

Africanizing classical European playwrights (Shakespeare and Molière)¹

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Abstract

This article analyses Shakespeare and Molière’s enduring appeal in various African countries and the diversity of their plays’ adaptations. The starting point is the discrepancy between the two playwrights, Shakespeare in Africa being an artistic phenomenon (a controversial one in some quarters), while the adaptation of Molière remains mainly the domain of school curricula. This article will first provide a historical overview of activities related to the introduction of Shakespeare and Molière’s works in Africa. Second, it will set out to analyse the varied adaptation and “Africanization” of both playwrights’ work. It will shed light on the political and scholarly disputes over the incorporation of these authors in school curricula after independence and examine the ways in which these classical European texts were domesticated in Africa.

Keywords: Theatre, Adaptation and translation, Classical plays, Shakespeare, Molière, Colonial education policies

Introduction

Shakespeare in Africa, or the story of “a Beauty out of place” to borrow the phrase forged by Edward Wilson-Lee in his thrilling bestselling monograph, *Shakespeare in Swahiland: Adventures with the Ever-Living Poet* (Wilson-Lee 2016: ix). Although this essay was acclaimed by the international press for its originality, it contained nothing dramatically new regarding Shakespeare’s transplantations into remote and exotic environments. Indeed, the author himself acknowledged that the attempt to demonstrate Shakespeare’s universal appeal has always been the “Holy Grail of Shakespeare studies” (2016: xii).

While there has been an abundance of academic articles on the dissemination of Shakespeare’s work over the last decade, no similar statement could be made about the exporting and transplantation of Molière around the world. If some scholars do attest to the presence of the eminent French playwright outside Europe – mainly in Africa and the Middle East – the corpus is rather meagre compared to the number of academic studies about his British peer.

1 Initially written in English, this article was corrected by researcher, lecturer and French to English translator, Melissa Thackway. I would also like to thank Marie-Aude Fouéré for her very informed reading of this article, as well as Léonor Delaunay, Omar Fertat, Étienne Smith, Céline Labrune-Badiane, and Tristan Leperlier for having provided me with various helpful documents and materials.

This discrepancy between these two emblematic figures of French and British literatures is the starting point of this essay. Considering that both playwrights have been transplanted to Africa, it is interesting to understand how the appeal of European classical plays emerged, and how it has been enacted by various social actors from the colonial era to the present time. This article draws on case studies from former French Africa (the Maghreb and AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française)), Belgian Congo and a part of British East Africa. It first provides a historical overview of activities related to the introduction of Shakespeare and Molière's works in Africa. By means of references to performances, translations and publications, we will identify the presence of Molière in French colonial Africa (West and North Africa) and in the Belgian Congo, and evaluate the enduring appeal of Shakespeare's work in eastern Africa. Many scholars have already proposed extensive studies and analyses of this global (African) phenomenon.² Second, the article will set out to analyse the varied adaptation and "Africanization" of both playwrights' work. It will shed light on the political and scholarly disputes over the incorporation of these authors into school curricula after independence, notably through the "great Nairobi literature debate" and its calls to decolonize the mind. It will also examine the ways in which these classical European texts were domesticated in Africa.

Given the breadth and depth of the subject and its broad spatial scope, the timespan covered in this article is limited: from the colonial era to the late 1980s, a period of intense turmoil in African academic and political life, notably in East African literary and educational circles.

I. "Molière en Afrique"

Ia. A historical overview

In AOF (French West Africa), before the First World War colonial politics relied upon the assimilationist model. French colonial civil servants insisted on creating a "community of language" (une "communauté de langue")³ via school education, hence encouraging language-based collective activities during schools' end-of-term ceremonies, such as the staging of theatre plays. The extracurricular activities at the William Ponty School (École normale William Ponty) are well documented. Researchers in history, political science and literary studies have taken them as a focal point in studying the training of the Francophone West African intellectual elite during the colonial era (Traoré 1958; Warner 1976; Mouralis 1971, 1986; Jézéquel 1999; Mbaye 2004; Warner 2016; Smith and Labrune-Badiane 2018). Indeed, the William Ponty School, based on Gorée,

2 For a global perspective, see Hardwick and Gillepsie 2007; and Loomba and Orkin 1998. Books about Shakespeare in south(ern) Africa have flourished over the last decade. Regarding books dealing specifically with Shakespeare on Robben Island during Apartheid, see: Schalkwyk 2013; Desai 2014; and Hahn 2017. In addition, see the special issue of the *Cahiers Shakespeare en devenir, La Licorne* (a journal, based at the University of Poitiers) dedicated to "Shakespeare in Africa", ed. Yan Brailowsky and Pascale Drouet: <http://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/>

3 Hardy 1913: 106, cited by Warner 1976: 8.

an island off the coast of Dakar, the AOF capital city in Senegal, was the main school training AOF civil servants and especially school teachers. From the beginning, tutors made use of French theatre to promote French language and culture among their students. Henceforth, Molière's plays were not only studied, but also performed:

Before the War, the School put on festivals [...] and even published an illustrated report. Many spectators were very surprised; surprised to see how our pupils seemed to be at ease on stage and their sense of nuance in interpreting French texts, surprised also to note the eternal youth and the universal interest of masterpieces, such as *La Farce de l'avocat Pathelin* and *Le Malade imaginaire* (Warner 1976: 9).⁴

The perspective was dual: on the one hand, assimilation aimed at literally incorporating French culture through its language performed on the stage ("le corps parlant" as Shoshana Felman puts it to analyse performativity, or the speaking body: Felman 1980); on the other, it was expected that this cultural inoculation would reinforce the universalist thrust of the *mission civilisatrice*. However, these mixed pedagogical and cultural events appear to have been only sporadic until the arrival of Charles Béart as the head of the William Ponty School in 1933 and a new cohort of colonial civil servants who would encourage their African students to tap into indigenous folklore and history to write theatre plays in French (Warner 2016; Smith and Labrune-Badiane 2017). This process was put in place to illustrate the glorious shift from particularism to universalism.

