The Relevance of (South African) Renaissance Studies

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This paper is part of a longer piece devoted to the elucidation of two related propositions. The first is that in South Africa the humanities in general, and Renaissance Studies in particular, are stymied by a lack of strategic thinking from those in the academy. The second is that the humanities, and Renaissance Studies, and Shakespeare, are valid and needed in this country, possibly as never before.

These are both issues to do with relevance. The first concerns the crucial matter of persuasion; how to convince the South African Higher education establishment and sceptics in civil society that Renaissance studies (or, more generally, Early Modern studies) have a legitimate and valuable place in twenty-first century South Africa. The second concerns intrinsic relevance, the contribution of Renaissance Studies within the current South African academic landscape. The first proposition concerns strategy and accountability; the second is to do with academic substance and cogency.

This paper tackles the latter question, the challenge of intrinsic relevance. What possible bearing have art and literature, politics and religion, customs and technologies developed 10,000 kilometres away and nearly half a millennium ago to do with South Africa in the 21st century? I want to steal up on the main issue by outlining an abbreviated rhetoric of relevance, establishing a framework within which we can conceptualize intrinsic relevance for Renaissance Studies today. At the invitation of the convenor, and in line with the intention behind this colloquium, I am going to draw mainly on recent South African research, my own and others’, to illustrate the points made.

First, there is a-historical relevance employed as a pedagogical device. If I am teaching Romeo and Juliet, it is easy enough to produce a-historical analogies to bring home the perennial issue of unthinking traditions of violence and retaliation between families, gangs, clans or communities. This strategy facilitates entry to the world of the play by flattening historical and social distinctions in order to seduce students into granting the play an appropriate form of attention (to borrow Frank Kermode’s term - see Kermode 1989).
A second type of relevance sets out to demonstrate historical continuity. If, for example, I am attempting to show the relevance of Jonson’s *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), I might propose the play’s concern with ‘projects’ as a direct historical link with the enterprise culture of late capitalism. Dodgy schemes such as the reclamation of the Fens, as put to Squire Fitzdottril, or Merecraft’s proposed monopoly on toothpicks, are ‘projects’ very close to the actuality of Jacobean London. In fact Merecraft’s ‘pitch’ for the toothpick scheme (4.1) would not be out of place in a modern ‘ad. agency’.

One could also point to the intimate connection between the ‘projecting’ ethos, nepotism and corruption. To feed his financial profligacy, James had surreptitiously re-assumed influence in the granting of patents and monopolies. Over 700 such patents were granted by 1621. The poet William Drummond tells us that James actually leant on Jonson to downplay the ‘projecting’ theme in this play.1 What, if anything, was left out in the text on these grounds we have no means of knowing. One doesn’t have to strain credulity to see parallels here with government-inspired business ventures in post-liberation South Africa, or, indeed, with the drama currently playing itself out in the Durban Courts (the Shabir Schaik trial).2

These two types of relevance, the relevance associated with a-historical analogy, and that predicated on demonstrating selective historical continuity, are valid in their own contexts, and their own frames of reference. They are indeed valuable adjuncts to a decision already taken, a scholarly commitment already made, within an academic environment that assumes or takes for granted the appositeness of studying Renaissance drama and literature.

They do not, however, add up to anything like a defence of the general relevance of Renaissance Studies, or Jonson, or Shakespeare for the South Africa of today. They will not speak to the challenge of a critic who maintains that the English Renaissance (if that is as much of the Renaissance as we choose to harbour in our academic purview) took place a long while ago on a little island off the coast of Europe, under historical conditions that predate anything that could possibly be relevant to this time and place. Appeals to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge or, conversely, rude remarks about philistine ignorance will probably cut no ice.

There has to be a broader frame of reference within which our concerns are seen to be self-evidently germane and important to the shaping of the country in
which we live. This will be the kind of relevance which enables the content of Renaissance Studies to be seen in relation to the South African social and political formation, not by mere analogy and selective illustration, but by their very nature.

Consider the following random instances – and from this point on I’m going to concentrate on Shakespeare. The first is a pre-imperial, or at most, proto-imperial instance.

