

The Struggle for Freedom: Shakespeare on the Eastern Frontier

PETER TITLESTAD
KARINA SEVENHUYSEN

In 1881, (or 1880 if the historian Heese is right) just at the time of the Anglo-Transvaal War, a play was published in London called *The Struggle for Freedom or, The Rebellion of Slagters Nek*, written under the pseudonym 'Leinad'. Leinad is Daniel. He was the youthful John Daniel Kestell, then twenty-six, destined to become one of the cultural leaders of nascent Afrikaner nationalism. The young dramatist was the future "Vader" Kestell, theologian and pastor, devoted military chaplain to the Boer forces in the Anglo-Boer War, one of the Boer negotiators at the Peace of Vereeniging, founder and first Rector of Grey College, Bloemfontein, which was to become the University of the Orange Free State. A small town in the eastern Free State is named after him. He was also an enthusiastic Shakespearean. Partly of British descent, his grandparents on the father's side were 1820 Settlers in the Eastern Cape. His father married into the Afrikaans community, serving as Deacon in his congregation. John Daniel was brought up and educated in Pietermaritzburg, that outpost of lovely Victorian architecture with Afrikaans street names, capital of the Colony of Natal.

The History

The Slagtersnek (Butcher's Nek) episode of 1815 is a lurid minor event in the history of the early Cape Colony. In 1806 the British seized the Cape from the Batavian Republic to gain control of sea routes during the Napoleonic Wars. By this time many of the Dutch settlers had moved far from Cape Town to what is now the Eastern Cape, where a frontier situation had developed as a result of contact with the Xhosa tribes. As is usually the case, frontier conditions far from central control created a frontier mentality of strong, often wild, individualism, impatient of rule, not always admirable but possibly containing the seeds of tragedy. It was out of this frontier situation that the Slagtersnek incident developed. The servants of the Boer farmers were generally Khoi (Hottentots) with an admixture of slave blood from the Far East, an inheritance of Dutch rule. Slavery at the Cape was abolished only in 1834, by the British administration.

Among other things, British rule from 1806 involved various attempts to control the frontier, not only through the use of British forces but with the help of sparse communities of Dutch farmers. Much of the local administration was done through the appointment by the British of local Dutch settlers. The play has a number of characters with the rank of Field-cornet, operating with British forces to quell the rebellion of 1815. The British also brought into being the Cape Corps, a corps of Khoi soldiers under British officers, which would also be part of the 1815 drama. These troops were called "pandours" or "pandoers", in Afrikaans.

An important consequence of British rule at the Cape was a more efficient administration, including even the distant eastern areas where a spirit of independence had been developing. Apart from taxes and fines, there was an attempt to enforce British concepts of the rule of law, limiting the 'rough justice' of the paternalistic master/servant relationship, requiring legal procedures at often very distant magistracies and making it possible for servants to lay charges

of ill-treatment against their masters. In 1809 a circuit court had made itself unpopular by hearing various such cases and this has gone down in the history books as the “Black Circuit”.

The growing sense of control and resentment, compounded by further legislation, the *Ordinance 50 of 1828*, by frontier wars and by the abolition of slavery in 1834, eventually led to the Great Trek, the migration from the eastern region into the interior, that began in 1836, a migration that had as part of its motivation the seeds of a new nationalism and which led to the founding of the Republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. While early historians of the 1815 Slagtersnek episode tried to harness this episode to these later developments, this has been questioned by later professional historians. The Slagtersnek rebellion, as has been said, was put down with the help of local forces under the leadership of the Field-cornets. According to Heese, who has made the most satisfactory study of Slagtersnek, the descendants of the chief rebels were not among the Trekkers while those who helped suppress the rising were. The situation was psychologically complex.

It will be necessary to go into the historiography in some depth a little later, but in broad outline what happened was as follows. In 1812 a case was laid by a certain Booi or Booy against his master Frederick (Freek) Bezuidenhout. Freek lived in a remote area with, nearby, his slightly older brother Johannes (Hans), “John” in the play, who was married to the sister of one Faber who also lived in the region. Following lengthy correspondence with the youthful Andries Stockenström, the legal functionary at the very distant magistracy of Graaff-Reinet, and after bungled negotiations through a certain Opperman, the local Field-cornet, and after Freek had repeatedly failed to appear in court, steps were taken to have him arrested.