In the essay written about his experience in AOF, *Recherche des éléments d'une sociologie des Peuples Africains à partir de leurs jeux*, Charles Béart, the initial instigator of this so-called "Pontin" theatre, returns to the beginning of African theatre in French which, he argues, emerged at Bingerville College (Ivory Coast) in 1932 during a Saturday evening sketch show of tales staged by students. Among them was the famous Ivorian playwright and novelist Bernard Dadié, who introduced his songs and texts from the Agni oral repertoire to the Pontin theatre the following year (Béart 1960: 128–9).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Molière was not very popular among educators and students at Ponty, even though the latter were primarily trained in the classical French repertoire.⁵ Interestingly, however, the metropolitan public recognized features of Molière's style in the play *Les prétendants rivaux*, staged in Paris during the Colonial Exhibition in 1937 (Mouralis 1986: 133).

The rise of Molière in the colonies occurred after independence, in the French cultural centres (*centres culturels*), a network of institutions set up by the colonial government in 1953 as a means to strengthen AOF cultural work throughout the colonial territories, while at the same time controlling the activities of the

4 Please note that all translations are mine unless otherwise stated. The acknowledged title of this play is *La Farce de maître Pathelin*; "de l'avocat" is therefore not quite exact.

5 Neither colonial documentation (such as specialized journals of that time), nor the testimonies of former Ponty students (Jézéquel 1999) make Molière the quintessence of the literary model to follow; they barely even mention him.

colonized.⁶ These structures, still in place today, have promoted the classical French repertoire since the 1970s and 1980s. Their directors – all French – urged West African dramatists to return to Molière, Corneille, and Racine, instead of “promouvoir les cultures nationales, au risque de l’ethnocentrisme”, (promoting national cultures for fear of ethnocentrism, Dedieu 2012: 164). The injunction to stay within the French dramatic repertoire can be seen as an attempt by the French State, fearing a loss of influence in Africa and beyond, to assert French predominance in its formerly colonized territories through the diffusion of French high culture. In this respect, Molière was considered the best representative of France’s aspiration to having a culture and a language which stand for universalism. Senghor is probably one of the African intellectuals who best exemplifies this Franco-centric conception of the world. He argued that universalism was consubstantial with Frenchness, and that French language and culture were the most appropriate to achieve the harmonious combination of European classics and traditional African features.⁷ This ideal echoed the way in which French colonialism was run as global politics and driven by a quest for a universalist ideal that would allow for the creation of a Franco-African civilization (Mouralis 1999).

Molière’s plays circulated across Francophone West Africa before the 1970s. However, this dissemination resulted from individual initiatives that were independent of the colonial government, such as the “Molière tour” undertaken by French actors from the “La Compagnie des 4” theatre troupe. In December 1949, Pierre Ringel went from Bordeaux to Dakar with three other actors (Jacqueline Beyrot, Jean Guilhène and Anne Alexandre) on a six-month tour throughout French Africa. They visited six AOF countries (Senegal, Sudan, Guinea-Conakry, Ivory Coast, Togo, Dahomey), as well as Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Chad, Cameroon, and Ubangi-Chari, which were then part of AEF (Afrique Equatoriale française, French Equatorial Africa) and, finally, the Belgian Congo. To organize a tour that consisted of a total of 100 performances, Pierre Ringel had no other contact than a French woman living in Dakar (whose identity has remained rather uncertain) who offered her support to put in place proper conditions to enable the troupe to give their first performances in the AOF capital. Then, as they progressively acquired fame within the colony, they were invited by some of the colonial administrators. Pierre Ringel entitled his travel book *Molière en Afrique noire, ou le Journal de 4 comédiens* (Ringel 1950), but the theatre troupe also offered a set of four Boulevard-style plays in addition to a Molière *pot-pourri* consisting of extracts from several plays.⁸ Although performed with great success (according to Ringel, who was not just the instigator but also the stage director), their

6 On these cultural centres, see Smith and Labrune-Badiane 2017, ch. 7, “‘L’humanisme colonial’ est-il soluble dans le colonialisme tardif? (1945–1959)”.

7 See for example Senghor 1988.

8 *Le Dépit amoureux* (the scene between Marinette and Gros-René), *Les Précieuses ridicules* (the “Sonnet”), *L’École des femmes*, *Le mariage forcé* (Pancrace and Sganarelle), *Don Juan* (Pierrot and Charlotte), *Les Femmes savantes* (first scene between Henriette and Armande), *Le Malade imaginaire* (scene from first act between Toinette and Argan). See Ringel 1950: 42–3.

“Molière show” was not the major piece of their repertoire. It was staged only 17 times (out of 100 performances). From a cultural point of view, the presence of Molière was, however, important: “If we bring to the French based in the overseas territories a breath of fresh air from Paris and give Africans the love of theatre, introducing them to Molière, even imperfectly, our time will not have been wasted. We don’t regret our pain, nor our fatigue!” (Ringel 1950: 123).

The initial goal of the “La Compagnie des 4”, Pierre Ringel wrote when travelling on the ship to Africa, was to entertain a colonial society bored with colonial life and depressed with being far from the vibrant metropolitan cultural life. In this regard, Ringel considered Boulevard theatre to be the most frequently adapted dramatic form and the most likely to attract large audiences, hence gaining fame, and subsequently ensuring the material conditions to cover an extensive part of French Africa, far beyond Dakar.

