

ENGL 128: World English Literatures
Professor Stephanie Newell

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Alexandra Galloway

Shakespeare in the Post-Colonial Imagination
by Alexandra Galloway '23

“All the world’s a stage,” Jaques declares in William Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It*.

The British Empire took these words to heart, turning the world into a stage for its colonial projects. On this stage, the colonized became “mere players” in a bizarre, cruel new show, in which Shakespeare became the symbol of British literary and cultural hegemony. Railing against this status quo, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o weaponizes Shakespeare's *The Tempest* against the British Empire to expose its hypocrisy. However, in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy wields Shakespeare as a weapon against India's caste system, as she alludes to *Romeo and Juliet* and employ the motif of roses. Thus, Shakespeare comes to fill a complicated role in the post-colonial imagination, at once embodying colonial oppression and offering a path to liberation.

For Ngũgĩ, Shakespeare becomes at once a symbol and agent of the “psychological violence” manifest in colonialism, in which the vanquished’s literatures and languages are condemned as ‘lesser than’ those of England (Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* 18). In his lecture *Decolonising the American University*, Ngũgĩ asserts that “central to the conquest of the body... is the conquest of the mind through language” (Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the American University* 22:54 – 23:12). Shakespeare’s works, due to their centrality in the English canon and their being taught in colonial schools, becomes agents of this conquest, in which “the [colonized] child... only see[s] the world as seen in the literature of his language of adoption” (Thiong'o,

Decolonising the Mind 17). This “alienation” through language and literature, as Ngũgĩ describes it, forces the colonized child to regard himself and his homeland as inferior to England (18).

Ngũgĩ reads this “alienation” not only in the colonial history of teaching Shakespeare, but also understands it through the Bard’s works themselves, namely *The Tempest*. Though Caliban was once “his own king” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 1.2.342-4), Prospero unseats him with sweet words and the ‘gift’ of language, a gift which Caliban comes to revile. But, as Ngũgĩ describes, what is truly sinister about this back-handed gift of the oppressor’s tongue of “Prosperish” is Prospero’s erasure of “Caliban-ban,” Caliban’s mother tongue.

As a consequence of this erasure, Caliban must “go perish with Prosperish,” as it forces him to view himself through Prospero’s eyes (Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the American University* 24:40). He learns to view himself as a monster, thus alienating him from his mother Sycorax and forcing him to regard himself as inferior in regard to Prospero. This relationality resonates with Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he asserts “not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 110). Not only must be Caliban be Caliban – he must be Caliban in relation to Prospero. Through the language of “Prosperish,” Caliban must internalize himself as monster and servant and Prospero as God and master. In this way, the politics of empire become irrevocably tied to the politics of language — they reinforce each other.

Conscious of these politics, Ngugi wields Shakespeare as a weapon against the very British colonial structures it symbolizes and reaffirms. He accomplishes this by exposing the hypocrisy of District Officer (‘DO’) John Thompson. Thompson imagines himself as the “Prospero of Africa” (Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat* 53). Like Prospero, he justifies colonialism as a benevolent enterprise: In educating the Mau Mau in the way of the British, he can uplift and

reform them according to British standards. When he first learns that he will occupy a post in Kenya, Thompson becomes “convinced that the growth of the British Empire [is] the development of a great moral idea: it means, it must surely lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing peoples of all colours and creeds... based on the just proposition that all men were created equal” (52-53). Yet, in asserting the superiority of a British system, “assimilating,” Kenyans, and calling them “primitive,” he is inherently undermining the notion that “all men were created equal.”

He further undercuts his “moral” agenda, through his violent actions as a DO and his wholehearted acceptance of Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s racist rhetoric. As a DO, he brutalizes anyone suspected of being a member of the Mau Mau, spitting on Mugo and threatening to kill him if his information on Kihika turns out to be false. In order to justify his actions, he turns to Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a man who figured himself as the Prospero of medicine. He agrees with Schweitzer’s propositions that “the Negro is a child” (54) and that “every white man is continually in danger of gradual moral ruin in this daily and hourly contest with the African” (55). Here, Thompson eschews responsibility for his actions and places the burden for what he has done squarely on “the African.” He frames his “moral ruin” not as a product of the British imperial project but as a necessary evil to correct the recalcitrant Mau Mau.