A detachment of the Cape Corps was sent to do the job. Apparently an order had been issued to send a detachment of white troops but for reasons unknown this was not done. Freek holed up in a cave with a certain “coloured” youth Hans, not to be confused with Johannes (Hans) the brother. In the play this youngster is called “Geschwind”. A Khoi sergeant, at great risk, scrambled above the cave mouth and mortally wounded Freek.

The status of the young Hans (Geschwind) is most important. He was a “coloured” youth but there are strong reasons to think that he was not a servant but Freek’s son, and there is also strong evidence to suggest that Freek’s “wife” was in fact not married to him and was of “baster” stock. The race issue becomes complicated. Early historical treatment tended to lay stress on the indignity of being arrested by a “pandour” detachment while obscuring the unmarried relationship with a “baster” woman and that the youth with Freek in the cave was no servant but his son. Any white versus non-white interpretation of the incident is a gross simplification.

Freek, his brother Johannes and Faber and other rebels from the area were rough frontier characters. Johannes and Faber may have had children with their wives before marriage and there had been considerable delays in having these children baptised. Doubtless, the exigencies of frontier life are part of the story. But Heese suggests that the Bezuidenhouts and Faber were in fact *personae non gratae* among the generally pious frontier farmers. Heese’s analysis of the myth that accrued around Freek and his brother is extremely valuable, as also is his investigation of the background of the rebels and of the prevailing *milieu*. Nevertheless some aspects of Heese’s own historiography will need further comment later.

Johannes Bezuidenhout (Kestell’s “John”), Faber and Henrik Frederik Prinsloo set about a vengeful rebellion against British rule that included negotiations with the Xhosa chief Gaika (more properly, ‘Ngqika’, but Leinad’s play employs the colonial orthography). With the help of a force of burgers under the Field-cornets, but again with assistance from British troops and the “pandours”, the rebellion was put down. The incursion by Gaika did not take place. This would, of course, have set the frontier colonists powerfully against the rebel Bezuidenhouts. Johannes was shot dead in an engagement in which his wife and young son were wounded.

The rest of the rebels were rounded up and five sentenced to death. The hanging took place not at Slagtersnek itself but at Van Aartspas, some distance away, the place where the rebels had sworn an oath. The execution was bungled, the ropes breaking because the hangman from Port Elizabeth had to scrounge for additional cordage, not knowing how many he had to hang. Despite the desperate pleas of the victims, they were rehanged and then buried in a grave prepared on the spot. A legend came into being that one was buried alive, but Heese contests this

detail: a military doctor was present. The name “Slagtersnek” adds a lurid touch to the episode, but it was not the actual place of execution and the name existed before the executions. The “nek” was a declivity in a mountain range where cattle were slaughtered. It could possibly be argued that the authorities acted unwisely but the whole situation was very muddled, compounded by distance, the bungling of the timorous Field-cornet Opperman and the violent propensities of the Bezuidenhouts and their associates.

With time, but not before the Great Trek that started in 1836, the episode came to be romanticised. In 1877 the Transvaal was annexed by the British and the appearance of Kestell’s play in 1881 coincided with the war (the Anglo-Transvaal War, 1880-1881) that ended this annexation. In early historiography Slagtersnek came to exemplify British imperial tyranny over the Afrikaner. As S.J. du Toit puts it in his history of 1877: “Hoe wreedardig die Engelse met ons arme Boere gewerk het.” (Heese 3)¹ It is possible that this work, *Di geskiedenis van ons land in di taal van ons land*² (its claims, among other things, to a new language nationalism) marks the beginning of this tradition, a tradition that Heese most ably brings into question although, as stated earlier, Heese’s own historiography, needs further comment and qualification.

It is quite possible that du Toit’s work contributed to Kestell’s tragic concept. Du Toit’s conclusion to his account of the rebellion goes:

Ween Afrikaanders! Hier leg julle vlees en bloed! – op die wreedardigste manier gemartel.
Verkeerd was dit om te’ en hulle owerheid op te staan; maar hulle het dit tog waarlik nie
sonder rede gedaan nie . . . Skuldig was hulle, seg die aardse Regter; maar wat sal die
Hemelse Regter eenmaal sê?
(89-90)³