In contrast to this primary purpose, their Molière show was explicitly dedicated to indigenous people. And yet, for both economic and political reasons, they could not get access to this public without addressing the colonial administration beforehand. In other words, they were able to initiate private activities in the colony, such as the theatrical tour, only if dealing exclusively with European people and addressing them first and foremost. Besides, performing theatre for the Europeans in French Africa was the main guaranteed income-generating activity, hence the best way to warrant their tour’s sustainability and profitability. Nevertheless, their Molière performances for Africans gave them real satisfaction, the public being attentive, but also very reactive to the play’s comic hints and impulses (Ringel 1950: 42–3, 51, 78, 81, 116–7). Even though this diary-style travel narrative contains racist remarks and observations (which is a common feature in 1950s writings about Africa), Ringel fought against the idea shared by most colonizers he encountered that Africans would not be intelligent enough to understand Molière’s language. To illustrate his conviction, he gave various examples to prove their full reception of Molière’s comical genius, the most representative being the students’ reception at the *École normale de Dabou* (Ivory Coast) which, like William Ponty in Senegal, trained school teachers:

It was a pleasure for us to play before such an attentive and receptive audience. There were only young men, aged 18 to 25 [...] and it was marvelous to hear them laughing at *Le Mariage forcé* and *Les Précieuses Ridicules* and follow *L’École des femmes* with rare attention and absolute silence. During the first scene of *Les Femmes savantes* between Henriette and Armande, I sneaked up to “feel the public” and I was surprised to find that several of them had brought their Molière and followed the text on their book [...]. At the end, they gave us an ovation which we are not ready to forget, and even several of them came to tell us the pleasure we had given them and the horizons we had opened to them. ‘I had never seen a French theatre play, even less Molière,’ one of them told us. ‘I have read it for ten years, but it is a revelation for me,’ said another. (Ringel 1950: 78)

Another kind of individual initiative in French Africa was undertaken from 1929 to 1941 by former actors of *Comédiens routiers*, a French Scout theatre troupe,

run by stage director Léon Chancerel (Romain 2005). *Les Comédiens routiers* was a travelling theatre troupe initially settled in eastern France, founded in the wake of Jacques Copeau's move to Bourgogne during the war to run his own travelling troupe, "Les Copiaus" (Collu and Doyon 2013). Both troupes – *Les Copiaus* and *Les Comédiens routiers* which continued the work of the former – performed in front of French rural audiences. Their shows were designed with a "pure" theatre aesthetic, focusing solely on the acting, and freed of the stage effects (what he called "machineries": Copeau 1913) of Boulevard theatre that had dominated Parisian theatre in the early twentieth century. In contrast, they chose to stage moralizing sketches based on a specific collection of texts: either existing texts, such as Molière's comedies and La Fontaine's *Fables*, or texts interlaced with Scout songs and Christian parables and written by Chancerel himself. Born in the Scouting milieu, the *Comédiens routiers* troupe had generated a powerful network of disciples who set out to pursue their experience in the troupe by spreading the good word wherever they went in France, and also in Africa. Indeed, as the Léon Chancerel archives revealed,⁹ some of those who settled in North and West Africa, tried their best to reproduce theatrical activities in Morocco, Algeria and in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ Among the several letters to Chancerel, one letter from Georges Croses mentioned the staging on the same night, with local youths from Scout associations and various students, of a Molière comedy, *Le Médecin volant*, and a moralizing play written by Chancerel. Although further research into the archives would be necessary to accurately determine the importance of theatrical activity undertaken by former actors of the *Les Comédiens routiers* troupe in Africa – and especially their staging of Molière – this reference to Molière is promising.

2. Modes of adaptation

In the letters to Chancerel, the former actors from *Les Comédiens routiers* mention either their desire to organize theatre tours in North Africa with Chancerel's new troupes, or their will to stage plays themselves from *Les Comédiens routiers* repertoire, with a cast of indigenous Boy Scouts. These two suggestions by Chancerel's actors reflect the ways in which Molière came to North Africa, and beyond in the Arab world. Indeed, Molière's work was introduced to Africa along a cultural and linguistic line starting in the Mashreq (Lebanon and Egypt) and going to the Maghreb (Morocco and Algeria) in two ways: first, by European touring theatre troupes in Beirut and Cairo, and then by Egyptian theatre troupes touring in Morocco and Algeria; second via Arabic

9 Léon Chancerel Archives, "Lettres des Comédiens routiers" box, Société d'Histoire du Théâtre (SHT), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). Consulted on March 2017. For more on the aesthetics of the *Les Comédiens routiers* troupe, see the virtual exhibition on the SHT's website: <http://sht.asso.fr/exposition-virtuelle/le-graphisme-des-comediens-routiers/> [20/11/2017].

10 So far, I have only found an allusion to a West African tour in a letter to Léon Chancerel from Michel Richard (L'Illustré Théâtre) dated March 1943, recounting that "Gaston Loutrel, sollicité de partir faire une tournée de théâtre en AOF, n'y résista pas" (Gaston Loutrel, asked to go on tour in AOF, could not refuse).

adaptations by local playwrights in the Maghreb. The first performance of Molière in Egypt is said to have been staged in 1870 and based on the first translation into Arabic of *Tartuffe*, *al-Šayḥ matlūf* by ‘Uṭmān ḡalāl; whereas the first staging of Molière’s *Le Médecin malgré lui* was staged by an Egyptian–Tunisian troupe in Morocco in 1923 (Fertat 2013a). In the wake of these pioneers, playwrights such as Tayeb Saddiki or Allalou (born Sellai Ali) translated and adapted several Molière plays in the Maghreb from the 1950s onwards: the first in Rabat and Casablanca from 1953 under the supervision of the French “educator” André Voisin; the second in Algiers in 1963, with his famous *Djeḥa* (or *Joha*), purportedly adapted from *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.¹¹ Omar Fertat and Hadj Dahmane, who have written about Molière in Morocco and Algeria, state that the main adaptation proposed by playwrights was linguistic. Tayeb Saddiki’s *Les Fourberies de Djeḥa*, and all his adaptations of Molière’s plays,¹² and Mahieddine Bachetarzi’s 1940s adaptation of *L’Avaro – El Mech’Hah* – Africanized the language and the context. Not only were the plays performed in the various national varieties of Arabic – that is, dialectal Moroccan Arabic or dialectal Algerian Arabic – but the playwrights substituted the original onomastics and topology with local ones. These playwrights sometimes made significant changes to the plots, such as omitting a love dialogue (mirrored by adding praises to God in another scene) to comply with social norms and the audience’s moral expectations (Fertat 2013b), or proposing a different denouement to the play’s initial one: the miser is delivered from his flaw (Dahmane 2012: 42).