In 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted a charter to George, Earl of Cumberland and two hundred and fifty Knights, Aldermen and merchants, for the formation of a corporate body to be styled “the governor and Company of merchants of London trading to the East Indies.” The East India Company’s first fleet sailed from Woolwich in February 1601. Between then and 1614 a further eleven fleets, each operating as a separate stock voyage, keeping its own accounts and paying its own dividends, were sent to Asia. In 1614 the separate voyages were replaced by a less cumbersome single joint stock: the origins of the joint stock company. By the eighteenth century it would be the world’s most powerful company, indeed, the first multinational corporation.

The other great joint stock company of early modern England, also formed on the banks of the Thames, had as one of its shareholders William Shakespeare. In 1594 he became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men which, after 1603 and the accession of James 1, became the King’s Men, and thus members of the royal household. Shakespeare made his money as a company shareholder rather than as a playwright, although the King’s Men obviously owed much of their enormous success to his contribution as resident dramatist – as I expect he would be called today.

If you think about it, two obvious and impressive features of globalization, the spread of the English language and the worldwide Shakespeare industry, can be traced in some measure to collaboration between these two outstandingly successful commercial ventures. Almost from the outset, early economic globalization and Shakespearean ‘Globe-alization’ proceeded in tandem, as Gary Taylor (2000) points out.

Not much later, in 1607, during the third voyage of the East India Company, the first performance of Shakespeare outside Europe took place on board Captain Keeling’s flagship, the Red Dragon, in the roadstead off Sierra Leone on the coast of West Africa, as part of complex trading deals between representatives of the
British East India Company, the Portuguese, and the Temne people of ‘King’, or Chief, Boreah, facilitated by an African interpreter called Lucas Fernandez. The play was Hamlet, and as far as we can make out, the performance functioned as a piece of corporate hospitality. In fact, Gary Taylor has speculated that the presentation on board of a play still fairly fresh on the London stage, may have been a response to diplomatic embarrassment which had arisen on the Company’s second voyage, when the Portuguese and Dutch had appropriate entertainment to offer their trading hosts at the royal court in Bantam and the British had not (cf. Taylor 233).

A second instance, this time from the founding moments of British imperialism in South Africa: The first recorded performance of Shakespeare in South Africa for which there is evidence took place for the opening of the African Theatre in Cape Town, in 1801. The initiator of the exercise, the colonial Governor, Sir George Yonge, missed the premiere of Henry 4, Part 1, because he had been recalled to Britain on grounds of malfeasance. The African Theatre was designed by Sir George and constructed at great expense, as one of his many pet projects. It was part of his largely private fantasy of what a Governor could or should be and do. Instead of augmenting and implementing the rudiments of colonial policy laid down by his predecessor, Lord Macartney, Sir George set out to develop the amenities of imperial civilization – and this even before his superiors had made up their minds what to do with the Cape! (cf. Wright 2004b). In modern business-speak, the motive was ROE rather than ROI (Return on Ego rather than Return on Investment), even though aficionados of the theatre may have a sneaking sympathy for Sir George.

Move ahead a good few years to a peak of Afrikaner Nationalist fantasy, the opening of the Nico Malan Theatre in Cape Town (recently renamed Artscape to sanitize apartheid associations). This instance of brutal late-modernist architecture was a show-piece of Nationalist cultural pretension, built to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the South African Republic in 1971. Significantly, the opening drama was to be Uys Krige’s translation of King Lear, directed by Dieter Reible. His was a most extraordinary appointment in the circumstances. Only the year before Reible had directed Titus Andronicus at the Hofmeyer. Rohan Quince recounts Reible’s recollections of the dress rehearsal, which was attended by black stage hands and their families because apartheid legislation prevented their attending the ordinary ‘whites only’ performances. Quince writes: “When Aaron the Moor reached the part where he held up his black child and proclaimed that he would take him to the woods and turn him into a warrior, the black audience rose screaming to their feet. Women ran towards the
stage holding up their babies. ‘It was hair-raising,’ said Reible. ‘The officials didn’t know what to do!’” (36). During the run itself, Quince records that the fashionable theatre-of-cruelty production style had members of the audience “fainting, rushing out to the toilets and vomiting, and then returning to their seats” (36).

