

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## How to read Shakespeare while duck-sitting in outer suburbia

Emily Sun

The three ducklings are dabbling in the large plastic turquoise clamshell we purchased for Ethan a few weeks before he was born. The ducklings are the first creatures to use the clamshell for the purpose it was intended.

My husband Marco, an Italian-Australian, and I, a Chinese-Australian, live a few doors down from my elderly parents who have exiled themselves to one of the suburbs where key scenes in *Bogan Hunters* were filmed. I am defensive when my city friends visit and point out that I need to find a way to make more money so that I can move to a better school zone. Like all parents, I want my child to have opportunities that I didn't have so I sometimes lose sleep over my inability to channel my inner Tiger Mother, even though I wake up very early every Saturday morning to drive Ethan to a Chinese school in the city. I will also admit that I was initially nervous about moving to this suburb because it is not known for its cultural diversity. In my first month here the 'Fuck off, We're Full' bumper stickers triggered mild panic attacks, even though I wasn't sure which ethnic minority the driver was addressing. I also chased and confronted a couple of local teens who made a casually racist comment as they walked past me when I was weeding in the front garden.

We think that the ducklings are Muscovies, which means their bills are pale pink and not yellow like the ones near Toad Hall. They look very different from the dearly departed Duckie who was a wild duck hybrid that hatched in our electric frying pan one summer and died in spring. We joked about roasting it but no one was game enough to eat a duck that had died from natural causes. My mother would not let anyone, least of all her friend and former restaurant owner, Mr Chan, joke about consuming Duckie because of her animistic beliefs. She truly believes that Duckie was a self-sacrificing duck who had taken the place of a relative who was suffering from a blood cancer. All jokes about serving up Duckie and accounts of Mr Chan inflating the corpse of dead ducks by giving them what looked like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation are still met with a stern frown.

I wait in the patio for my octogenarian father to drop Ethan off after school and wonder what Marco will do if two or three of the ducklings turn out to be drakes. Ideally, we will have three females and no males, or one male and two females. Any other combination could end badly. Our backyard is very green despite being built on sand dunes because Marco has spent many hours enriching the sand with sheep manure and compost. I contemplate taking a crash course in botany as I harbour hopes of one day writing the Great West Australian Novel. The only plants I recognise are the ones you can find in the supermarket.

Ethan runs in from the garage and hugs me. The first thing Gong Gong says is, 'Don't let him play with the ducks. They carry avian flu'.

Although I know that one day I may live to regret not spending more time with him, I find it difficult to accommodate my father's helicopter grand-parenting of Ethan. I take into account that he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder from the Second World War, even though he denies it left any scars. 'My generation is tougher than yours,' he always says. Perhaps the telling and retelling the story of his childhood means that he has never had nightmares. By the time I was Ethan's age, I had so many stories that I could imagine what it was like to live in the jungles of war-time Malaya, witness the bayonetting of Japanese collaborators and their families, and

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hear a young boy on his death bed crying out for water. Ethan also knows that Gong Gong's younger brother died from dehydration the year the war ended, and understands that this is why Gong Gong is always monitoring Ethan's water consumption. I try to hold my tongue but it's hard when you are almost forty and your father still lectures you about your Chinese parenting style ('Why do you send him to weekend Chinese school with all the rote-learning sheep?') and at the same time accuses you of not being Chinese enough ('You can't let him play all the time!'). All I want to do is get Ethan out of his school clothes and into the shower.

'You won't believe what Mr Collins taught us today,' Ethan says.

'I can help him with his Chinese homework, but don't make him write out every word. It takes too long, do it with him. Ethan, where is your work? I want to show you,' Gong Gong says, and begins rummaging through Ethan's school bag.

'Shakespeare,' Ethan says.

'Where did you put his Chinese homework? You know that I should be teaching him. It's too much for a seven-year-old. We are not in Hong Kong. Where is the teacher from? Taiwan? Mainland China?'

'I'm the only Year Two kid there!' Ethan continues, as Gong Gong continues his search for the Chinese book. 'The others are in Years Four or Five...and I am allowed to go to the Bell Shakespeare company play with them. Why did you waste so much money on sending me to the other school?'

'Friends are important,' Gong Gong calls out from the house. 'I need to show you the strokes, so you can show him where the order and where you apply pressure. There is an art to writing Chinese.'

I've seen this week's Chinese homework and know that it involves sixteen strokes. There are eighty-eight square boxes in Ethan's exercise book which means that there are 1,408 character strokes to complete in the five hours we have before bedtime.

