Terms of Engagement: Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England

Over the last few years, the work undertaken by the European Research Council funded "Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, 1550-1700" (TIDE) project has returned repeatedly to the task of delving into the long history of some of the terms, concepts, and preconceptions that we take as given in discussions of early modern race and belonging.[1] The premise of this exercise takes us back to Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) and the attention it drew to the meanings of certain crucial, familiar words that were "inextricably bound up with the problems [they] were being used to discuss"(15). Our enquiries have been at once narrower in historical focus and wider in range than Williams's own essays, chasing the development of concepts across legal and royal courts, diplomatic and trading missions, churches and theatres. What is illuminated through this exercise is the often-shifting sands on which the lines of distinction around ideas of both difference and identity were first marked. Some of that we knew already: the tracing of the conceptualisation of "Turks," "moors," and "Indians," for instance, have long shown the instability of those identities. In the rising, welcome wave of initiatives such as #ShakeRace and RaceB4Race, our collective attention to them has been immediate, deeply thought-provoking, and often exhilarating.

Often less visible, however, are the broader terms that provide the fundamental framework on which those more specific labels of difference are constructed. Williams's description of a "history and complexity of meanings" that lie behind certain words applies particularly well to them. They signal, as Williams had noted, "a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning" (17).

The identity of the "foreigner" is a case at hand, whose specific legal and popular meaning encompassed internal, rather than external difference, indicating people who moved within the country than those who came from abroad. Migrating regional English workers who travelled to Tudor centres of industry and trade such as Norwich and Bristol were among those classified as foreigners by urban authorities. Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, by the same definition, were "foreigners" in London. Popular culture often conflated the threats posed by "strangers and foreigners," gradually opening up an increasingly complicated linguistic and legal space. For instance, when a proclamation was made in 1550 instructing foreigners to return to "the places within the realme where they last dwelt by the space of three yeres" (Edward IV), the intention was to drive vagrants and masterless men back to their home towns and parishes in England. However, it also created a space in legal discourse through which migrants and their children, such as Huguenots and other religious refugees, could claim a form of early modern residency in England.

"Denizen" is another example, originating from the Anglo-Norman for someone who is born or dwells within a country as opposed to outside it. Yet in early modern English, it had come to identify figures who were distinctly external in their origins: immigrants who received certain rights to settle in the country. Add to this the distinctions between "denizens" and "free denizens" (people who held the freedom of the City in addition to, or instead of, a letter of Denization), "stranger-born" subjects and "English-born" strangers, and the lines dividing those within and those without become increasingly muddied.

Interrogating such terms is a way into interrogating that framework itself, within which matters of identity and belonging, and the relational position of those "at home" and those who were not, slowly cohered throughout this period. The conjecture that the *Merchant of Venice* drew on the contemporary scandal of the trial and execution of Roderigo Lopez, for instance, has long been put to rest. Lopez, physician to Queen Elizabeth I and to many of her principal courtiers, was hanged, drawn, and quartered in June 1594 for his alleged role in a plot to assassinate the queen. He was a likely suspect: foreign, multi-lingual, well-connected enough to have got involved in various diplomatic intrigues. Both English legal argument and popular sentiment around Lopez's trial claimed he was a "stranger" and an "alien," a "Portugal" not to be trusted. His fellow Portuguese in London, on the other hand, were all too willing to distance themselves from him by drawing attention to his identity as a second-generation *marrano* or Jew converted to Christianity, interpreting it as a mark of his natural and innate duplicity in the process. While his case gave rise to widespread anti-Jewish feeling and led to the revival of Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and possibly to the writing of *The Merchant of Venice,* there is arguably little to link him to the threat that Shylock holds over Christian civic order in Shakespeare's play. Yet *The Merchant of Venice* feeds on a deep-rooted early modern English paranoia about the impossibility of the "good immigrant." Its manipulation of both Shylock and his daughter is deeply reminiscent of the debates around Lopez's status as a "denizen," an identity at once precarious, conditional, and mutable.[2]

On other occasions, attending to that linguistic framework of identification and difference can offer a way into both early modern negotiations and subsequent responses. Take *The Comedy of Errors* and its remarkable obsession with matters of belonging, about rights and identities assumed, claimed, and questioned. From Solinus's opening description of the "enmity and discord" between Ephesus and Syracuse, the lives and loyalties of the subjects of both nations are defined by their birth:

> if any born at Ephesus
> Be seen at any Syracusian marts and fairs;
> Again, if any Syracusian born
> Come to the bay of Ephesus – he dies,
> His goods confiscate to the Duke's dispose,
> Unless a thousand marks be levièd
> To quit the penalty and to ransom him.

