

Georgianna Ziegler
Address in San Diego, 6 April 2007

On Monday, March 5, 2007 at 11:40 a.m., a bomb destroyed one of the last remnants of cross-cultural civility in the city of Baghdad – the street of the booksellers. In the carnage died a gentle, tea-drinking man named Mohammad Hayawi, whose shop, the Renaissance Bookstore, had carried everything from “books by communist poets and martyred clerics” to “translations of Shakespeare [and] predictions by Lebanese astrologers.”¹

I'll return to the Renaissance Bookstore at the end of this talk, but let me begin with another story, one from our own neighborhood. It's about a 46-year-old African American man named James who lives in Washington, D.C. Like too many others in that city, James fell under the spell of drugs, but he managed to free himself from their grip, get a job, join a church, and enter a tutoring program. That's how I know about James, because the person who is teaching him to read is a friend of mine, and has been an important constant in his life, staying with him and mentoring him, even when he didn't show up all the time. Last year my friend took James to see a Shakespeare comedy at the small Folger theater. She wondered how he would cope with the language, but he loved the play, and said he understood it because it sounded like the language in the Bible. This year she gave him a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* for Christmas. When they started talking about the play, he said, “That's the one where he kills himself at the end because he thinks she's already dead, then she wakes up and finds him.” Turns out he knew the basic plot of the play, though my friend doesn't know where he picked it up – perhaps some year in high school when he couldn't read but heard the story.

Now, as *scholars* hearing this story, what probably strikes us first is the interest of finding someone who comes to Shakespeare's plays with much the same background as many members of Shakespeare's own audience. A real live “groundling” in fact. Someone who works hard at a basic job, can barely read, yet has fed himself on an oral tradition – hearing the Bible read in church, and somewhere or other picking up stories that are part of the cultural mix around him. We who have read Shakespeare innumerable times, have edited, analyzed, taught, and written about him, will never experience that kind of fresh, spontaneous reaction to a live performance.

But what if we shift our view? What if we don't see this man only as a kind of ethnographic curiosity who can help us understand what things were like back then, in Shakespeare's day, but as a human being of our own time and place? How many other Jameses are out there, or Charlenes as well? What might our relationship be with these folks? What is our responsibility? Or, to frame the question more broadly, how can our special knowledge and skills as Shakespeareans, teachers and editors possibly make any difference in the economically-divided, crisis-driven world around us? Most of the time when we turn on the TV or read the headlines and see torture in prisons, more killing of civilians in Iraq or in our own cities with drive-by shootings, we get depressed about any of us *ever* making a difference in this mess, and we turn with relief to writing about the Sonnets or even to grading papers.

There are no easy answers, but let me think aloud for a few moments about ways in which we, with the help of Shakespeare, can keep the roads open and the bridges passable. On November 16, 2006, the *Washington Post* headlined an article, “Sectarian Strife in Iraq Imperils Entire Region,” suggesting that Turkey and Saudi Arabia would also get involved. About ten days later, with the Pope flying to Istanbul under protest, the *New York Times* wrote “Allure of Islam Signals a Shift Within Turkey.” At that rather tense moment, with little in the way of warm feelings from Muslims towards the Pope, and a fear on the part of western Europe that Turkey was looking more towards the Islamic world than to the West, I received an email. A scholar from Istanbul wrote, “For my research on Shakespeare, I'd like to have some references dealing with Islamic motifs in his works-inc sonnets. I'd be pleased if you could help me on the point. Thanks in advance.” I was delighted by the coincidence. Here was someone from a place where

political lines were being drawn between East and West, between Muslims and Christians, calmly going about his scholarly work, which, in itself, was trying to bridge this gap by looking for cross-cultural connections. Whatever might be happening on the streets of *his* capital, this scholar was reaching out to *our* capital – not because it was a place of political power, but because he hoped to get an answer about Shakespeare related to his world.

Or let us go back to September 28, 2001, exactly two weeks to the day after the momentous attack on New York City. A man from Calcutta wrote, “Question: how to locate the poetry all the world is a stage.” Of course I directed him to a place on the web where he could find the full speech, but was his question serendipitous or did it grow out of some thoughts triggered by the times, that we are, indeed, all players together on the world’s stage?