This use of the tragic and complicated tale of the Bezuidenhout brothers and their associates to bolster Afrikaans nationalism, starting around 1877 with du Toit’s history, had a long life surviving well after the election victory of the National Party in 1948, and figuring among other things in the teaching of history in South African schools. Heese confesses that Freek Bezuidenhout was the hero of his adolescent schooldays, a feeling inspired by Langenhoven’s *Die Pad van Suid-Afrika*.⁴ The political use of the episode suppressed Freek Bezuidenhout’s relationship with a “baster” woman and the probability that the youth with him in the cave was his son. The myth became so powerful that John X. Merriman, sometime Prime Minister of the Cape Province and a prominent liberal, wrote a pamphlet in 1911 dissecting the myth. The work *Een Eeuw van Onrecht*⁵ to which Smuts lent his name, used the episode as a source of grievance “the first bloodstained beacon” (3). The nature of the sentiment can be understood from the title of another work, cited by Heese, by J. Albert Coetzee, *Ruiters van Slagtersnek* (Knights of Slagtersnek).

Shakespearean influence

“Leinad”, the youthful John Daniel Kestell, wrote his play at the beginning of the process of romanticisation, and it provokes a number of questions. How does he relate to the growing tradition of romantic nationalism? Why did he write the play in English and get it published in London? From a dramatic or artistic perspective, how does he treat the Slagtersnek episode and why did he choose the Shakespearean tragic mode for the purpose? The existence of the play is certainly evidence of the bardic cult in the colonies, but is there more to it? Is this mere bardolatry, is the play Shakespearean only in its external trappings, or is there a real sense of Shakespearean complexity, of open-endedness and interplay of character and situation? We have to look at the tragic conception evidenced in the play and consider it in relation to Shakespearean tragedy, for which Kestell seems to have had a certain feel, quite apart from the formal externals of blank verse, soliloquies, comic burgers, and so on. Why did Kestell use this form for an analysis of a, by then, rather distant historical episode?

The formal Shakespearean trappings are certainly there. The blank verse is uninspired. There are attempts at Elizabethan wit and clownish humour in the treatment of the minor characters. They are a group of “burgers” (citizens) expressing various opinions and grievances as in *Julius*

Caesar and more relevantly *Coriolanus*. In the latter play the citizens are given fairly complex treatment, and these minor characters have come in for interesting commentary (involving possible textual changes), as witness the chapter by Wilbur Sanders in the rumbustious and provocative book in which he collaborated with Howard Jacobson, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity* (1978). The problem revolves around the second citizen. The first citizen is an agitator, the second a man of milder views. The First Folio shows how, under the contemptuous wit of the patrician Menenius, the second citizen is converted to a radical course, while the erstwhile radical, the first citizen, fades from the scene. Some later editors have suspected the nomenclature of the citizens in the First Folio to be muddled, and have assigned later portions of the scene to the radical first citizen. Sanders argues effectively for the First Folio.

In place of the witches in *Macbeth* or the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* there is a black thrower of bones, uttering vaguely portentous prophecies to Freek Bezuidenhout in one of Kestell's less successful scenes. Freek Bezuidenhout himself is given to brooding soliloquy about fate and free will, and his own need to act. Perhaps this reflects debate on predestination and inscrutable divine providence in Kestell's Calvinist milieu – he was a student of theology, having studied at Stellenbosch and Utrecht. (De Kock 441) His studies could not but have included discussion of Calvin's exposition of election in the *Institutes*, and of its confirmation and development in the Arminian controversy that led to the formulations of Dort (Dordrecht) in 1618, a milestone in the history of Calvinism. Calvinism, with its concept of the chosen or elect, is thought to have been one of the shaping influences on Afrikaner national consciousness, the chosen people replacing (in a difficult situation and threatening surroundings) individual election. This is, however, not really the argument of Freek's soliloquy. He is concerned that all his actions, even those he seems to will himself, are foreordained. Is he the stone rolling downhill and crashing into various obstacles, impelled by forces over which it has no control? The concept has within it the germ of a tragic conception – the development of an ever worsening situation leading to disaster. However, at the conclusion of his speech, Freek asserts his sense of individuality and the validity of his own will (an implicit statement of frontier freedom) as the shaper of his own destiny. He has choice, it is God's part to judge. "Myself am author of my acts" (1.2). The wilfulness is itself a precipitating factor in the unfolding of the events. Is will illusory, is one trapped, do one's decisions form part of an ineluctable pattern or does rampant individualism bring its own consequences? Perhaps the conclusion to the speech echoes the sentiment of S.J. du Toit, quoted earlier, in which God delivers the final judgement.