(1.1.16-22)

The play's action repeatedly exposes the fragility of such distinctions. Even as it plays with the vulnerability of strangers in a strange land and raises comic laughter from the nightmare that plagues hosts about having their hospitality exploited, the play reveals how easily the certainty of those identities may change. The grand recognition scene at the end, for instance, is preceded by a smaller but no less pointed realisation about Antipholus of Ephesus, indignant throughout about his rightful place at "home" being usurped by a "stranger." "I came from Corinth," he tells us belatedly (5.1.367). Coupled with the new-found knowledge of his Syracusan origin and his birth in Epidamnum, it makes him as much a stranger and perceived enemy to Ephesus as his estranged brother: his loyalty is as much in question, and his safety in Ephesus as much at risk.

I have written elsewhere about the widespread anxiety about the influx of "strangers" in England in the 1590s, which provided the backdrop to what is assumed to be the first recorded performance of *The Comedy of Errors* during the Christmas festivities at Gray's Inn on 28 December 1594 (Das, 10-20). In the fraught parliamentary debates of the period, those arguing the cause of strangers often found themselves evoking not only the tradition of English hospitality, but also the spectre of the English subject's own past and possible future displacement. As Henry Finch, the MP for Canterbury, asserted, "In the days of Queen Mary, when our Cause was as theirs is now, those Countries did allow us that liberty, which now, we seek to deny them. They are strangers now, we may be strangers hereafter. So let us do as we would be done unto" (D'Ewes, 507).

That context, while relevant, is not my focus here. However, attending to its place in *The Comedy of Errors* also returns us repeatedly to a particular etymology of belonging that shapes the uneasy dynamic of "guest" and "host" in Shakespeare's play. Daryl Palmer and Kathryn Vomero Santos, among others, have written about the ways in which the common linguistic root of these two words inflected early modern meanings of hospitality. Etymological scholarship points out that the basic Latin term "hospes" links two concepts, "(g)hosti-" and "potis." The initial term "(g)hosti-" or "hostis" in Latin corresponds to the Germanic root, "gasts," which is the origin of our English "guest." It is also linked possibly to Sanskrit "ghásati," meaning "to eat, to consume," which is related to the idea of guest-friendship and sharing food. The second part, "potis," signifies "master," sharing a root with the Greek *posís* "husband" and *despótēs* "lord or absolute ruler," and the Sanskrit *pátiḥ,* "master" and "husband" and *grihapátiḥ*, "head of the household." The term that emerges as a result of their combination thus literally means "guest-master" capturing the delicate balance of power inherent in both the offering and receiving of hospitality.

Even as the reciprocity of hospitality claims our attention, however, it is useful to acknowledge the shadowy presence of enemies and strangers that loom behind them at the same time. Both "hostis" and the Germanic "gasts" originally simply denoted "stranger," comparable to the Greek *xenos.* But like the Greek "xenos," classical Latin "hostis" turned into something more — or less. From the stranger-guest, it came to denote the stranger-outsider who is seen as a threat, primarily an external enemy, with the word "inimicus"

being used more frequently for private or internal opponents.[3] It is a meaning that English carries in another usage of the term "host," to mean "multitude," or "army." Spanning across the Indo-European languages, the history of "guest" and "host" thus reminds us of the qualification of hospitality that is woven into the very fabric of the terms we use, one mirroring the other in ways that can be both familiar and threatening, accommodating and usurpatory. It is caught up also, inevitably, in formulations of national identity and difference. As TIDE's work on the concept of the "host" reminds us, "The thin line between hospitality and hostility towards strangers tended to be associated with expectations about decorum and customs along national lines, as well as ideas of generosity and magnanimity." In the action of *The Comedy of Errors*, that intrinsic instability of identity and meaning drives both the narrative and the crisis, tapping into deep-rooted anxieties even as it dispels them with comic laughter.

