The African Imprint in Shakespeare

Does the study of sources underlying William Shakespeare's dramas depend on a legacy of colonialism? Studies of this kind have hardly looked beyond European texts in languages that Shakespeare supposedly could read. If any records originating outside Europe are considered as possible source materials, they tend to be marginalized or appropriated within the continent's cultural orbit. But is it accurate to assume that Shakespeare's achievements are almost exclusively inspired by European textualities? This essay explores the proposition that much of Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre would be unthinkable without African imprints. These are mainly (a) non-classical African mythical or geographical narratives, and (b) literary or historiographical texts written earlier with northern African origins. It's only now becoming visible how type (a) has a likely impact on early modern drama. Considering (b) in conjunction with this enables a new perspective on Shakespeare's art. We also have type (c): legacies of knowledge culture originating in Africa that leave profound marks on early modern literature. Should we begin regarding much of Shakespeare's work as being inherently non-European in origin – the opposite of what is generally assumed? Though limited in scope, this essay presents some salient evidence.

Keywords: *William Shakespeare, literary sources, Eurocentrism, Africanist presence, African folktales*

Introduction

African Textuality in Shakespeare

The nominal setting of one of William Shakespeare's best-known comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (composed ca. 1595), is Athens in the time of Theseus. The play seems to be at home in Greece, sprinkled with some English Renaissance elements. Yet what if it turns out *not* to be an inherently European work – what if it features a tangible though effaced imprint from Africa, of a kind that concerns not only this play, but indeed some major achievements of the age's culture? Such a proposition would open a different perspective on early modern England and its sociocultural context. This essay's purpose, though limited, is to offer some salient evidence and outline its cultural significance. If we can understand imprints as distinguishing effects, the task is to investigate the traces of African textuality especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, a prominent comedy and a major tragedy. The investigation will begin with non-classical parallels which are likely influences, extending to a complementary inquiry into classical influences from south of the Mediterranean.

A "colonialist logic" has recently been suspected of underpinning the study of Shakespearean sources (Britton and Walter 17). That study is not culturally and politically innocent but rather "a product of nineteenth-century nationalist criticism," using non-Shakespearean materials "wrenched out of

context rather than appreciated in their historical ecosystems" – and from "under-represented" cultural milieux (Newcomb 27). Consequently, even if great art can be esteemed as speaking or even belonging to all cultures, it makes a difference what sources we admit to our purview *and* where they originate. We should open our inquiries to the intercultural dimension with its focus on diversity: the ballad of *Titus Andronicus* in 1594, for instance, "must have been read in London [...] with people of color visible in the work force and in theater audiences" (Newcomb 32). Accordingly, the presence of transformed cultural knowledges from south of the Mediterranean is likely to be far greater than we have usually assumed.

After the Introduction, with a literature review and explanation of methodology, the main analysis focuses on the comedy (section 1, with a West African myth and a classical African source) extending to the tragedy (section 2, with an early modern source and classical African sources).

Literature Review

The overwhelming bulk of the study of literary sources suggests that the work of Shakespeare like that of his English contemporaries is essentially if not exclusively European in its inspiration. The emphasis is mostly on printed books and thus on Shakespeare's reading (as in the studies by Miola, Muir, or recently by Gillespie in 2016). Scholars continue to explore relationships between Shakespearean plays and European texts written predominantly (apart from English) in French, Latin, Italian, and sometimes Greek. Influences from elsewhere have received at best marginal attention, oral transmission only slightly more. At the same time, it cannot well be doubted that there are valuable impulses with an origin earlier in North Africa, from authors such as Apuleius to whom we will come back (for research on Apuleius in association with Shakespeare, see section 1.3 below). One can also focus on "sable" Terence in this context (see Teramura). By mapping a perceptual space for Africa, a mnemonic process that goes beyond the singular culture – as translocal memory – would conceivably open early modern authors' receptive horizon toward a storehouse of impulses from African narrative art. Yet only briefly has there been attention, in passing, to parallels in folktales from outside Europe (Echtermeyer et al.). Shakespeare's use of folktales is granted in principle (Britton and Walter, Bullough, and Miola), and discussed more substantially by Artese (in 2015 and 2019), yet the emphasis remains on materials from Western Europe.