Freek and John (the brother) are heroes, but flawed heroes, especially the former. They are surrounded by a web of vacillators, cowards, intriguers and representatives of governmental power. Conspirators fall out or drift away. There is an element of compulsion or inevitability in the disaster, born of Freek's robust and unruly heroic qualities and John's loyalty and desire to avenge his brother. At the end there are a few noble words, a touch of "the noblest Roman of them all", delivered by Nel, the leader of the Afrikaner forces that help to quell the revolt, bringing the tragedy to a close.

The burgers speak, appropriately, in prose, with some attempt at Shakespearean wit and humour. Their exchange is a prelude to the action of the play, giving some idea of the debate about British rule which is to follow. There is much about the insolence of the "Hottentots" because of the rule of law recently introduced by the English. The fourth burger, rather like one of the citizens in *Coriolanus*, asks, however, "whether you have heard of the tyranny of their masters?" and is condemned as a traitor and slave and nearly ducked in the pond. There is Shakespearean play on "humour":

How now! Out of humour?
Nay he is in humour, but that
humour is not to humour you.
(3)

What Kestell cuts out are the executions that followed the collapse of the rebellion. Perhaps they were so well known that he thought he could rely on knowledge of the ghastly sequel, although

an English readership might well not have known the details. The play ends on a noble note with the death of John, Freek's brother. The racial complexities of Freek's "wife", as she is in the play, and his "son", not so called in the play, are not developed. They feature only in some very vague brooding remarks by Freek that seem to show that he is, in fact, not *persona grata* with his fellow frontiersmen.

I know the black man well, too well alas
For my lost reputation, which I yet
I yet may live to redeem . . .

(37)

Torn by the storm of sin and shame, I am scarred
And marked indelibly.

(17)

There is confirmation elsewhere of our hero's standing in the community. Martha the patriotically heroic wife of his brother John, in a quarrelsome scene, openly says to John that he has three "bastard" nephews, the sons of Freek by various "kafir" women (28). Martha suspects that her husband's conspiratorial nocturnal absences have a similar reason. However, the heroic tragic death in the battle in the cave is devoid of any suggestion that "Geschwind" (whose name marks him as "coloured") is other than a servant. Kestell's hero is indeed flawed, and perhaps Martha's view chimed in with Kestell's own, but Kestell still gives Freek heroic status.

Kestell's play may therefore suggest a more thoughtful treatment of history, reflecting hidden complexities foreign to a budding nationalistic romanticisation and perhaps hinting at Heese's later findings. However, as indicated earlier, Heese's own interpretation requires some comment, even though he intended to demythologise Slagtersnek. We have the historical circumstances, adequately unravelled by Heese. We also have the broad question of what Kestell was trying to do – his intention, if we dare embark on this troubled topic. It is a play on a contentious subject written at a time of growing ideological debate and ferment, and this does invite us to consider whether an authorial perspective apart from the dramatic points of view of the characters in the play can be discerned. Of course, Kestell may not have fully grasped and projected his own attitudes. Cleanth Brooks used to say that an author could write better than he knew. Possible an author can also write worse than he knew – it is a necessary corollary.

The promised comment on Heese's historiography is needed at this point. The romantic national tradition saw the brothers as heroes, "knights", (ignoring or being ignorant of the inconvenient racial alliance of Freek). Heese very effectively discredits this mythological tradition but in the service still of a certain idealised concept of the Afrikaner. To him the Afrikaner is pious, law-abiding and a preserver of racial purity. The Bezuidenhout brothers and their associates are discredited by Heese as being unworthy proto-Afrikaners. Nevertheless his remarks also indicate a possible tragic potential. In his introduction he describes Freek as a passionate, individualistic man of uncontrolled drives who made other people most unfortunate: "n hartstogtelike, eiesinnige man wat met sy onbeheerste drange baie ander mense diep ongelukkig gemaak het."⁶ But he also says that Freek was perversely opposed to tradition, he was not married, he did not have his children baptised and like his brother (another brother) Coenraad Frederick, he stepped over the colour line: ("Freek Bezuidenhout het dus dubbel en dwars teen die tradisie oortree. Hy het nie getrou nie, nie sy kinders laat doop nie, en nes sy broer Coenraad Frederik, oor die kleurlyn getrap") (2).⁷ Heese disapproves of renegades and traitors opposed to the upholders of law and order. The rebels were breakers of the traditional values of the Afrikaner, such as their sense of racial purity and honouring of the church's sacraments: "verbrekers van die tradisionele waardes van die Afrikaner, soos sy sin vir rassuiwerheid en sy eerbieding van kerklike sakramente" (2).⁸ The Afrikaner of 1815 was taken to be conservative and a lover of order: "die konserwatiewe en ordeliewende Afrikaner van 1815" (xi).⁹ The men who helped the British suppress the rebellion were, rather, the bearers of the Afrikaner's national consciousness. "Die regeringsmanne van 1815 eerder as die rebelle van