For those of us interested in Shakespeare beyond the English-speaking world, it also offers a way into thinking not only about Shakespeare's play, but also its later appropriations, adaptations, re-imaginings. Writing about the striking number of Indian adaptations of *The Comedy of Errors,* Amrita Sen has observed that what makes that continuing presence notable "is not only the sheer number of these Indian versions of *The Comedy of Errors*, far outstripping the adaptation of most other Shakespearean plays in Indian cinema, but also how each film appears to directly engage with its predecessor" (251). *Bhrantibilas* (dir: Manu Sen), a Bengali film version with the hugely popular regional film star, Uttam Kumar, in the lead role as the Antipholi was produced in 1963. Its popularity led to its remaking in 1968 in Hindi, as *Do Dooni Char* ("Two times Two makes Four"; Dir: Debu Sen). Gulzar, who was in charge of dialogue and lyrics for this film then went on to make his own version in *Angoor* ("Grapes," 1982). Since then, there have been a number of direct remakes, such as *Ulta Palta* ("Topsy Turvy," 1997; 1998) in Kannada and Telugu, *Double di Trouble* (2014) in Punjabi, and *Local Kung Fu 2* (2017) in Assamese, even as the long-running interest in twins and "double-roles" in Indian culture and cinema generally has continued to evoke the shared cultural memory of Shakespeare's play. Many of them return us, directly or indirectly, to the first Indian adaptation of the play — the prose retelling in *Bhrantibilash* (1869) by the scholar and social reformer, Ishwar Chandra Bandopadhyay or "Vidyasagar" (1820 – 1891), which had produced its own dramatic adaptations since 1888, and was acknowledged as the principal source in the 1963 Bengali film version. Sen's analysis illuminates the distinctive intertextuality of the films, whose own internal family resemblance develops as they "draw upon one another, expanding or radicalising themes and scenes that come before" (266).[4]

The dynamic she identifies in these adaptations, however, is also the dynamic that is particularly noticeable in this among all of Shakespeare's plays. There is much that resonates with that etymological oscillation of guest and host, stranger-friend and stranger-enemy, in the Indian incarnations of *The Comedy of Errors.* Vidyasagar's prose re-telling was in many ways a product of Thomas Macaulay's much-discussed *Minute on Indian Education* and the Education Act of 1835, which made the introduction of an English language curriculum in Indian schools a crucial first step in the creation of a new, English-educated Indian

elite who would serve the interests of the British empire. Shakespeare featured heavily in that curriculum through what Supriya Chaudhuri describes as Macaulay's "signal employment of what we might call a trope of erasure, replacing the unwanted other with the cultural master-property of empire" (104).[5] As cultural projects go, such emulation of the Shakespearean ur-text was also an assimilation of a very different order from the original intentions of colonial powers. Vidyasagar, a highly-regarded Sanskrit scholar, was involved in the development of a body of contemporary Bengali prose that could hold its own against the influx of the European literature enthusiastically adopted by the rising generation of Bengali free-thinkers known as the "Young Bengals."

