handkerchief that Bertram took from Helen and treated as a talisman throughout the performance. In Rome I was struck, in contrast, by how very "Italian" the performance was: the set a disused but very operatic theatre; Miranda writhing on a bed while her father recounted their history; the half-naked Ferdinand flaunting like a male model; and the heavy emphasis on comedy. Not only was this, as my international group of companions remarked, the only "funny" Caliban any of us had ever seen, but Stephano and Trinculo — pronounced Trin-cùlo, to create a pun on the Italian word "culo" or ass — kept up a rapid patter in Neapolitan dialect and more or less stole the show.

Seeing Shakespeare in Prague was a different experience, since I don't speak the language. But it was possible to tell that the two performances were dominated by two very different Falstaffs — the first short, self-satisfied, and fat (he lifted his tee shirt to admire his own very real blubber), wearing a white suit and matching fedora, a local power just below the level of the law; the second very tall, dark, mostly sober and authoritative, and obviously padded. Clearly, here again there were local jokes; I missed them but could tell that both audiences had a wonderful time and appreciated the way these Falstaffs spoke "their own language," in all senses.

But does this horizontal spread of Shakespeare mean that the bard and his works are unproblematically transported and globalized? Daljit Nagra, in a poem in the July 25 *New Yorker*, "A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples," is less persuaded. Visiting "Mr. Wanamaker's Globe. An American's thatched throwback to the king of the canon" leads Nagra to meditate on whether "the Globe should be my muse" or whether "now we're bound to the wheels of global power" his language (and by implication his/our devotion to Shakespeare) is an unwanted legacy, just "manorial slime." In the face of such hesitations the Prague congress seemed confirmation that — whether in English or translation — Shakespeare has indeed become "the language of the world." I had conversations with persons whose homes ranged from the Czech republic to Calcutta, and whose presentations were similarly wide-ranging. The new president of the International Shakespeare Association, Peter Holbrook, is Australian, and despite Mr. Nagra's doubts, the plenary lecture/performance by the Afro-Canadian playwright Djanet Sears, "Racing Othello; Writing Back/Talking Back," which she identified as "*The*

Anatomy of an Act of Literary Decolonization as Viewed from the Inside” demonstrated precisely how Shakespeare stimulates scholarly and artistic activity throughout the former empire and beyond.

My current concerns, consequently, might be identified as vertical rather than horizontal, that is, about preparing the coming global generation to continue our work and engage with Shakespeare both critically and theatrically. If we, and here I mean the SAA, are to have a future, at least in the U.S., we need to continue supporting all those teachers (and theaters) who engage middle and high school students with Shakespeare in a multitude of activities. We need to resist attempts to reduce reading assignments to contemporary “American Literature,” and the consequent failure to provide students with historical and literary context. Instead, we need to insure that newer generations are presented both with post-colonial literature and with “colonial literature,” if that is what Shakespeare is. We, our children, our students, and our future audiences need Shakespeare beyond ninth grade *Romeo and Juliet* as well as appropriations like Sears’ play *Harlem Duet*, which ‘conversely reaffirms the canonical text,’ directing readers and audiences back to the original. This, I think, should be our goal too; we need to welcome and encourage multiple Globes, and globalization, but we must not lose sight of the texts on which they all build.