Even more sinisterly, he seeks to perpetuate this false, unilateral history through publishing his memoirs, entitled “PROSPERO IN AFRICA” (53). Like Prospero, he promotes a narrative written in “Prosperish,” in which the voice of “Caliban-ban” —the voice of the vanquished—goes utterly silent. Ngũgĩ, in this reference to Thompson’s memoirs, recalls the way in which the politics of empire and the politics of language intertwine: Through his tale of

“Prosperish,” Thompson can further the goals of British empire, while erasing the history of the conquered.

In alluding to Prospero and then exposing Thompson’s hypocrisy, Ngũgĩ alienates the figure of Prospero from its British audience, forces them to examine it critically, and eschews Thompson’s imposed discourse. Thompson and other British imperialists admire Prospero as a model for their own work; however, Ngũgĩ re-frames him, as a model of folly, rather than one to which to be aspired. In this way, Ngũgĩ uses Shakespeare to undercut the very imperialist structures that, for Ngũgĩ, it embodies. In Ngũgĩ’s hands, Shakespeare becomes a sword against the British imperial regime.

Roy, too, wields Shakespeare as a sword, but she directs it at India’s caste system, rather than British Empire, through her allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* and the recurring imagery of roses in *The God of Small Things*. She first invites comparison between the novel and *Romeo and Juliet* when she describes the reaction of India’s elite to the communist protests:

Cardamom Kings, Coffee Counts and Rubber Barons—old boarding-school buddies—came down from their lonely, far-flung estates and sipped chilled beer at the Sailing Club. They raised their glasses: “*A rose by any other name...*” they said and sniggered to hide their rising panic (Roy 67).

The line “*A rose by any other name...*” is a direct allusion to Juliet’s balcony monologue in *Romeo and Juliet*. But there are telling differences between the snide remarks of the “Cardamom Kings” and the laments of lovesick Juliet.

While Juliet undermines the power of naming to challenge the “Love Laws” of her time, the “Cardamom Kings” wield the allusion of ‘roses’ to reinforce them. Forbidden to marry by their feuding families, Juliet urges Romeo to cast off his name Montague, saying, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet. / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title”

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.1.80-91). She argues that without his name Romeo would still be Romeo. For Juliet, names do not matter — the essence of the thing stays the same, no matter what one calls it. She embraces this argument as a form of revolution: By casting off Romeo’s name, they can defy the “Love Laws” of their time, where Montagues can be with Capulets. But the “Cardamom Kings” employ the allusion to the exact opposite effect.

The “Cardamom Kings” remove the phrase “*A rose by any other name*” from its original contexts to make revolution moot and to strengthen the existing caste divisions between Touchables and Untouchables. Like Juliet, they ascribe to the idea that the essence of the thing stays the same but use it to declare being an Untouchable an immutable state. From their perspective, whether under the red flag of communism or the veneer of equality, Untouchables are still Untouchables. And, by contrast, the “Cardamom Kings” will always be “Kings.” Thus, they use Shakespeare to reaffirm the class hierarchies that buttress their own position.

Their appropriation of Shakespeare to support class divisions becomes all the more apparent when noting the differences between *Romeo and Juliet* and the love story of Ammu and Velutha. Though Romeo and Juliet are from “two households both alike in dignity,” Ammu and Velutha are from different castes (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* Prologue 1). They are divided not by feuding families, but by the caste system to which men like the “Cardamom Kings” and even Velutha’s own father cling.

At first blush, Roy’s use of Shakespeare in this way seems like a condemnation of the vestiges of British imperialism. Through their easy Anglophilia, the minds of the “Cardamom Kings” certainly seem captured by the “very worst sort of war” described by Chacko, that makes them “adore [their] conquerors and despise [themselves]” across caste divisions (Roy 52). But, through the idea of Love Laws, Roy makes clear that, while British imperial structures are not

innocent, the true tension does not rest between the Indians and the British, but rather the Touchables and the Untouchables. In this way, she weaponizes Shakespeare against the caste system.