It's not difficult to understand why. Scholars find it "reassuring" to learn that a possible source text "was available in print" (Brooks lxiv). A commonsensical approach focuses on Shakespeare's presumed desk and the books to which he would have access, supposing he would tend to use English materials wherever possible. These might extend to languages he could (maybe with a little help) comprehend adequately. A sprinkling of hardly noted authors have suggested an impact of Persian and Arabic con/texts (see Al-Dabbagh, Avci, and Khairallah) and possible parallels in African culture (see Balogun

and Mafe). Yet the overwhelming bulk of Shakespeare source studies works within a somewhat hidebound Eurocentric manner of reading. This can slide almost imperceptibly into cultural hegemony, a "euromorphic universalism" that "substitutes particular forms for universal ones, thereby displacing and obscuring genuine universals" (Hostettler 20, 138). But access to universals, we should not forget, is only possible through "le sens des autres expériences et des autres civilisations" (Merleau-Ponty 62).

Methods

The task requires scrutinizing a textual interface between source and target text in a range of categories: be it setting, action, motivation, characterization, dramatic structure, imagery, or style. This can but does not invariably have to involve the micro-level of lexical or semantic field overlap. In testing the assumption that the English bard could have had access to a particular pre-text (Scholes), discovering parallels would allow a more accurate understanding of the playscript's cultural positionality. If parallels correspond to a playscript at least as closely as other pre-texts, they can be assumed to indicate influence. What, then, is a source? It has been defined as a text which

(a) presents "distinctive" parallels with a target text, hence ones that are wholly or nearly "unique to the two given texts"; which
(b) "demonstratively predates" the target text; and which
(c) "demonstrably circulated in the same historical and literary context as the target text" (Rauer 10).

Any such evidence in the study of Shakespearean sources is usually inferential and circumstantial, since no documentary statement expressly declaring debt has been found. Still, inquiries of this kind can come very close to revealing the circulation of cultural knowledge in the early modern theatre, helping us to gain a more adequate analytical understanding of drama. For the present purpose, the comedy will receive more detailed attention owing to the complexity of its arguably African traces − beneath the Athenian surface.

Analysis: Cultural Imprints

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Brawls and Supposed Sources

Depiction of natural turmoil

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, pre-textual presences inform two layers of performative reality, the first being Athenian society– the aristocratic and the lowly craftsmen class – and the second, natural forces at work above and all around the urban society. These forces manipulate human characters at will, who are almost wholly unaware of their existence. A war has just come to an

end. Having defeated the Amazons, to cement his victory the Athenian ruler is preparing to marry their queen Hippolyta, effectively consummating his triumph. In this situation four young citizens appear, Lysander (who is in love with Hermia) and Demetrius (who likewise desires her) as well as Helena (who rather despairingly loves Demetrius). Clearly this spells trouble. Indeed, young Hermia's livid father not only declares Demetrius to be *his* choice of son-in-law, but insists that she agree to marry his choice, otherwise she should be sentenced to death. In order to escape such a fate, Hermia and Lysander secretly flee from the city into the woods, whereupon the other two young people follow. As elsewhere in Shakespeare, the forest setting seems a place that ensures a life in harmony with nature.

Yet the natural world is inhabited by a band of fairies, a counter-society ruled by their king Oberon and queen Titania. Far from manifesting any harmonious model realm, this powerful couple are engaged in a bitter quarrel: Oberon demands a young boy under Titania's protection; when she refuses, her furious husband resolves to subdue and humiliate her. The quarrel causes life-threatening turmoil throughout the natural world:

> [...] never, since the middle summer's spring,
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
> By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
> Or in the beached margent of the sea,
> To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
> But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
> Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
> Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
> Hath every pelting river made so proud
> That they have overborne their continents.
> The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
> The plowman lost his sweat, and the green corn
> Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
> The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
> And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
> The nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud,
> And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
> For lack of tread are undistinguishable. [...]
> Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
> Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
> That rheumatic diseases do abound.
> And thorough this distemperature we see
> The seasons alter [...] (2.1.82ff.)

Titania's graphic complaint illuminates the effectiveness of natural forces throughout the play, destroying the natural and thus the urban order as well. The quarrel becomes the cause of multiple confusions among the four young humans, and no less of the play's pivotal episode when royal Titania is forced to make love to ... an ass. We will return to the ass plot (see 1.3.1).

Alleged sources

Literary ideas and motifs rarely arise *ex nihilo*. To understand this, the process of metamorphosis is helpful. It has been redefined as "a figure for intertextuality," a metatrope for selection and combination in textual production; creativity is most successful when it operates as "transformative intertextuality" (Mikkonen 329). Is it possible, then, to trace from whence Shakespeare adapted this dramatic inspiration? In his magisterial collection of Shakespeare's sources, Geoffrey Bullough has nothing pertaining to the quarrel over the young boy, and it may be that the Bard simply "invent[ed]" all this (Foakes 6). Nonetheless, Jacques Derrida (among others) has a point when he speaks of "the very 'first' trace, which is already marked by duplication, echoes, mirrors, presenting itself something like 'the trace of its reflection' […]" (*Dissemination* 361). It's very doubtful, that is, whether there is any such thing as an unprecedented origin, which is why it would be erroneous to overlook genuine influences and lines of inspiration *if* they actually exist.