Given that several researchers have already written about Molière in the Arabic world (Fertat 2013a, 2013b; Dahmane 2012; Fertat 2004; Saddiki 1974), I will limit my analysis to these elements and close this part by stressing the fact that the staging of Molière’s plays was often strongly supported by the colonial government, especially in Morocco, as Omar Fertat demonstrates very aptly.

In the Belgian Congo, the dissemination of Molière’s works often followed an analogous pattern: plays were staged by metropolitan troupes visiting Congo, in dedicated spaces (such as real theatres in the main cities) but also in schools and seminaries, where the plays were performed by Congolese pupils themselves for their schoolmates. French and Belgian theatre from the metropolises was introduced in the Belgian Congo before the First World War in performances by visiting French and Belgian troupes who often performed Molière’s plays from French and Belgian repertoires (Feydeau, Labiche, Cocteau, Anouilh, Giraudoux, Crommelynck, Gaston-Marie Martens and Verhaeren). These performances were mostly scheduled for the entertainment of the large European populations of the main cities such as Léopoldville and Élisabethville to ward

11 One of Tayeb Saddiki’s great successes was an adaptation of *Les Fourberies de Scapin*. *Les Fourberies de Joha* was staged in Paris at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt on 25 May 1956 during the *Festival du Théâtre des Nations*. Pictures of the performance can be seen on the Gallica database (BnF): <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8419952z> [20/11/2017].

12 He claimed to have adapted them all apart from *Les Précieuses ridicules* which he considered too specifically related to a quintessentially French context, hence too far from the Moroccan cultural context.

off colonial boredom and nostalgia. However, among the performances of Molière plays listed by Antoine Muikilu Ndaye and myself from research in the archives, 15 (out of a total of 25) were not only dedicated to indigenous people, but also performed by them from 1933 to 1960: *Le Médecin malgré lui* (4 occurrences), *Le Mariage forcé* (3), *Les Femmes savantes* (3), *L'Avare* (4), and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (5).¹³

Interestingly, apart from North Africa where Molière has been staged more in Arabic than in French, the number of translations of Molière in African languages is far less significant than the number of Shakespeare translations.¹⁴

North Africa (and especially the Maghreb) and the Belgian Congo boasted the highest number of translations of Shakespeare and Molière's plays, compared to AOF, for example. Yet the Belgian Congo and AOF share similarities in the political use of theatre as a tool to regulate and domesticate interactions between colonized and colonizers in the public space. In the Belgian Congo and in AOF, theatre – when mostly performed in French – embodied the ideal of a Euro-African community, a sort of mixed civilization whose foundations would nonetheless remain European. Building a Franco-African culture was the prevailing goal at the William Ponty School, as Garry Warner reminds us by way of official texts published in *L'Éducation africaine* bulletins in the 1910s (Warner 1976: 98–101). As far as Belgian Congo is concerned, the creation of the *Groupement culturel belgo-congolais* in 1949 acted as a lever to spread shows and performances sponsored by the colonial government throughout the colony. Indeed, theatre was perceived as a highly appropriate way to convey the ideology of the “rapprochement des races” (race reconciliation). Hence, the government began to support theatrical activities in the 1950s and was keen (notably in the media) to show images of styles and communities mixing to serve its means.

13 In his PhD dissertation, Antoine Muikilu-Ndaye listed all the theatre plays performed in the Belgian Congo during the colonial era (Muikilu-Ndaye 2013), and I completed this rich list with references to other performances found in the archives and newspapers: Archives africaines, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Bruxelles (Fonds COPAMI portefeuilles 4795, 4796, 4797, 4798; Fonds GG – Gouvernement Général – 1732, 6253, 6116, 8028), Photographic archives of the MRAC – Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren; the complete review of the journal *Jeune Afrique. Revue africaine des arts et des lettres*, published in Élisabethville from 1947 to 1960; a review of the daily Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* from 1957 to 1959 and a review of the weekly newspaper *L'Écho du Katanga* for 1957. This data is not exhaustive; my exploration of the archives is still in progress.

14 In the Belgian Congo for instance, only three plays were translated into local languages: *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* translated into Swahili in 1952 in Costermansville (today Bukavu) by the theatrical section “*Travail et progrès*” at the Centre récréatif [Source: *Nouvelles d'Afrique*, 21 mars 1952 (feuillet isolé) – Archives africaines – Ministère des Affaires étrangères du Royaume de Belgique: Fonds COPAMI, portefeuille 4795, liasse 1950–1952]; *Les Maîtres de M. Jourdain* translated into Ciluba in 1954 in Luluabourg (today Kananga) by the *Anciens élèves des Pères Joséphites* and *Le féticheur malgré lui*, a Lingala translation and adaptation of *Le Médecin malgré lui* by the famous playwright, stage director, actor and painter, Albert Mongita. The latter was staged in 1955 at the Groupement culturel belgo-congolais in Léopoldville by LIFOTHAC, Mongita's troupe (Source: Muikilu-Ndaye 2013).

Inventing modes of juxtaposing spectacular styles from Europe and Africa was a common practice observed both in the Belgian Congo and AOF. In the latter, Pierre Ringel recounted events that associated (and seldom really mixed) “traditional” indigenous performances and modern theatre representations (Ringel 1950: 60):

Minister Letourneau had planned to come only for the opening day, and to attend the great folk festival in the magnificent open-air theatre built above the Milo [...], he invited us to participate symbolically in this show with a Molière scene.