1815 (was) die draers van die Afrikaanse volksbewussyn.”¹⁰ He points out that these were the people who went on the Great Trek a little later, not the rebels or their descendants (xi). The latter were hotheads (“heethoofde”). He says that there have always been the hotheads but fortunately also the unruffled cool heads (162). The rebellion was no expression of Afrikaner national consciousness: “geen uiting van Afrikaanse volksbewussyn nie” (62). “In die grensboere se oë was Freek Bezuidenhout om hierdie rede reeds ‘n verstoteling” (60).¹¹ Can we detect in Kestell, at the beginning of the romantic mythologising, some qualification, however faint, similar to Heese’s later attitude of the 1970s?

Kestell treats the episode as a tragedy, with the Bezuidenhout brothers as heroes. The play’s publication in London in 1880 or 1881, coinciding with the Anglo-Transvaal War, may indicate that the purpose of the play was to create sympathy for the Afrikaner cause. Shakespeare, however, does not deal with issues in a simplified fashion. Is there, however, some sense of complexity that sets him apart from the developing romantic tradition? Did Kestell’s enthusiasm for Shakespeare lead to some problematising of the events he presents. This is the question that needs to be followed through, with understanding of the 1815 situation and also of Kestell’s situation (including his love for Shakespeare) in 1881.

Kestell’s tragedy of the Bezuidenhouts is a tragedy of character and circumstance. Kestell of course predates A.C. Bradley, but seems to have had rather similar conceptions. He was an educated man and it is not impossible that he might have been in touch with nineteenth century canons of criticism from Aristotle onwards. He seems to have had a proto-Bradleyan notion of character and of fatal flaw in relation to circumstances and action. Bradley identifies the hero as a person of high estate, above the level of average humanity not only in rank but in attributes of personality. The hero is a person of a striking kind. Action issues from character, precipitated by a particular set of circumstances. Freek, of course, is hardly of high estate; but he is certainly not the average kind of human being. He is the frontier individualist faced by encroaching bureaucracy and law. Sanders talks of “an ordinary man, driven to extremity” (138). This seems to have been the case with the historical Freek; it is even more the case with Kestell’s Freek, brooding over fate and free will and with a powerful sense of freedom and incipient nationalism.

Heese, in his patriotic unmasking of the Slagtersnek myth, declares that Freek was no hero. Kestell, however, tries to create an heroic figure. Freek is not a small man. There are lots of small men around him. He has a passionate greatness that unfits him for orderly society and, of course, a powerful conviction of his mastery over “Hottentots”. There are complicating hints in Kestell that this attitude needs, at least, modification. “Piet”, the historical Booi, is however no heroic fighter for freedom, while Freek is the frontier individualist to a degree. When Heese, intending condemnation, says that he was “‘n hartstogtelike, eiesinnige man wat met sy onbeheerste drange baie ander mense diep ongelukkig gemaak het”, he unwittingly gives the key to Kestell’s tragic conception, even if Kestell’s hero and his heroic brother do present a mixture of the heroic and problematic, or perhaps evince a heroism that is intertwined with the problematic, as heroism can so easily be. This complexity or ambivalence is, in fact, reminiscent of Shakespeare. The complexity is echoed in the words of Nel, the leader of the Afrikaner posse that helps quell the rebellion. Kestell gives the final word to a fellow Afrikaner. The words are over the dead “John”, the brother, but they apply to Freek as well.

Alas, Bezuidenhout, I grieve for thee
Thy life was stormy, may thy end be peace.
(98)

The last words of “John” raise the chief problem of the play, which sometimes slides into “heroics” of the wrong kind. This is implicit in the play’s title, *The Struggle for Freedom*. What is this struggle? What is this author’s treatment of this theme? What, if one dare put a question that some significant modern criticism (Foucault and Roland Barthes) and also the not so modern “New Criticism” of Cleanth Brooks and Wimsatt and Beardsley of “Intentional Fallacy” fame, has declared invalid: what is Kestell’s intention? What was he trying to say?

