Balz Engler

**Shakespearean Passages**

*The Peregrinations of the Text*: I have always been fascinated by the way texts leave the printed book, make themselves independent to varying degrees, spawn oral versions, and as such may have repercussions on what we make of their sources. When I speak of “passages” I am therefore using the word in its double meaning: a phrase, but also a journey—in this case in the Caribbean world. I do hope that the exoticism of the setting does not distract too much from my general argument, which concerns the *use* of Shakespeare.

---

*Hypoplectrus*, a type of bass, exists in a number of varieties, and it is unclear, even to ichthyologists, whether these should be assigned to different species: *indigo, guttavarius, unicolor, gemma, chlorurus, gummigutta, puella, aberrans, nigricans*. The *Hypoplectrus* get about 15 cm long. They live in the coral reefs of the Caribbean Sea; they are shy. “[T]hey are easily spotted and followed, even in shallow water. Moving in short (a foot or two) swims to another spot, hesitating, then heading off to the next spot.” (Hypoplec) They fixate on prey and execute a lightning-fast strike (Oceana). They are well known among ichthyologists for two reasons: They are simultaneous hermaphrodites, having active sexual organs of both sexes at the same time. And some of them, but not all, may interbreed, in other words, their gradual differentiation into different species may be observed at work. They are easy to have in an aquarium, but not particularly popular, because they easily lose their coloration. In Jamaica they are called *Bad-lucks*, but their common name in English is *Hamlet*.

In other words: a fish called Hamlet.

*Why Hamlet?* Is it because of the hesitant, yet sudden way they move? Because of their sickly loss of coloration? Because of their problematic identity?

---
On 13 December, 2010, there were elections in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, an island state with about 120’000 inhabitants in the Lesser Antilles, between St. Lucia and Grenada. There are two main parties, the Unity Labour Party (ULP), which has been in power since 2001, and the New Democratic Party (NDP), which before had governed the country since independence in 1979. The campaigns were heated, but the elections fair, for all we know. The ULP used the Caribbean English *[end of p. 21] slogan: “We Naaah Tun Back!!!” [We don’t turn back!] (Voteulp). The NDP, on the other hand, used “Enough, no more”, and had it printed on t-shirts below the picture of a hand making a thumbs-down gesture. The phrase has an unusual ring, because it lacks an object (it is familiar in the form “Enough, no more taxes, no more crime, no more junk food, etc.”) It immediately reminds a Shakespearean, of course, of Orsino’s first speech in Twelfth Night, where he weary stops the music he has just demanded as “the food of love”, by saying: “Enough, no more, / ’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.” (1.1.7-8)

Why this quotation?

* 

Some islands further south in the Lesser Antilles, in Carriacou, which is part of Grenada, they celebrate carnival in grand style, with costumed processions behind sound systems mounted on lorries, dancing in the streets, steel orchestras, and heavy drinking—nowadays the influence of nearby Trinidad can strongly be felt. But there is also a strong sense of tradition, and thanks to this something unique to the Carriacou carnival: The Shakespeare Mas—Mas being a word for carnival, derived from the French masquerade.

On Monday morning, masqueraders meet at Mount Royal, near the highest point of the island. They wear masks, made of fly screen and painted white, a common representation of a European in the former colonies, and costumes reminiscent of a harlequin, with a big heart and little mirrors sown on their chests. Their heads and backs are protected by capes, padded with thick cement paper sacks. They carry a stick in their hands—and they recite speeches from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, in no particular order, and without any reference to the context of the scene. They do so in pairs facing each other, competing with each other, loudly egged on by a knowledgeable audience. If one of them stumbles or dries up, his opponent hits him on his back with his stick and goes on reciting with somebody else—a performance reminiscent to us of a Punch and Judy show, or, rather more distantly, of the contests in reciting Homer at games.
in ancient Athens. But it is a truly syncretic cultural event. West African stick fighting and speaking contests, English mummers’ plays, and French-inspired carnival come together. Recordings can be found on Youtube.

The contestants learn their speeches from what they call “the book” or from fellow participants if their reading skills are not up to the task. Why do they do it? The answer of one of the contestants to the question why was simply: “Passion!”

But why recite Shakespeare? Why *Julius Caesar*?

The name of a fish, an election slogan, and a carnival performance: What do they have in common, apart from being connected with Shakespeare? Certainly [end of p. 22] their geographical origins in an English-speaking, formerly colonial part of the world, and it would be of some interest to study these in terms of the globalisation of English-speaking culture. But here I’d like to address something else, something more general: What do these uses of Shakespeare tell us about his status and even about the meaning of his texts? Shakespeareans tend to take it for granted that the only uses of Shakespeare worth studying are in performance on the stage (which has been an orthodox view for decades) and possibly in reading a book (a view that has experienced a small revival recently). They rarely take into account how Shakespeare, in various shapes, has entered what I’d like to call general (not only popular) culture, which, in turn, may shape our approach to him and his works. This may happen largely in three forms:

- stories from his plays are perceived as representative of certain patterns of experience,
- figures, reduced to their most striking traits, are used in characterizing certain types of character and behaviour, and
- phrases and passages are quoted for their perceptiveness or wit, or have simply become common usage. (Engler 1990: 55)

My interest in these processes has resulted in the *HyperHamlet* project at the University of Basel, which studies the cultural history of the play in quotations. So far it records and classifies more than 8400 quotations from the play (HyperHamlet).