Notably, the Love Laws, while forbidding the caste-crossed romance of Ammu and Velutha, do not forbid Anglophilia. Roy claims that the story “really began in the day when the Love Laws were made” (33). She defines them as “the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33). Though Chacko’s mother dislike his British ex-wife and the drowning could symbolize nature rejecting Sophie Mol, Sophie Mol earns love from the family through her mere half-Britishness. Despite the consequences of Anglophilia, leaving the family “pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away,” characters embrace it and, instead of working to upend it, invest their energy into separating Ammu and Velutha, who have transgressed the Love Laws (51).

The trauma caused by the Love Laws and the breaking of them permeates throughout the novel in the motif of “old roses on a breeze.” At first, the motif feels almost cryptic, but its associations with Love Laws and Shakespeare escalate throughout the novel. At Sophie Mol’s funeral, Estha and Rahel “were already familiar with the smell [of breaking men]. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze” (8). Even in his adulthood, Estha is haunted by “a smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze” (32). Later, Roy describes the smell of old roses as “history’s smell” —of history “collect[ing] its dues from those who breaks its laws” (54). The term “laws” resonates with Love Laws and implicitly associates “old roses on a breeze” with the breaking of Love Laws. This resonance foreshadows the tragic ending of Velutha and Ammu’s love story.

But it also connects back to the tension embodied by Shakespeare's phrase "a rose by any other name."

The "roses" come to be another name—another face—of the thorned cruelty of the caste system. Though they also embody the love shared between Ammu and Velutha, they cannot be divorced from the brutal violence that Velutha ultimately encounters. The "rose" comes to embody not only the "dry rose in [Ammu's hair]" and the promise of "tomorrow" (321) but also the "sicksweet" lessons learned by the children when they witness Velutha's vicious beating:

Lesson Number One:
Blood barely shows on a Black Man. (Dum dum.)
And
Lesson Number Two:
It smells though,
Sicksweet.
Like old roses on a breeze (293).

Here, what Homi Bhabha calls the "the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white'" becomes all the more apparent, as Velutha suffers as a "Black Man" and an Untouchable (Bhabha 132). The roses become the "*objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse," reminding the reader of both Shakespeare and the children's trauma, as they saturate the text (132).

Through these "part-objects of presence," Roy mimics *Romeo and Juliet* but tailors it to fit a new Indian context (132). In her mimicry of Shakespeare and the star-crossed love of Velutha and Ammu, Roy is not expressing a "disavowal" of British imperialism alone. Rather, she is expressing a "disavowal" of the caste system (126). In this world of "not quite/not white," roses come to symbolize disillusionment, not hope as they do in *Romeo in Juliet*; caste divides, not families; and Velutha's death does not put an end to the caste system, as Romeo and Juliet's death "bur[ies] their parents' strife" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue 8). These differences—of almost *Romeo and Juliet*, but not quite—offer a means to criticize the caste-

driven Love Laws. By contrasting Romeo and Juliet with Velutha and Ammu, Roy brings to light the cruel inequities of the caste system through the lens of Shakespeare. In this way, Roy incorporates Shakespeare within her own discourse, uses it to undermine the caste system, and thus seeks liberation from it.

Like “old roses on the breeze,” Shakespeare lingers in the post-colonial imagination. While Roy uses Shakespeare to upend the caste system in India and Ngũgĩ uses it to challenge the remnants of British imperialism in Kenya, for both writers, Shakespeare occupies a precarious position, as both a force of oppression and liberation. Despite the complicated politics of Shakespeare in the post-colonial imagination, both authors have weaponized it for their own means. In this way, they have provided hope that Shakespeare can be reappropriated and used to dismantle both imperial and caste systems—hope that, one day, when Ammu pins a rose in her hair and promises “Tomorrow,” that there could be a happy ending.

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