And this is the Director to whom Nationalist officialdom entrusts, the following year, the politically delicate task of directing King Lear to open the Nico Malan! Reible’s Lear sabotaged the event in devastating fashion, assisted by the gods in the form of extraordinary technical glitches on the opening night. Suffice to say, the director had opted for a violent, bloody, primitivist Lear to challenge the quasi-European afflatus of the new theatre and the programme of indigenous cultural suppression it stood for. The production took some four hours, and ended with a plethora of (white) bodies lying round a huge African anthill. This was not the uplifting Koning Lear its sponsors had commissioned, and disgruntlement rumbled on in the press for months afterwards (Quince 38-39; Kannemeyer, 585).²

The history of Shakespeare in South Africa is replete with episodes of the kind just recounted. This is to be expected. I have just published for the Internet Shakespeare Editions a web-archive of Yael Farber’s 2001 version of Julius Caesar, SeZaR, to my mind the definitive post-millennial African Shakespeare (see Wright, 2004a). Every production has to make its own conjunctural relevance, has to address itself to the concerns of an audience in a particular time and place. Conjunctural relevance inevitably issues in different forms of local significance, forms as diverse as the sheer variety of political and social circumstances must impel.

But as scholars we need more. We need to be able to move from remarking this specific conjunctural relevance to placing and analysing such incidents, this data, within a larger historical framework. Without distorting the empirically-nuanced detail of our writing, we should be able to nudge readers towards an awareness of the significance of South African Shakespeare within more comprehensive conceptual frameworks.

Those two joint stock companies formed side-by-side on the banks of the Thames, to which I referred earlier, stand symbolically at the origins of the British contribution to the early-modern world system. So, too, do the early modern British investments in Ireland, the Caribbean, America and Asia from the sixteenth century on, investments treated centrally or tangentially by
dramatists, poets, mapmakers, chroniclers, travel writers and politicians. We can explore comparable and interlinked documentation for Spain, France and Portugal. The spread of this global interconnection is one of the central themes of the research and publication project to which several of those present at this colloquium are contributing, called “The Southern Hemisphere Spread of Shakespeare”, which involves over thirty scholars from South Africa, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Australia. One of the concerns of the project is precisely to link local instances of conjunctural relevance (seen, for the South African case, in the changing procession of Shakespeare productions and appropriations, ballets on Shakespearean themes, South African poems, short stories and visual art inspired by Shakespeare, certain scholarly readings of his work) to these larger schemes. We need to explore how conjunctural relevance speaks in detail to these schemes, thus creating for Shakespeare and Renaissance studies a form of systemic relevance.

In pleading for an awareness of systemic relevance, I am moving this argument towards engagement with civilizational analysis and world-systems theory, the two disciplines most closely concerned with studying long-term historical change. Their distinct domains are reflected in their names. The civilizationists are concerned with studying the establishment, growth and decline of civilizations; the world systems theorists with examining patterns of interaction in the global economy. In recent years, there has taken place the beginnings of a convergence between these overlapping fields of enquiry. In the past, civilizationists have been criticized for concentrating too exclusively on the internal character of civilizations, and on comparative civilizational studies, at the expense of appropriate attention to external and dynamic interactions in world-system processes; or for downplaying economic and material circumstances and over-emphasizing cultural and ideational influences. World-system analysts, by contrast, have suffered the obverse criticism: too great an emphasis on exogenous factors, not enough about the specific character, the empirical nitty-gritty, of particular civilizations. Today we see the beginnings of a rapprochement.

World-systems theory was inaugurated in 1974 with the publication of the first volume of Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System*, a development of Marxian historical materialism, inspired in part by the ‘world-system’ which the eminent French historian Fernand Braudel had adumbrated in order to understand the political economy of the Mediterranean region in the early modern period. Basically, Wallerstein took the Marxian notion of class-struggle within capitalist society and, greatly influenced by the underdevelopment or
dependency theory developed by André Gundar Frank, applied it to the world as a whole.

Civilization studies are much less high-profile. They enjoyed a degree of popular recognition in the earlier part of the last century through the controversial work of Spengler (*The Decline of the West* [trans. 1932]) and Toynbee (*A Study of History*, 1934-61), but suffered a setback with the pervasive loss of faith in historicism (in Popper’s sense of the word) that followed the disillusionment of the Second World War. Nevertheless, study of the growth and transformation of civilizations continues to produce work of absorbing interest, particularly for South Africa. The most dramatic claims for convergence between the two approaches are made by the civilizationist David Wilkinson, who argues that “Civilizations are World Systems” (1995).