In this light, I should like to return to the three examples.
The Shakespeare Mas in Carriacou: This is certainly the most intriguing case. First of all, why should Shakespeare, the national poet of one of the former colonial powers, be cherished in a community that is very much aware of its slavery past? We have to reckon with an ambivalent attitude towards the culture of the former masters, as it has also been observed in other areas, for example in dancing. As Rebecca S. Miller, who has studied the practice of quadrille (a dance of French origin) on Carriacou, has observed:

[M]any Carriacouans continue to support quadrille, precisely because its appropriation represents a sort of cultural victory. At the same time [...] the act of appropriation also serves to reproduce and perpetuate the dominant culture, in this case, the memory of European oppression and control. I believe it is this latter facet of quadrille that cannot be fully accepted, causing the distanciating pull, and giving way to a pervasive cultural ambivalence (Miller 435)

The Shakespeare Mas serves the same function: As a parody of the former colonial masters’ cultural practices, the recitation of Shakespeare gives Carriacouans control over them, at the same time as acknowledging their continuing authority. This is supported by the white, European masks the performers wear. [end of p. 23]

We can only speculate why Julius Caesar should be used for the purpose. The play certainly offers some magnificent speeches, but this may not be a sufficient reason. Attempts to find parallels between the play and the local political situation do not lead anywhere. Probably the choice of this play is due to how the play was used at school. At least one of the great speeches—Antony’s over Caesar’s corpse—was represented in text books like the Royal Readers, or Bell’s Standard Elocutionist common in the schools in the British colonies. (Dionne and Kapadia 51–52) This suggests that not only the national poet of the former colonial power is parodied, but also the practices at school, where learning by heart was a common exercise, and where the failure to repeat the lines correctly would lead to punishment.

Whatever the motives for its use, the Shakespeare text serves as a touchstone, an absolute standard here. The text is no longer subject to criticism or change, on the contrary, it judges those who use it, properly or improperly. This is a situation we are familiar with in the discussion of classics, albeit in a less colourful fashion.
The way the text is used here also reminds us of the role of Shakespeare in education—beside the stage and the book—a topic that deserves much more attention than it receives at the moment.

* 

The election slogan: “Enough, no more” is purely reactive, unable to make any promises, and as such seems to be a bit helpless. The negative message is supported by the picture of the thumbs-down gesture on the yellow T-shirt (the colour of the party). Anything is supposed to be better than the government that has been in power for ten years. It may have worked with people who were not aware that the phrase occurs in Twelfth Night. Those who were may have wondered why the politics of the government to be voted out should be compared to music, even “sweet” music. Apparently, those who invented, or rather chose, the slogan were aware of the Shakespearean association, but did not expect this to be the case with those they addressed.

In any case, a Vincentian seeing Shakespeare’s play shortly after the election would have been sidetracked by the use of “Enough, no more” in Orsino’s speech.

This reminds us of a general issue in discussing literary texts: the role of the audience. When can we, when should we take it for granted that an audience is meant to notice, even understand an allusion? As students of literature we tend to look the other way when faced with such a problem, because we do not have the means to tackle it. Instead we posit ideal, implied and other constructions of a recipient.

The ULP, by the way, with its robust, homely slogan “We Naaah Tun Back!!!” won a third term. [end of p. 24]

* 

Hypoplectrus: Hamlet, the name of the fish, finally, does not seem to have anything to do with the name of Shakespeare’s hero, in spite of its hesitant movements. Hamlett apparently may mean “skin colour” in Norwegian (Wiktionary), which may be fitting, considering the colours of these fish, but the Vikings never seem to have got as far south in America as the Caribbean. The origin of its name remains unclear: The OED does not list it yet (I have reminded them of it); Webster’s Third says its origins is unknown (Webster and Gove) and Partridge’s Origins, the only other dictionary that has something to say on the topic, conjectures that it may be Amerindian (Partridge). In other words: The Shakespearean struck by the name when coming across it on a poster in a beach bar may have
been misled by his own expectations. But then: Who knows? Further research is urgently called for (whenever possible as fieldwork).

I, for one, cannot help thinking also of *Hypoplectrus*, when coming across *Hamlet*

**Works Cited**


YouTube:  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4cA0o_tFZM (24 December, 2011),  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTV0ld3sDKA (24 December, 2011)