The last words of “John” are that Nel is a “foul traitor” who does not love his country. Heese states that people like Nel, not the Bezuidenhouts, are the real Afrikaners. Certainly, Kestell does not seem to condemn Nel, even if “John” seems to be the mouthpiece of a new nationalism (which Heese strongly rejects). Is this a blurred focus on the part of Kestell, or a presenting of a set of ambivalences in Shakespearean fashion? The final scene is, it must be admitted, high pitched. “So ends my dream of freedom” says the dying John. He sees himself as “he who first essayed to gain South Africa’s Freedom,” but the time has not yet come. The final line, printed in the text in capitals, is: “FREEDOM, THE SWEETS OF FREEDOM GIVE, OR DEATH!” This suggests an unrelieved expression of early romantic Afrikaner patriotism and nationalism, taking the cue from S.J. du Toit’s history of four years earlier and contributing to the political use to which Slagtersnek was put in ensuing generations, until a more sophisticated historiography spoiled the romance. Certainly, Kestell did not have access to the documents used by later historians, from Leibbrandt’s pioneering documentary study onwards, and was not a trained historian. In 1881 he was only twenty-six. And the date of publication coincides with the period of the Anglo-Transvaal War, the play’s publication in England (and in Shakespearean guise!) appearing to show the intention of creating understanding for the Afrikaner. But what about the fourth burger – the little dissentient voice?

The theme of freedom and revolt from British rule is intertwined with the question of race. What Kestell does not make explicit (possibly because he did not know, but possibly not) is that Freek’s woman was no married wife and was, furthermore, a “baster”, and that the youth who accompanied Freek to the cave for the shoot-out was his son, also “coloured”. There are, however, those two remarks by Freek, mentioned earlier, that could be taken as indicating that Freek is an outcast from his community for venturing across the racial divide. What kind of condemnation, if any, is implicit? Is it all part of the make-up of our doomed, brooding tragic hero?

Race is what the clownish burgers debate in the opening scene. Why are they clownish? The scene starts with comic confusion about pounds and shillings and the rixdollar, the old currency, then moves to British rule, British rule of law and the new-found insolence of the “Hottentots”. The theme of British “tyranny” is troubled, however, by the fourth burger (there are five) who seems prepared to pay taxes and fines and asks an awkward question about the “tyranny” of masters over their servants. His incensed fellow burgers want to duck him in the pond but are prevented by a Field-cornet who rebukes their unruly behaviour in a speech about order and loyalty to the King. It is rather reminiscent of the speech by Sir Thomas More in the fragmentary play of that name that survives in manuscript, the work of various hands of which one is thought to be Shakespeare’s, possibly his first speech on order. Unlike later Shakespearean speeches on order, the message in the More play seems unproblematised. Kestell could hardly have known *The Boke of Sir Thomas More*, but he did have the numerous speeches on order in the later plays, which have had a varied critical reception.

One is not sure how to take this speech of the Field-cornet, with its invocation of majesty. Is it intended to raise queries? Is it a point of view, a dramatic utterance, and are the viewpoints of the various burgers to be taken likewise? The burgers reappear later in various states of cowardice and trepidation about the rebellion, which they desert. They are not an admirable bunch. The fourth burger, however, seems to disappear. Kestell lost an opportunity. There has been considerable argument about whether Hand D in the manuscript (never printed) of the *More* play is Shakespeare’s. R.W. Chambers, in *Man’s Unconquerable Mind* argues very persuasively, from internal evidence, that it is. There is also the evidence, less decisive, of the handwriting. What needs to be said here is that the law and order or natural order theme, as expressed here, is not problematised as are similar speeches in the later Shakespeare. R.W. Chambers tends to take the later speeches at their face value; problematising them is the work of a later generation of critics.

Shakespeare’s later speeches on order indeed do occur in dubious or troubled contexts. The well-known speech by the Bishop of Carlisle in *Richard II* about the evil of usurpation and the disordered future of an England rent by civil strife is in defence of a corrupt and incompetent

King. Shakespeare may be suspected, here, of taking out an insurance policy, even if he found something in his sources. *Richard II* was a risky play to write. It was used by the Essex conspirators as an attempted springboard for their *coup*. Elizabeth herself is on record as angrily saying “I am Richard II, know ye not?” to Lambarde, one of her courtiers. The speech about bees in the hive by Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely in *Henry V* is born of mercenary motives: the church is in danger of being taxed! The fable of Menenius about the belly (the patrician class) that distributes to the rest of the body, in *Coriolanus*, is a bit of adroit political rhetoric to bamboozle the citizens of Rome, who lack bread. Most famous of all, Ulysses’ oration on order and natural law in *Troilus and Cressida*, whatever E.M.W. Tillyard might say about its being the view of Shakespeare himself and of the generality of Elizabethans, is the utterance of a wily politician to the rather ludicrous Agammemnon and his flabby council of war, in a play in which natural law is cynically questioned. What did Kestell learn from such speeches?

