

Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa
INTERNATIONAL SPREAD OF SHAKESPEARE CONFERENCE
25 June 2007

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues: good evening, molweni

And to all participants in the *Seventh Triennial Congress of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa* and the *International Spread of Shakespeare Conference*, a very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to Rhini/Grahamstown, and to the Makana District and the Eastern Cape.

And to our international participants from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States a special welcome also to South Africa.

I am confident that you will experience Laurence, Rhodes and our town as convivial hosts.

Reading your Project Rationale I note with interest your quest to 'understand in greater detail the material processes involved in Shakespeare's translation to the southern hemisphere' and 'to arrive at provisional conclusions about the cultural significance of the spread of Shakespeare in the southern hemisphere'.

To begin with I must confess to some amusement with the terms 'provisional conclusions'. The good scholars that you are, like all good scholars you have learnt to protect your behinds!

More seriously, if you will indulge a mere historical sociologist who has been influenced by the great scholar C Wright Mills to have a very active imagination, it seems to me that the aim that you have set yourself and its related objects of knowledge are both exciting and also hold the promise of hugely interesting research and publications.

- For one, dealing as you are with one of the greatest playwrights of all time, your work has great intrinsic value and significance – something that we must strive to protect and promote in a world that is obsessed with utilitarian and instrumental ends.
- Second, I learnt today through your website that Hamlet and Richard III were performed on a ship moored off Sierra Leone exactly 400 years ago in 1607. The 'material processes' that you seek to understand thus span four centuries from mercantilist colonialism to globalisation, and there are likely to be fascinating

shifts in the form and content of these material processes, which are clearly ongoing, over the last 400 years.

- Third, I noted with especial interest your use of the term 'translation' to describe Shakespeare's diffusion to the southern hemisphere'. It may be accidental but I am assuming that it is deliberate. If so 'translation' is entirely an appropriate term as it alerts us to the very interesting reconfigurations that can occur in translation processes – be they across language, context, geography, or in their uses and appropriations by different social classes, groups and strata. It seems to me that here too are exciting avenues of research and analysis.
- My final comment is that there is likely to be little doubt about the 'cultural significance' of Shakespeare's spread in the South. The task of critical scholarship is to rigorously and sensitively analyse both the positive and debilitating aspects of this significance. With respect to the documentation of positive effects it is my hope that we will be spared the sterile debate that denies the worth or contribution of anything by virtue of its Western origins. In an excellent essay in *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen argues that we should forsake the need to choose between so-called Western, African and Indian knowledge, culture, music and the like. Our choices must be on other more intellectual, epistemological and rational grounds, at the same time as we appreciate the cross-fertilisation of knowledge and cultures over centuries.

In closing I wish you well on your most exciting research project, a stimulating and productive conference, and trust that you will have an enjoyable stay in the lovely environment of Rhodes and Rhini/Grahamstown.

Thank you.