In his early literary history of Congolese literature, Joseph-Marie Jadot rather vaguely mentions a composite show: “It happened that their shows were made more or less accessible to the Africans in the big cities. It even happened that certain troupes called upon coloured stage hands, and that Blacks danced to the music of J.-B. Lully accompanying Louis XIVth ballets in Molière’s comedies” (Jadot 1959: 64).¹⁵ Indeed in his PhD dissertation, Antoine Muikilu Ndaye attested to the co-presence on stage of European actors and Congolese dancers, a joint presence which implied neither fusion nor hybridization. The event recounted by Jadot (mentioned in Conteh-Morgan 2008) was a performance of *Le Médecin malgré lui* by the Troupe du Théâtre de l’Union française, which ended with a Congolese ballet (instead of the Maure ballet), *Les Filles du Fleuve* (*Girls of the River*) in Léopoldville at the ASSANEF quarters, to celebrate Belgo-French friendship, in March 1956.¹⁶ We may also recall that, a year earlier, *Le Médecin malgré lui* was adapted in Lingala by Mongita (see footnotes 14, 7) within the framework of the Groupement culturel belgo-congolais at the ASSANEF quarters.

One may also question the choice of Molière’s plays and ponder the reasons for their success. Why was *Le Médecin malgré lui* the most used play for bringing people (“races”) together and one of the most performed Molière plays ever in the Belgian Congo? The French title of Mongita’s adaptation gives some clues: *Le féticheur malgré lui* (*The Witchdoctor in Spite of Himself*) obviously connotes the Congolese cultural context. Elements about its adaptation are lacking, but one can imagine that *Le féticheur malgré lui* sought to make people aware of the dangers of witchcraft and cast it as a hoax. The success of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* throughout the colony (the most staged play in the Belgian Congo) was even more striking, as the social (racial) tensions in Congo perfectly match the plot of Molière’s play. *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*’s protagonist, Monsieur Jourdain, is a rich man whose sole goal is to resemble a

15 Translated by J. Conteh-Morgan (Banham 2008: 115).

16 “Molière is no longer unknown in our city. For more than two hours, the Comédie Française professionals had the audience on the edge of their seats, each of the actors applying themselves to make the show more enjoyable. It was indeed an excellent performance which greatly amused the capital’s Eurafican population ... Thus loud prolonged applause closed the session when shortly before 11 pm, the new “Girls of the River” troupe appeared on stage performing, in a homogeneous ensemble, very successful Congolese dances”. (Muikilu Ndaye 2013: 488).

courtier. Transplanted to the colonial context, this figure embodies the delicate position of the *évolué*, who painfully endeavoured to resemble the powerful white colonizer in an attempt to become integrated into the dominant community. Thus, Monsieur Jourdain immediately found his Congolese counterpart in the *Mundele Ndombe* character, “the Black White” in Lingala, meaning the Black mimicking the White. This phrase is a clear illustration of a psychological process that Homi Bhabha, drawing on his reading of Fanon’s theory of Black people’s aspirations to become White in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Toward an African Revolution*, calls “colonial mimicry”: “Mimicry is . . . the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha 1984: 126). This concept even more aptly captures what is at stake in this exact situation, where mimicry is not only a modality of discourse or action, but is the action itself. This action is literally performed on a stage: “As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like *camouflage*, not a harmonization or representation of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (Bhabha 1984: 131). Homi Bhabha pertinently highlights the subversive potential of mimicry, an observation which, once again, matches the dramatic form very well: “The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of the colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 1984: 129). In 1975, another adaptation of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, entitled *Mundele Ndombe* and directed by Alain Moens and Norbert Mikanza Mobyem, was staged by the national theatre of Zaïre in Kinshasa. The play was performed in both French and Lingala.¹⁷

II. “Once upon a time, Shakespeare came to Africa. . .”

1. Core matters

In this section, I would like to focus on the translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The translation of *Julius Caesar* into Krio by Thomas Decker in 1964 is said to have “determine[d] the shape of Sierra Leonean drama” (Sheriff in Banham 2008: 177); Michael Seboni, from Botswana, translated several Shakespeare plays into seTswana (Kerr in Banham 2008: 280); Ezekiel Mphahlele adapted many Shakespeare plays in Johannesburg (Hutchison in Banham 2008: 348); Tsegaye Gebre Medhin translated of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* into Amharic in Ethiopia.¹⁸ Last, but not least, Julius K. Nyerere’s translations into Swahili of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (*Mabepari wa Venisi*, 1969 and *Julius Caesar* (*Juliasi Kaizari*, 1963, 1969) are probably the most famous translations in an African language. The latter, which was published by Oxford University Press’ Dar es Salaam

17 The film of the show can be watched on Youtube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tITdFrv1vkw>

18 Though his translations of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (*Hamlét; Makbez*) were completed in 1964, he was not given permission to stage *Makbez*. *Hamlét* was staged in 1967, but the performance created a scandal and was forbidden. Both plays were published in 1972 by the Addis Ababa branch of Oxford University Press (Wilson-Lee 2016: 187–212).

branch and first staged in Tanzania in St. Francis College Pugu,¹⁹ is considered, and was meant to be, a real political act. First, let us recall the particular circumstances of this performative political process: Nyerere undertook the translation of *Julius Caesar* at night, during the pivotal days preceding Tanganyika independence in 1961 when he was on the verge of becoming Tanganyika's first president. As Edward Wilson-Lee (2016: 175) states: "As Nyerere translated *Julius Caesar*, he was experiencing, as almost no other reader of the play ever has, the core elements of Shakespeare's play: both the crucial importance of friendship and its fragility in the turbulent crucible of power from which a new state emerges". Alamin M. Mazrui and Ali Mazrui's analysis goes even further regarding the reception of that work (Mazrui 2016: 159): "In Tanzania . . . *Juliasi Kaizari* became relevant because Julius Nyerere personified resistance, against the personality cult syndrome".