I send Ethan to Chinese school because I feel guilty for not speaking to him in Chinese. In the late twentieth century, many of us who knew how to speak it pretended we could not and eventually we forgot our mother tongue. When Ethan was first born, I thought that being half-Chinese in the Chinese century would suffice, but now I feel intense pressure to raise a bilingual child as we live on the edge of Asia.

'Mr Collins is the best teacher ever!' Ethan says, jumping up and down. 'We learnt the prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*.'

Gong Gong rejoins us in the patio as he has given up looking for the missing book.

'*Romeo and Juliet*?' Gong Gong says.

'Do you know what's going on? Are you reading a children's version ... or are you reading in Shakespearean English?' I ask.

'Of course,' Ethan says proudly. 'It's not the kid's version *and* we watched a DVD.'

'Hang on! Isn't that about gangs?' I ask. 'The one with lots of guns? They show you that at school?'

'What are you talking about, Mum?'" Ethan says indignantly. 'It's a play, not a movie!'

'You mean people on a stage in old-fashioned costumes?' I ask.

'Yes, mum.'

'Do you know what it's about?' I ask.

'Of course I do,' Ethan says. 'It's about crazy teenagers.'

'You know ... um ... that it's ... um ... about romantic love?'

'In fair Verona ...two households, both alike in dignity,' Gong Gong begins.

'No, no,' Ethan corrects him. 'Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene.'

'Do you know where Verona is?' I ask.

'Yes. Mr Collin taught us all of that. In Italy and the Capulets and the Montagues are nobles which means they are posh, but they are also ruffians,' Ethan explains.

'Do you know what ruffian means?' I ask, wondering why his teacher chose this play.

'They are like old-fashioned bogans,' Ethan interprets.

He pulls out a printout of the first twenty-eight pages of the play that his teacher has downloaded from Project Gutenberg. Gong Gong, who is as intrigued as I am, sits down next to Ethan and I can sense his pride in having a seven-year-old grandson who reads Shakespeare. When he was Ethan's age, knowing how to read English let alone having access to a Shakespeare play was unheard of in the jungle hideaway. After the initial reign of terror, the Japanese began their imperial rule and allowed those who emerged from the jungle to attend their schools. It was in one of these schools that Gong Gong half-heartedly learnt how to sing Japanese nursery rhymes.

'This is the fun part,' Ethan says and reads off his sheet: *Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? I do bite my thumb, sir? Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? (Aside to Gregory) Is the law of our side if I say ay? ... Your turn.'*

I take some credit for introducing Ethan to Shakespeare. A few months ago, he saw my old copy of *Macbeth* lying around the house during one of my de-cluttering frenzies and asked why the ghoulish woman on the cover had a green face. It was the copy I took from a school in London when I had to teach a class of Year Nine, many of whom were refugee kids from a limited schooling background, how to pass their Key Stage 3 English exam on the three apparitions. I questioned why these students had to learn Shakespeare before they could read a newspaper article, but a colleague defended the curriculum by saying that to succeed in their world one must know Shakespeare. I remember that each time I stood before the class I thought to myself: *Prince Harry is at Eton and has an Oxbridge professor preparing him for the same exam. Shakespeare wrote this play for Prince Harry's ancestor.*

I suggest to Ethan that we should all read a different part because Shakespeare is a play and not a novel, so he assigns me the role of Abraham and Gong Gong the part of Gregory. I worry about the age appropriateness of the exchange between Sampson and Gregory as they speak about gang rape but Ethan skips over that part and focuses instead on the section that he has already read to himself. As we rehearse I find myself loving the rhythm and drama of the rapid exchange between Sampson and Abraham. As I get into my role of a young ruffian, I begin to see why Ethan loves Shakespeare so much.

I tell Ethan that when I was his age, I performed the *Double, double, toil and trouble* chant, not realising it was written by Shakespeare until I was in high school. Gong Gong recalls how, after the war, he won a scholarship to the British-run school and learnt Shakespeare before he knew how to speak English. 'I sometimes spoke in Shakespearean English to my teachers,' he said. 'It was rote learning and eventually I understood the story.'

I reminisce about the last time I was in a production: it was in my first year of high school when I played a fairy from *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

'I wanted to be in my school's *MacBeth*,' Gong Gong says, 'but I had to go home after school to shop and cook for the family. After my father died, I was the only one who knew how to slaughter chickens.'

We continue reading Shakespeare in the patio and the curious ducklings emerge from under their makeshift compost-box house. Ducks are social creatures that can die from loneliness.

No one mentions Chinese homework for the rest of the afternoon.

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