Turning closer to home, imagine a group of teens jailed at a juvenile detention center, handcuffed when they leave, but bursting on stage in masks and bright costumes, performing *Macbeth* to drums, chanting, and step dancing. Shakespeare had been far from their lives on the street, but suddenly they were memorizing the lines, and a Banquo in dreadlocks was standing up for his friend Macbeth who “succumb[ed] to his base desires,” as they had all done in the darkness of the streets of D.C.²

Or think about our growing and lively immigrant population. We keep hearing pundits offering free opinions on what to do about them: send them back, make them learn English, build fences? In the meantime, while politicians mull over numbers, teachers and librarians recognize that each of those numbers is a human being who wants to know what is going on, to learn about their new society, to communicate. So questions come in like the following: “I am an English teacher in Florence, S.C. I have an Albanian student who doesn’t know very much English. I am trying to find a translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, so he can read it with us. I don’t know if there is an Albanian translation, but he does understand Italian. . . . Can you help me locate a source?” Or, “I am an 8th grade teacher in Portland, Oregon, who loves teaching *The Merchant of Venice* every year. This year I have three ESL students who have already had to sit out our *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit, as I was unable to find translations for them. Could you help me find copies of *Merchant* in Chinese and Arabic?” Unlike *Mockingbird*, Shakespeare *has* been translated into at least 80 languages, and we were able to xerox an Albanian version of *Romeo and Juliet* and provide options for finding the Chinese and Arabic *Merchant*.

Would they learn more about American society if they could read Harper Lee’s book? – probably. But is it more likely that through their own cultural backgrounds they might have come upon a Shakespeare story and thus find it easier to comprehend other students from different backgrounds as they all read this text? And might they not learn interesting cultural perspectives through differences in translation? How, for example, would an Arabic version of *Merchant* deal with the Christian and Jewish elements of that play? This is the kind of question that scholars of Shakespeare are actively pursuing – including at this conference – but the point I am making here is the importance of engaging such questions *outside* the scholarly journal and *inside* the high school classroom or community library. One way to open a conversation among different cultures, strange as it may seem, can be through Shakespeare. And one would hope it would be a true conversation with each side learning from the other.

I offer one further example in this category on a lighter note. A member of the Swedish rock band CLARK emailed that they were recording their second album and wanted a speech from *Romeo and Juliet* to read in the background in 7 or 8 languages. “We’re looking for quotes of love,” Anders wrote. “It has to be about love of some kind and we thought that Shakespeare knew how to express himself in beautiful terms, so that’s why you are hearing from us now.” CLARK is a group from southern Sweden who attended a cultural festival in China last fall. Perhaps they played their new song, which incorporates a multi-lingual Shakespeare, to that international audience. Their web space includes postings from the US, Australia, Japan, and Canada, and their recording called “Our Best Second Album” is due out this

spring. While the world at large clings ever more fiercely to national identities, the world of youth has moved on, sharing pictures, music, Shakespeare's love lyrics. It is brave and new as Miranda said, and our ultimate best hope.

The notion of opening a conversation through Shakespeare outside of the academy can apply within our own culture as well. A number of the questions about Shakespeare that I and many of you are asked come from that diverse group known as the "general public." Some of the questions seem at first trivial. Not long after arriving at the Folger, I received a call from a woman in Virginia whose child had to play Hamlet, and she wanted advice on costuming. Not earth-shattering, but important in her world and worthy of a thoughtful reply. Other queries are more serious: a woman preparing to sign *Pericles* for the deaf, but needing to see the film first; or the person who leads a Shakespeare discussion group for a senior citizen community.

Some of the most perplexing and challenging questions come from high school students trying to figure out what they're being taught or even how to find the material. Some are barely articulate. From a young woman in Indonesia, "Why can we understand Shakespeare novel?" Others are mature but engagingly youthful, like this from a young man in New York State:

Hey. . . so here's my question. . . . We're reading *Hamlet* in school . . . and while we analyze it pretty closely. . . my teacher always references his own freudian reading of shakespeare . . . and constantly cracks up at the "SEXUAL PUNNS+IMAGERY". . . . So i mean . . . I guess everybody knows that shakespeare puts subtle sexual comedy in the writing . . . but my class' problem is simple. . . . How can you distinguish what's meant to be interpreted sexually from that which is not.

Taking him at his serious word, I replied that some teachers react this way because they think teens will like it, and I referred him to several dictionaries on Shakespeare's bawdy, on the assumption that if he's mature enough to ask the question, he's ready for a straight answer. He replied: "That's awesome, I'll check those out today. That's exactly the kinda' books I'm lookin for!" Then he asked a follow-up question about Shakespeare and Freud.

Or there was this seemingly simple query from a young woman in Huntsville, Alabama: "What was the effect of Shakespeare's life and writings in the world today?" Not surprisingly, this seems to be a popular question for teachers to ask these days, but where do you begin? I usually assume that students don't have a lot of printed resources at hand, so I try to steer them to good websites. I suggested she consider the following areas and do a bit of web searching: 1) quotes from Shakespeare used in newspapers, often in political context; 2) political persons compared to Shakespearean characters; 3) Shakespearean productions; 4) Shakespeare referenced in movies (such as *Star Wars*) and TV sitcoms; the list could go on.