Therefore, Nyerere not only undertook this work because of his literary interest nurtured first at Tabora Boys School in Tanzania – "The Eton of Tanganyika"²⁰ – then at the prestigious Makerere University, but also because he acutely perceived the political power of literature. Discussing Ali Mazrui's perception of Nyerere's interest in translation, Alamin M. Mazrui states: "Mazrui's interest in Nyerere's transverbalization was by no means restricted to the political domain. It also extended to the cultural and, more particularly, the literary domain" (Mazrui 2016: 158). To highlight the convergence of the political and literary fields, we may recall that Nyerere is well known for having adopted a socialist-oriented path of development for the independent nation of Tanzania, or *Ujamaa* (African Socialism, literally extended family or brotherhood), which included an important focus on language matters. The unity of Tanzanian society was to be reinforced by the extended use of East Africa's lingua franca, Kiswahili, as the sole official language of the new nation. Translating Shakespeare into Swahili was a way to set an example to his people to demonstrate Swahili's ability to express the complexity of human life and the universal psyche, as well as to depict difficult or even tragic political situations through class struggle (Mazrui 1996). From this perspective, the "Merchant" of Venice is translated as *mabepari*, a *Gujarati* word (in the plural form) that means capitalists, rather than merchants (Devji 2000: 182):

The term for merchant here is not the Arabic-derived *mtajiri*, or large trader, but the Gujarati-derived *mabepari*, shopkeeper, which was used in the language of Nyerere's socialism to refer insultingly to the Indian commercial bourgeoisie which this socialism sought to destroy. Indeed the image of Shylock, both in the comedy and in the drawing that prefaced its Kiswahili translation, evoked the Indian in East Africa, depicting as it

19 This first staging is recounted by Nyerere himself in the preface of the second edition of *Juliasi Kaizari* (1969). Devji quotes an extract of it in his article (Devji 2000: 181). Alamin M. Mazrui also mentions another performance of the play in Nairobi, forbidden by the government in 1976, during the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta: ". . . the state intervened to stop a performance of the Swahili version of the play at the National Theatre" (Mazrui 2016: 160).

20 Molony 2014; Wilson Lee 2016: 165.

did a leering, hook-nosed character with a knife in one hand and a pair of scales in the other. Nyerere's use of the word *mabepari*, of course, also displaces the identity of the play's merchant from Antonio, a well-meaning member of the majority, to Shylock, the representative of a usurious minority.

His choice of this linguistic terminology is obviously highly meaningful in relation to his overall socialist ideology. This event is central to Edward Wilson-Lee's book. In his journey through East Africa, Wilson-Lee traces the circulation of Shakespeare back to its beginnings in school missions and its subsequent blooming in the Imperial State School of Makerere University, where Milton Obote, Uganda's first president, performed the heroic role of Julius Caesar in 1948 (in English this time). Wilson-Lee again stresses the very performativity of Shakespeare's play: "... at the same time as learning Caesar's lines, Obote was forming a political organization to stage protests against the Ugandan Lukiiko elite as puppet-tyrants for the colonial overlords" (Wilson-Lee 2016: 143). In addition to Shakespeare being invariably taught in schools in the British Empire, his plays were also widely read, performed, adapted and translated all over Africa (south and east). Even when they were not staged, they somehow circulated, as Edward Wilson-Lee demonstrates with regard to East Africa. Drawing on Ali Mazrui's article about Shakespeare in African political thought, Faisal Fatehali Devji also stresses the fact that East African educational circles fostered a dialogue between political and literary fields: "... political parties, such as the one which led Tanzania to independence, often emerged from literary organizations of a distinctly European and *therefore* African bent".²¹

While explorers such as Stanley and Burton came to use Shakespeare's works as a talisman – a token of enlightened civilization – to prevent themselves from "going native", the Bard's famous plays were performed en route throughout the continent (via railroads in the early 1900s). Long before any trace of Shakespeare in the region, the plays were staged on European ships off African shores between 1607 and 1610. Nevertheless, the missions remained the first important source of spreading the works of Shakespeare in Africa, with early translations and adaptations of his plays, the first being in 1867 in a collection of shorts texts, *Hadithi za Kiingereza* (Tales of the English) created by Reverend Steere to cautionary ends. The bequest of Shakespeare in Africa basically condensed an important variety of ways of capturing the "ever-living" Poet's spirit (Wilson-Lee 2016: 241):

In a century and a half [in] Eastern Africa ... Shakespeare has provided an amulet against the dark recesses of an unknown continent and the human heart, a primer for children reading in a foreign tongue, a prompt for fantasies in the wilderness and urban revelry, a tool for testing what we share with others and a weapon used by colonizer and colonized, a cover for

21 "Therefore" because Mazrui suggests "that the tribal associations of many African languages and literatures resulted in the adoption of European equivalents as the only neutral media for colonial nationalisms" Mazrui 1967: 112). See also Devji 2000: 188; and Mazrui 1990.

resistance to foreign and domestic tyranny, and a way for people without power to take for themselves something from the world of power.

2. Political factors of settlement

If the desire and prime initiatives to transplant Shakespeare and Molière's texts to Africa were obviously part of the colonial conquest, the incorporation of these playwrights' work in literary and educational spheres after independence is more complex. In East Africa, the incorporation of Shakespeare in school curricula triggered an important controversy and has carried and crystallized the core issues of African literatures until today.