Without pursuing this particular issue any further at this moment, I hope I have said enough to suggest that Renaissance and Shakespearean studies in South Africa can secure a necessary measure of systemic relevance if their practitioners are aware of the need to generate this kind of significance for their discipline. Not only production histories but all kinds of Shakespearean appropriation and influence benefit from being understood in terms of both systemic and conjunctural relevance.

Note I am not claiming that this should be done because that is one way to secure the future of studies I enjoy pursuing. Quite the reverse. I am arguing that an important part of the relevance of Shakespearean and Renaissance studies is lost and obscured if we do not, where appropriate, pursue these and similar lines of interpretation.

Now we come to the crisis of this paper. I have briefly introduced four different types of relevance: a) ‘a-historical relevance’, the kind used to woo audiences into unfamiliar territory; b) the relevance associated with small-scale historical continuities and analogies: ‘look how these things still go on today’; c) conjunctural relevance, where productions or texts are seen as projecting or being susceptible to particular kinds of historical significance thanks to their imbrication in a specific set of socio-political circumstances; and d) systemic relevance, where Shakespearean and Renaissance studies are shown to stand in significant and unavoidable relation to larger schemes of global interpretation.

Now here’s the crisis. None of these forms or types of relevance necessarily speaks to the central impulse of the humanities. Such forms of relevance are
valuable in their own right. They may contribute to arguments or discourses that do indeed achieve deeper human significance in some measure, but they can also stand on their own, quite innocent of any relation to the humanities proper.

In other words, there may be all sorts of ‘relevances’ that are in fact devoid of that central human relevance which is the distinguishing hallmark of the humanities. (In certain circles, a remark like this is the equivalent of long fingernails scratching on a chalkboard. No matter. First and last, this is the most important thing to understand about the humanities.)

People come to the humanities in search of human relevance. This is why students still flock to these embattled disciplines, even in their current confused state, and despite their instructors being, in general, unable to satisfy what Sister Bridget, in Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello (2003), calls a “craving for guidance”: “that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation” (127). This is less mysterious than it might seem. Everyone knows the main pitfall in using the word ‘relevant’. How many times have we pulled up undergraduate enthusiasts who proclaim that ‘x’ or ‘y’ is not relevant. Immediately our green pens go into action: ‘Relevant – to what?’ we insert, with emphasis. Yet that semantic and syntactic vacuum, to which our little reprimand gestures, may indicate at least in some instances the central intellectual and spiritual void the student is striving to fill, the main reason he or she has come to the humanities for sustenance.

Under apartheid, students – at least the best of them – approached the humanities expecting at the very least to understand in detail why this barbarous political system was wrong both in aim and implementation and how it could be destroyed. I think, by and large, that the academy failed them. There were bold exceptions, mostly from informal extra-curricular education, but I did not experience the formative power of the humanities being exerted in mainstream studies, certainly not in English Studies. Perhaps others did.

We will fail students – and ourselves – again, under the new and much happier circumstances in which we find ourselves, if we do not wake up to the true character of the humanities. Let us think, particularly, of a concern which has been central to the humanities since their inception, namely, their contribution in a democracy.

In its ideal form, democracy depends on the virtue of its citizens. The achievement of virtue implies wisdom. Since most people are neither particularly
wise nor particularly virtuous, democracy is a spectacularly vulnerable form of
government – at least that was the judgment of the ancient Greeks. Modern
political theory sensibly neglects ideal democracy as a pipe-dream. Political
scientists are far more engaged with how people actually behave in democracies
than they are with how they ought to behave.

As a consequence of its political impracticality, we replace ideal democracy with
formal democracy, in which the populace is governed by élites whose position is
achieved through privilege and maintained by electoral passivity. The values
and intellectual judgments of these élites are either the inadvertent legacies of
ordinary socialization, or the results of deliberate education. What hope is there
that ordinary socialization in an unequal, uneven society will secure appropriate
wisdom and virtue, let alone the knowledge, needed by members of the ruling
élite? We have, perforce, to rely on deliberate education.