Jonathan Bate in *The Genius of Shakespeare* of 1998, uses the Wittgensteinian duck/rabbit image to illustrate Shakespeare’s multifaceted and ambivalent quality (31). There are often no final answers. This perception of Shakespeare’s elusiveness is far from new. Keats was getting at the same quality in his famous statement about Shakespeare’s “negative capability” as opposed to Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime”, in his letter of 21 December 1817. Negative capability is to be “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts...” Matthew Arnold may have had the same idea in mind in his sonnet *To Shakespeare*: “We ask and ask. Thou smilest and art still.”

Freek Bezuidenhout, in his soliloquy, represents the human will in a world of possible predestination. The speech stamps him as a brooding individualist and also possibly as a man with a strong propensity for turbulence. He is the man of will and action who will act, even though prospects of success are slight. He is also, as early scenes show, strongly racist. In the scene in which he chastises “Piet”, the historic Booi, he calls Piet “slave-born” and of the “accursed race of Ham”. He invokes “our most sacred rights” and “ancient rights”, lamenting the equal rights for black and white secured by English law (11). Does Kestell want us to swallow all this without reflection? Is it a dramatic utterance in character, or Kestell’s own opinion?

Piet, formerly a slave sold to somebody by Freek, who has been manumitted, says, “I am no slave but free”. It is not only the burgers and Bezuidenhouts who talk of freedom. Piet does admit that Freek has “purer blood” in his veins so he can never stand as Freek’s equal, but he nevertheless claims rights (10). Kestell seems, at this moment, himself to be taking out an insurance policy; nevertheless, there are opposing claimants to rights and freedom.

When the bungling functionary, Opperman, comes to arrest Freek and take him to stand trial, he talks in anachronistic Shakespearean idiom of “most sacred majesty” (15), hardly the language of the Cape nor of Britain itself in 1815, nor of Britain in 1881 when the play was published. Are we to accept this point of view? Freek’s last argument against the Field-cornet, in true frontier style, is “this gun”, his firearm (15). This is in character, but does Kestell anticipate future anti-colonial criticism? What should the reader think of this “heroic” attitude?

Freek and his brother “John” debate rebellion. John is, at first, cautious and reasonable. He prophesies correctly that their countrymen will play Freek’s proposed rebellion false. Some do, and others are staunchly on the side of the authorities. John also asks: “Hadst thou such freedom / Under the former flag?” (25) Was the Dutch East India Company any better than the British? The British, in 1806, in fact captured the Cape from the Batavian Republic, not the Dutch East India Company. The precise import of John’s question of this point is not entirely clear. It is possible, for example, that there was more freedom for the white frontiersman under the DEIC or the Batavian authorities than under the British because of less control over the frontier regions. However, the “freedom” that has been lost to the British is the freedom of the frontiersman to rule himself as he thinks fit, dignified elsewhere by Freek as “ancient rights”. Freek is adjured by John to lead a “holy life” as a “peaceful burger, tilling thy rich lands” (15). One wonders how rich the lands in fact were in the rugged and arid area of the eastern frontier. However, by the end of the scene John is converted:

If our wives and daughters
Are safe no longer under British rule

. We born in liberty
 Are free no longer.
 Freedom, the sweets of freedom give, or Death.
 (26)

These words are repeated as his final line, capitalised, before he dies.

When John earlier suggests to Freek that no rebellion will succeed, Freek asks:

. . . must a man act
 only when success smiles in his face?
 (24)

The heroic attitude may be simultaneously perverse and admirable. John exclaims:

. . . there breathes not one
 half as heroic as my brother is.
 (25)

Is this his point of view, or Kestell's own opinion? Despite Freek's earlier soliloquy about will versus determinism, he tells his brother:

There is a power, John, doth lead us on
 By ways unknown, we know not how or why.
 (18)

Is this heroic delusion? What does this power lead them to? The arguments here are a continuation of the free-will / predestination debate discussed earlier.