The turning point of 1968 also affected East Africa's cultural history. First, let us recall that Nyerere's first translation of Shakespeare designed to legitimize the choice of Swahili as the official language of the Tanzanian nation-in-construction, was included in Swahili literature curricula and was expected to enhance literary creativity in Swahili, as Nyerere explained in his preface (Mazrui 1996: 71–2). In September 1968, a controversy about the literature curriculum broke out in the English department at Nairobi University. While drawing up the new directions of the department, its British director, James Steward, timidly encouraged diversity and invited his colleagues to study the works of Commonwealth writers who, in his view, were all descendants of the old continental literary tradition. A month later, in October 1968, three Kenyan academics (including Ngugi wa Thiong'o²²) wrote back to him, calling for the abolition of the English department. They questioned the underlying assumption that the English tradition and the modern West were the roots of African cultural heritage. This initial discussion became what Ngugi called the "great Nairobi literature debate" (Ngugi 1986: 89) which, for about a decade, informed all discussions about teaching and the way curricula reflected the Kenyan academics' quest for self-definition as Kenyan and African citizens. In the wake of the conference on "The teaching of African literature in Kenyan schools" (Nairobi 1974), the debate became national and a set of measures were proposed, among which the increased use of Swahili literature in Tanzania and Kenya. The suggested corpus included many translations. Translations had mainly been the way of discovering European classical literature for generations of East African schoolchildren. In his famous 1986 work *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi briefly related the 1980s atmosphere of radicalization that grew in academic and governmental circles: "a syllabus of the Literature department was labelled by some political elements as Marxist" (Ngugi 1986: 101). While the accusation of Marxism, most likely due to the statement about African texts' pre-eminence in curricula, was aimed at academics, it is interesting to point out that: "by 1985, Shakespeare remained the only non-African artist in the English-language literature syllabus for high school who had not fallen under the cloud of rejection" (Mazrui 1996: 64). While, by 1989, the academics had finally got rid of the last token of Englishness, President Daniel arap Moi reacted against the nationalist push in a public speech, rehabilitating Shakespeare's genius and restoring his place in the curriculum.

22 On Ngugi, see the articles by Grant Farred and Alena Rettová in this special issue.

Advocating the desire to Africanize African literature by “decolonizing the mind” in the area of drama in particular, Ngugi wa Thiong’o “traces the beginnings of a ‘counter-Shakespeare revolt’ in Kenya” (Mazrui 1996: 66), based on the strong anti-colonial feeling borne out of the struggle that had begun to rock Kenya in the 1950s. Ngugi’s main idea, which he had already expressed in his first essay – his “farewell to English” – is about writing in African languages in order to decolonize African literature mainly written and published in European languages: “This book, *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way” (Ngugi 1986: xiv). He added:

In my view language was the most important vehicle through which the power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.” He went on to quote Cheikh Hamidou Kane: “The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fighting weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and the school fascinates the soul”.²³

Fighting for the emergence of an original African literature is thus first and foremost a matter of creating a corpus of texts written in African languages, rather than translating every English book. However, quite ironically, Mazrui notes that a sort of compromise between the two apparently opposing positions was somehow found. Indeed, after Moi’s intervention, “as Shakespeare in English was being purged from the English-language literature, Shakespeare in Swahili was being embraced as part of Kenya’s Swahili literature syllabus for upper secondary schools” (Mazrui 1996: 66).

In his essays – or what he called his “explanatory prose” (Ngugi 1986: xiv), written in Europe and the USA where he fled into exile – Ngugi wa Thiong’o condemned the “colonial hangover”²⁴ of those who promoted the predominance of Shakespeare and British literature in Kenyan curricula. At the same time in Kenya, some playwrights “began to Africanise western musical and theatrical classics” such as their “most compelling” success, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, adapted as *Too Good to Be True* in 1995 (Chesaina and Mwangi 2008: 229).

Transplanting and domesticating Shakespeare and Molière in Africa

Analysing translations of theatre is thus a complex process given the multidimensional nature of theatre. Translating theatre does not only imply the mere translation of the words written by the playwright, but the translation of the

23 From: Ch. Hamidou Kane 1961, *L’Aventure ambiguë* (Paris: Julliard, 60). Translated into English by Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Ngugi 1986: 9).

24 “Shakespeare as a colonial hangover” was an expression coined in a 1981 Kenya Institute of Education report (Wilson-Lee 2016: 216).

whole “hidden dimension”. This is the reason why Michel Garneau, a Québécois playwright and English-to-French translator, forged the neologism, “tradaptation” (*transladaptation*) to refer to the specific translation of theatre, which needs to be adapted as well as translated (Suchet 2014: 3).

Perhaps the two aspects of “transladaptation” are more complementary than they seem at first sight? According to this hypothesis, the invention of an identitarian language and theatralization are thought to be intimately linked. To put it differently, there could be a relationship of reciprocal implication between identity formation, linguistic forging and performance. We can indeed assume that “language” is constitutive of an identity elaborated by a performative staging of the self (Suchet 2014: 4–5).

Myriam Suchet develops this hypothesis in her article about *tradaptation* as observed in three Québécois plays. Suchet’s interpretation of Garneau’s notion works very well when applied to the rewriting of Shakespeare and Molière in postcolonial African countries where, from the 1980s, writers began to claim their right to colonize European languages and literatures, make them their own, and handle this process with complete freedom.²⁵

One cannot help but be struck that so few French-language plays have been translated into African languages. In order to assess the reasons of this scarcity, let us examine the varying fortunes of two recent examples of French plays’ translation in Africa, one contemporary, the other classical: *À petites pierres* by Gustave Akakpo, translated into Mooré by Sidiki Yougbare (*Siindi*) and directed by the playwright, actor and stage director Aristide Tarnagda in 2014;²⁶ and *Le Roi s’amuse* by Victor Hugo, translated into Kiswahili (Michezo ya Mfalme), by Marcel Kalunga Mwela-Ubi, a specialist in Kiswahili and Bantu languages.²⁷ If the first one, *Siindi*, was a great success and much praised by the audience, and not only by the Mooré-speakers, it might be due to its original style. The play was indeed written in an “African” French that was quite close (although less oralized) to *Nouchi*, a variety of French spoken in Abidjan. This language, which some speakers refer to as a “national creole” (Akissi Boutin and N’Guessan Kouadio 2015), is actually a well-known “mixed language”²⁸ in Francophone Africa, spread by circulations between the Francophone West African metropolises, and via Ivorian music, which is highly popular throughout the continent. The second play did not enjoy the same success. Although Marcel Kalunga won the International Organisation of Francophonie’s 2009 Kadima Award for the Promotion of Creoles and African Languages for his translations from French to Swahili, the play has, to my knowledge, never been staged either

25 See Zabus 2007.

26 G. Akakpo, *À petites pierres* (Carnières-Morlanwelz: Lansman, Le Tarmac chez Lansman, 2007). The play was staged during the Drama Festival “Récréâtrales – Résistances panafricaines d’écriture, de création et de recherche théâtrales”, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, October 2014. The translation has not been published yet.