Then again, we must accept that, when we turn to the populace, their mental
formation will to a large extent be the ubiquitous legacy of mass culture, defined
as that mental furniture automatically attained through exposure to the least
effortful offerings of the media, or perhaps from the decontextualised
prescriptions of popular religious or political ideology.

If we want democracy to deliver the best it can, we cannot escape the effort to
provide in formal education means for the development of contextualised
wisdom and virtue. This is the crucial avenue a democracy has for exploring the
yawning gap between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’, the ideal and the achievable, of
providing guidance for the governors and the governed, and persuading the
governors that it is right to open their ranks to the governed, the underprivileged
and the poor.

I would maintain that the humanities offer the only arena in the academy whose
intrinsic aim is constantly to renew the conversation about the meaning of the
good for human beings, for their environment, and for other life forms.

The humanities contribute not through praxis, but by means of detailed
argument embodied in an educational process. This process is maintained in the
humanities through the study of exemplary ‘texts’ (not only literal texts and
artifacts, but historical episodes, aesthetic ideals, social schemes, and so forth).
Such ‘texts’ are examined at depth to ascertain not only their meaning in context
(social and historical), but their significance for a generalized discourse of human
experience (ethical and philosophical). The humanities are concerned with the
study of human value, and constituent sub-values are construed as signifiers portending correspondent action on the world. They involve not only conscientious engagement with questions of value, but with the scrutiny and assimilation of values by the individual. The ultimate purpose of the humanities is the formation of social, ethical, aesthetic and religious judgment and responsiveness in human beings. As disciplines, they are not only critical and creative, but deeply visionary.

So when we return to the question of the relevance of Shakespeare and Spenser, of Jonson, of Webster, Marlowe and Thomas Heywood, let us not cloak their continuing human relevance merely in the contingent facts of history. As I hope I have shown, there is a solid case to be made for the historical relevance of Renaissance Studies in South Africa. We can easily demonstrate a-historical, selective, conjunctural and systemic forms of relevance. The texts of the Renaissance as a whole define a crucial moment in the creation of the modern world.

But let us resist the temptation to make these forms of contingent relevance the main reason for pursuing studies in the Renaissance, or any other strand in the humanities. We explore the Renaissance because in these texts we see values and human significance being shaped and formed, debated and rejected, qualified and transformed. And make no mistake, these texts are unique. If we want to explore these particular values and significances, we must study these particular texts, and submit, at least temporarily, to the ‘relevances’ they offer. But neither are they definitive, sufficient or even ubiquitously appropriate. There is no intellectual rationale for ignoring other literatures, for not looking beyond, behind, under and around the massive impact of western civilization, as the late Edward Said, among others, did with such spectacular success. The humanities can never be defined by certain texts, by the ‘Great Books’, or someone’s “Great Tradition”. The humanities are not bounded because, worldwide, they are informed by the same urgencies felt by all human beings. If South Africa were to lose the humanities in the sense in which I have been discussing them this would, of course, be a tragedy. It might happen, but I have little doubt that someone would soon start the conversation again.

I want to end with a few lines from a poet, because poets not only say things better, but say better things, than do most academics. The lines come from Elias Pater’s poem ‘The Damned’:
I lost myself in the place where I lived,  
Because I did not overflow my place

I lost myself in the time I lived,  
Because I did not lord over my time

I wandered in the maze of the multiple,  
Mislaying the ancient map to singleness

I lost my soul, because I judged it right  
To place bounds on possibility.

NOTES

Keynote address delivered at the Wits Shakespeare and Renaissance Colloquium, 15 October 2004

1. “A play of his, upon which he was accused, The Devil is an Ass; according to comedia vetus, in England the devil was brought in either with one vice or another: the play done the devil carried away the vice, he brings in the devil so overcome with the wickedness of this age that thought himself an ass. ΠαρεργωϚ is discoursed of the Duke of Drounland: the king desired him to conceal it” (Drummond 472).

2. The Shabir Schaik fraud and corruption trial in which Schaik is accused of malfeasance in relation to a major South African arms deal entered into by the South African government shortly after the liberation elections of 1994.

3. This section on the fiasco at the Nico Malan draws on my review of Rohan Quince’s book Shakespeare in South Africa: Stage Productions during the Apartheid Era.


WORKS CITED