Whatever Kestell may have learnt from S.J. du Toit's earlier patriotic history, and whatever uses Slagtersnek may have been put to in later political propaganda, the plot and argument of his play are much more sophisticated than either, even if there is a strong element of the romantic. The play is not blindly one-sided. There is some effort at complexity and enough to trouble easy answers. Sanders talks of causing "discomfort" to the reader (136, 145). Kestell's play is a tragedy in which the tragic rebels, creatures of time and circumstance and their own passions, in their way greater than the people around them, come to an unhappy and violent end. This end has some stirring patriotic and bombastic notes which do betray Kestell's desire to make a point to the readers in England where this play was published in 1881. Ironically, the bombastic touches were likely rather to alienate than to evoke sympathy, or empathy, and are the weakest part of the play.

If one takes a leaf out of Jonathan Dollimore's *Political Shakespeare* and asks about the "dominant ideologies of the period" and whether there are subversive elements that undermine these, one finds a complex of possibilities (Dollimore 3). The play is ostensibly about the "FREEDOM" of John Bezuidenhout's dying words, a freedom to be asserted against the encroachments of British colonial rule. But when Freek talks of "ancient rights" are we on his side? What in fact are these "rights"? The Cape is under colonial rule but it is precisely this rule that is responsible for the concept of the rule of law that disrupts the "ancient rights" and precipitates the tragic action. Piet, the Booi of history, has his rather mute say about his rights and there is the troubling remark by the fourth burger right at the beginning of the play. Then, where in the complex of attitudes do we place the Afrikaner commando under Nel (who speaks a brief epitaph over John Bezuidenhout's body)? What, further do we make of the "sacred majesty" and law and order utterances, with their archaic Elizabethan tang, by sundry Field-cornets? In any case, are we dealing with the ideological situation of 1815 or of 1881, when the play was written and a new romantic nationalism (a dominant ideology in the making) was beginning to evince itself? Finally the race issue is complicated by the hints in the play that Freek has sinned against the settler racial mores, and so this issue does not conform to ready-made paradigms.

There is an approximation to the ambivalence that characterises so much of Shakespeare's treatment of tragic and historical themes. In his treatment of history Kestell is, like Shakespeare, plastic in his handling of event and character, shaping what sources he had to his own purpose and showing some signs of a complicated interplay of sympathies.

While Kestell may have wanted to bring the Afrikaner cause to the attention of England, the freedom debate shows some kind of intellectual honesty. Nevertheless, the stridency of John's dying remarks, (those printed in capitals) seems to indicate that Kestell was, in unShakespearean fashion, putting his thumb in the scale, using the play to make a declaration. On the whole, however, Kestell is, like Shakespeare, self-effacing, giving us a dramatic presentation of different people involved in a difficult situation. For a literary work of its time and circumstances it is not without interest, while bearing testimony to the fascination with Shakespeare that penetrated to remote and unlikely colonial corners. André Brink, the modern South African writer and a dissident voice in Afrikaans literature, has written two plays on *Slagtersnek*, testimony to the episode's continuing ambivalent fascination.

NOTES

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1. "How cruelly the British went to work with us poor Boers.
2. "The history of our land in the language of our land."
3. "Mourn, O Afrikaners! Here lies our flesh and blood! – in the cruellest way martyred. Wrong it was to rise against higher authority; but they did it not without reason . . . Guilty were they, says the earthly judge, but what will the Heavenly Judge finally say?"
4. *The Road (path) of South Africa*. It is a romantic nationalistic poem. C.J. Langenhoven was the first prominent Afrikaans literary figure.
5. *A Century of Injustice*. It appeared under the name of F.W. Reitz, State Secretary of the South African Republic (i.e. the Transvaal).
6. "A passionate, individualistic man whose uncontrolled drives made other people deeply unhappy."
7. "Freek Bezuidenhout thus over and over stepped over the bounds of the tradition. He did not marry, did not have his children baptised, and like his brother Coenraad, Frederick overstepped the colour line."
8. "breakers of the traditional values of the Afrikaner, such as his desire for racial purity and his respect for the sacraments of the church."
9. "the conservative and order-loving Afrikaner of 1815."
10. "the government men (i.e. the Afrikaner forces that helped to quell the uprising) rather than the rebels of 1815 were the bearers of Afrikaans national consciousness."
11. "in no way an expression of Afrikaner national consciousness". "In the eyes of the frontier farmers Freek Bezuidenhout was for this reason already an outcast."

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