27 Victor Hugo, *Le Roi s’amuse* [1832]. Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 2009. See also Kalunga 2013.

28 “Un parler mixte”, see Queffélec 2007.

in DR Congo nor in the Francophone and Swahiliphone space in general (Burundi, Rwanda). The only staging of the play known so far was by the French director, Guy Lenoir, and his Kenyan assistant Samwel Mwangi, in Alliance française of Nairobi in August 2005.

Thus, although performability is a controversial concept,²⁹ one can first question the effective performability of these “transladaptations” in a Francophone context; and venture to identify a limited degree of performability in the transladaptations of French classical plays. Second, the sociolinguistic factor is not to be dismissed here. Indeed, let us recall that Marcel Kalunga is from Lubumbashi, Katanga in the DR Congo, a sociolinguistic space characterized by a strong French/Swahili *diglossia*, where speakers have a singular relationship with Swahili. As they consider their variety of Swahili to be far from the standardized (thus authorized) variety from Zanzibar, and given that French is the sole official language taught in schools, they do not – at least not spontaneously – acknowledge the possibility of creating a performance from a written text in Swahili.³⁰

However, the difficulty of translating, and not just adapting, European classical plays into African languages is not specific to the Francophone space. Whenever a play is translated from French or English into an African language, there seems to be a tension between the quest for indigenization and a will to externalize; or, to put it differently, a tension between particularism and universalism. In other words, one could stress the fact that, before the 1960s, the staging of Molière and Shakespeare in Africa actually met the European political project of promoting the imperial conquest (if we think of Molière’s play adapted by Saddiki at the Théâtre des Nations in Paris in 1956); at the same time, the colonized were encouraged to write – in French – about their own native cultures, which the colonizers feared would be progressively forgotten. A recent event organized in the UK offers a good example of the paradox of the desire for externalization in the present time. In 2012, the London Globe Theatre launched a Shakespeare Olympiad where theatre troupes from all over the world were invited to compete. The only condition was to play in “their” tongue. English was forbidden. With regards to this restriction, Colette Gordon aptly remarked: “The decision . . . to direct the festival’s global search toward language rather than nation allowed the festival to promote itself (and London) as a polyglot, cosmopolitan site of translation and cultural interpenetration” (Gordon 2013: 28). Ironically, most of the African troupes did not come from Africa but from London, and most of them had to confess to their inability to perform Shakespeare in their “mother-tongue”. Hence, they performed in English, sprinkled with words in foreign tongues and songs in librettos. Driven by the will to promote Shakespeare’s universal appeal and the foreign cultures and languages celebrating it, the organizers, in a very postcolonial way of thinking, countered the well-known colonial paternalism that consisted of forcing the English language on African subjects. The result, which was disappointing given the few productions in other tongues “. . . fulfilled the promise

29 See for instance Gregory 2010.

30 See Fabian 1986; Le Lay 2014.

of a multilingual showcase, without significantly compromising the production's overall intelligibility to a monolingual English audience" (Gordon 2013: 31).³¹

Conclusion

This historical survey of Molière and Shakespeare's plays in Africa demonstrates a plurality of disseminations, uses and appropriations of the two great playwrights. It is interesting to note that in West Africa Molière's didacticism was more exploited by an independent French theatre troupe in the 1950s than by the colonial educative institutions a decade earlier; whereas in North Africa his plays had begun to circulate via translations into Arabic since the early twentieth century. The spread of Shakespeare in former British Africa is far wider, reaching several milieus. Its presence in the collective psyche is stronger as well, almost verging on adoration, for example in Kenya where, in 1968, five years after independence, another festival in celebration of Shakespeare's birthday was held in the Kenyan National Theatre.³²

Since the 1980s, Shakespeare's popularity has elicited heated debates among those who have reflected on his relevance in African literature curricula and theatre. The most persuasive example is the legitimacy of English literature in general even though this legitimacy has been sharply reassessed by the ongoing controversy raging in South Africa about the urge to "Africanize" academic curricula. Echoing the 1968 Nairobi controversy, South African students, outraged by the outdated representations of Africa and the persistence of colonial habits and symbols, have for two years been asserting their desire to decolonize the university. In this perspective, Shakespeare is displayed in the media as a symbol of the never-ending cultural supremacy of the European heritage. One might even venture to argue that Shakespeare's current treatment is reminiscent of that of Cecil Rhodes. Following a strong #RhodesMustFall campaign on Twitter, the South African student protests started in April 2015 with the pulling down of Cecil Rhodes' statue at Cape Town University. If we have not yet experienced a #ShakespeareMustFall crusade, one cannot ignore the way in which Shakespeare's presence has been questioned in the former British colonies.³³ Even more striking is the contrast with Francophone Africa where Molière's status seems to have remained undamaged.

31 To learn more about the Shakespeare Olympiad in London, see also Plastow 2013 and Osofian 2013.

32 A greeting card mailed from Nairobi, written by James Master, former Head of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-Upon-Avon, to Patricia Neesham (a former actress of the Kenya National Theatre and Donovan Maule Theatre in Nairobi) and her husband Roland. The card has a picture of the poet's bust, decorated with flowers, and the caption: "One thousand names of people who have helped in the East African Shakespeare Festivals displayed beneath the bust made by Brugiotti in 1853". (Source: Archive of SOAS Library, East Africa, Kenya: MS 381289/02.)

33 See this non-exhaustive selection of recent newspaper articles (2015–2017) dealing with this issue:

<https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/education/2017-03-27-shakespeare-may-be-taken-out-of-classroom/>

<http://www.kfm.co.za/articles/2017/03/28/is-shakespeare-still-relevant-to-sa-s-school-curriculum>

Would it be reasonable to argue that intellectuals schooled in a Francophone system are less troubled by Molière than their Anglophone counterparts by the Bard? And that they feel freer, as a result, to propose reassessments of Molière and other French classical playwrights?

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