What will happen to these young people when they go out into the world? If they become parents, doctors, teachers, lawyers, businesspersons, will Shakespeare still mean anything? Probably, because these are the kinds of people who get in touch with us all the time. In an interview she did recently for the new Folger radio program on "Shakespeare in American Life," former Attorney General Janet Reno said:

When I went to Washington, I found that people were fascinated by the issues that we faced and often talked about precedent that could help them better understand the situation. One afternoon I suggested that we have a Shakespeare reading and everyone just looked around at me like, "What?" They didn't understand. . . . I said I would get the books and they were welcome to come, they didn't have to come. A number showed up and they started reading, first with chuckles and nervousness, and then with increased power as each line went by.

Their faces changed, they listened with a listening ear, they read with beautiful sense of what Shakespeare was at, and by the end of the hour and a half, we had learned so much in terms of the human nature of age, of Lear, of what he had been about, of his relationship with his daughters, of the responsibility of ruling, and the problems you face in trusting people and understanding people. I watched as people read from the book and suddenly it seemed to go beyond the book and it was their voice . . . my secretaries . . . senior staff. . . I don't think it's just American civic life, I think it is beyond our shores . . . I think every person can find something within the lines that Shakespeare wrote that applies to him.

Why do strong, powerful people relate to Shakespeare, even to the point of sentimentality? It's because they see mirrored in his characters so much of what they confront in their own lives. Senator Alan Simpson said, "I can think of people who I knew in public life and in the Senate who remind me of characters from Shakespeare . . . There was a magnificent Iago, there was a magnificent Cassius. And then of course there were the Caesars and the power . . ." Or, as Vice President Walter Mondale has said: "Shakespeare's great genius was in unraveling and explaining human nature, you know – ambition, egotism, greed, self-pity, all those themes he plays on when he analyzes people in power. I found those words coming back to me all the time in public life."

All of this is not to say that we as Shakespeareans from various countries have been standing around with our collective heads in the sand; that we have not been aware of the possible interplay between Shakespeare and the world around us in the 21st century. At this current meeting, the Trustees are discussing several initiatives that involve cultural exchange. In 2006 we attempted to open a dialogue with the military in a roundtable on "Drafting Shakespeare." In 2005 a seminar focusing on world pedagogy asked questions such as: "What cultural and political constraints impinge upon the teaching of Shakespeare?" "How do world events impact the practice of teaching Shakespeare?" Other recent programs have included sessions and seminars on "Wartime Shakespeare," "Trauma on the Early Modern Stage," "Shakespeare in Post-Colonial India," and "Race and Reverse Immigration" in British filmings of Shakespeare. In fact, I suspect that if we did a survey of topics covered in most other conferences dealing with early modern subjects, we would find that Shakespeareans are more in tune with the present as they also continue to explore the past. But let us take this farther than a conversation among scholars. Let us make the general public of all of our countries aware of our conversations on war, on trauma, on race, and why we see Shakespeare as a way of grappling with these difficult issues. Most Shakespeareans, I think, include such issues as part of their classroom engagement with students, and it is to be hoped that students will carry some of these ideas out into the world, wherever they go and whatever they do. But I'd like us to ask ourselves how *we* can take this conversation outside the classroom and scholarly journal. Can we work in our communities with teachers and librarians who are inundated with immigrants or adults who cannot read? Can we create discussion groups in our neighborhoods? Can we write about political and social issues through Shakespeare, using web-casts, blogs, or other online discussion venues?

Shakespeare has a ready-made audience out there, whether it's the man learning to read, the scholar in Turkey interested in Islam, the Albanian student learning English, the rock musician writing lyrics, or the Attorney General opening a conversation on humanity with her staff. Let us speak to all of them as well. What happened on the street of the booksellers in Baghdad should never be allowed to happen again. We must support these liminal places where cultures rub shoulders with each other– Sunni and Shia, communist poet and Lebanese astrologer, Shakespeare and the Koran – so that Mohammed Hayawi and his Renaissance Bookstore will not have died in vain.

¹ Anthony Shadid, "The Bookseller's Story, Ending Much Too Soon," *The Washington Post*, Monday, March 12, 2007: C1.

² Marc Fisher, "Young Inmates Strut Their Hour Upon the Stage," *The Washington Post*, Thursday, March 15, 2007: B1, 4.