His preface to *Bhrantibilash* (1869) is a fascinating exercise in the dynamics of both translation and hospitality through which Shakespeare is accommodated both as the host-source and stranger-guest within the cultural and intellectual landscape of nineteenth century Bengal. He skirts English assertions of Shakespeare's superlative excellence deftly. It would be presumptuous and irrelevant for a translator to assess whether such claims about the original are rightful and unbiased, he suggests, raising the possibility of such contention even as he defuses it. It does not prevent him from assuming the right to judge its verse as inferior to that in many of Shakespeare's other plays, or from claiming that the play's merit in his account is not that of a cultural icon, but as a farce [*prahasan*] that can "suffocate its readers with laughter." The translator steps out of his remit as a guest within the imaginative landscape of the English play the moment he chooses to adopt its narrative [*upakhyan*] in order to play host to his own Bengali readers. Their entertainment [*chittaranjan*] justifies the changing of proper names on the grounds that "in Bengali books, European names do not sound right; it becomes particularly annoying [*biroktikar*] for readers who do not know English. Bhrantibilash replaces such names with names of this country from a desire to avoid such a fault."[6] As a result, his act of re-homing the action of Shakespeare's play in high literary, Sanskritised Bengali also becomes a literal relocation, with the Ephesus and Syracuse of the original swapped for the fictional Indian kingdoms of Hemkut and Jayasthal, providing the space of action for the pair of Antipholi called Chiranjeev, and the Dromios renamed as Kinkar. The title of Vidyasagar's text itself is telling, signalling both the "Error" (*Bhranti*) of Shakespeare's play, and the extravagance (*bilas*) of its dramatic device of doubling. As Paramita Chakravarti has pointed out, the latter signals a generic re-homing as well, gesturing towards the medieval Vaishnava form of the "bilaas" or love-play of Lord Krishna, himself an acknowledged exemplar of doubling through reincarnations (*avatar*) in Hindu mythology (220). The relative positions of the Shakespearean canon and its Indian response are constantly renegotiated in this exchange, each a host-guest, at once welcome and unwelcome, at home in its own territory and a usurping stranger.

That act of negotiation gains further nuance in a telling moment within the cinematic action of the Bengali *Bhrantibilas* (1963), where a village puppet show is watched by the characters. 'Dance life into this old story,' the song in the background tells the puppets, offering the story of the beautiful Ahalya, married to the aging ascetic Gautama. Indra, the king of gods in the Hindu pantheon, disguises himself in the form of her

husband in order to seduce her, and their discovery leads to Ahalya being cursed by her husband to a life of penance in the form of a stone. Those familiar with classical European mythography would recognise in this story an Indian alternative to one of Shakespeare's sources, Plautus's comedy, *Amphitruo*, in which Jupiter turns himself into Amphitruo in order to seduce Amphitruo's unsuspecting wife, Alcmena. Yet the decision to indigenise the Shakespearean play through this narrative swap gestures at something more when we remember that in the Indian story, Ahalya's misjudged and ultimately adulterous hospitality is redeemed only by her act of hospitality to Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu who is the protagonist of the epic *Ramayana.* It is, ultimately, a story about the redemption of hospitality itself, returned to its true form after corruption and exploitation by the usurping stranger-outsider. The story of Ahalya's meeting with Rama in Indian mythology is a finely-tuned enactment of reciprocity: Rama, the guest, touches her feet as a mark of respect, confirming her redemption in the eyes of all; Ahalya, in her turn, washes his feet and offers him the fruits of the forest, confirming his divine power. Here, as elsewhere, the preoccupations of *The Comedy of Errors* with the unsettling, uneasy reciprocity of guests and hosts, strangers and friends, becomes an internal, structural trope for Indian negotiations with the Shakespearean canon itself. Attending to the keywords of difference and identity offers a glimpse — limited yet necessary — into that exchange.

Endnotes

[1] The print and open access e-book is forthcoming: *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England*, by Nandini Das, João Vicente Melo, Haig Smith and Lauren Working (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

[2] Lopez's Jewishness has been discussed by many. See, for instance, Jonathan Gil Harris, 79-106. His status as a denizened stranger receives relatively less attention, but see Alan Stewart.

[3] In Cicero's Eleventh Philippic, for instance, Cicero condemns Antony and Dolabella for treating Roman republicans "non inimicos, sed hostis" ("enemies, not merely private but public"). *Philippics 7-14*, pp. 136-7.

[4] For another recent discussion of Indian adaptations of the *Comedy of Errors*, see Wieland Schwanebeck. Koel Chatterjee offers another excellent overview of the tradition.

[5] See also, Jyotsna Singh.

[6] My translation. Original Bengali text from Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, 5-7.

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