It's likely that Shakespeare drew generally on descriptions in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.477-86), where the emphasis is on "sol nimius" along with rain and wind. One could add, from the Deucalion context, "Sternuntur segetes et deplorata coloni / vota iacent, longique perit labor inritus anni" (1.272-73) – or Aeacus's account of heat and plague (7.528-41; for Ovid, see also Brooks 137-38).

Seneca's *Medea* (752-67) has been claimed as a complementary source (Brooks lxiii), rightly called unconvincing by Holland (159) seeing that the focus there is on "aestiva tellus floruit" as well as harvest during winter times. Another contrasting description, this time of excessive heat, is found in Seneca's *Oedipus* (37-48; for Seneca as putative source, see Brooks lxiii, 139ff.). Brooks glances at Edmund Spenser's "December" in *The Shepheardes Calender* (lxi), perhaps meaning the boughs that "[a]re left both bare and barrein now at erst: / The flattring fruite is fallen to grownd before / And rotted, ere they were halfe mellow ripe." Though Brooks maintains that this is a source of Titania's speech, Spenser is speaking of the natural cycle of seasons, not their disruption; Foakes (144) plausibly dismisses this as not being a convincing influence.

<u>West African Myth (as Source One)</u>

These European (viz., Roman and English) sources were accessible to Shakespeare. They describe various kinds of disruption of natural order, owing to heat or plague or precipitation or other effects. Yet they have no equivalent for the idea that a power struggle is going on between natural energies, and that it is this which engenders enduring disorder. From a shared commonsensical ground, scholars have not looked beyond Europe for possible sources. Yet a West African myth transcribed and annotated by Wande Abimbọla, professor of Yoruba language and literature, comes surprisingly close to what happens in Shakespeare's comedy.

In the myth, the universe comprises "two physical planes of existence, *ayé* (earth) and *òrun* (heaven)" (Abimbọla 261), which are not entirely separate

from each other. A quarrel ensues between the lord of the earth Ajàláyé and the king of heaven, Ajàlọrun: "Ọré ni Ọba Ajàláyé àti Ọba Ajàlórun [...]" (Abimbọla 264). In Abimbọla's English rendering (265 ff.), these two powers are friends and agree to go hunting together, so that "[a]t the appropriate time, / They burnt the forest, / The forest burnt for a long time" as a method to drive out animals for prey. An ẹmó rat emerges, not a large animal, and the two powers "started to quarrel" over this prize. Ajàláyé claims the senior right and hence the rat, so that this domain should be the rat's abode. Yet Ajàlọrun disputes that claim and demands the right to take away the rat. The quarrel grows "very bitter"; angry Ajàlọrun announces that "[a]ll the world would know who was the senior" with the greater power (or presumption). As a result, "yams grew small tubers which could not develop. Corn grew small ears which would not ripen. Bean flowered but could not develop further. [...] The sick remained infirm. Small rivers wore garments of falling leaves." Eventually the diviners resolve that there should be a sacrifice for Ajàlọrun, and Ajàláyé should "beg" Ajàlọrun sufficiently. Ajàláyé thereupon sends a messenger to Ajàlọrun with the sacrifice, a centerpiece being the disputed bush rat, and the task being to express "complete submission" so that Ajàlọrun may no longer be angry. Now it becomes possible for human beings to mend "the leaking roofs of their houses"; natural order with a balance of moisture is soon restored. The version subsequently retold by Emanuel Abosede (141-42), scholar of Ifá traditional religion, has no substantial differences.

Whereas Ajàláyé in a few versions of the myth can be constructed as a masculine counterpart of Ajàlọrun, that is not necessarily so: Ajàláyé is characteristically the female spirit of earth (see Idowu 46-47, Lawal 25, and Williams 187-88). This spirit is finally humiliated by the stronger energy and has to give in – just as Titania has to do at the end of Shakespeare's drama when she finds herself compelled to yield the young boy in her charge to ruthless Oberon. Without pressing the case too far one can examine both narratives, myth and dramatic script, for further and smaller verbal correspondences: illness and disease feature in each; Shakespeare's ox who vainly stretches his yoke can recall the "*ẹinlá* cows with big horns" who become the offering to propitiate mighty Ajàlọrun. Hunting and chasing in the forest, as well as images of fire, are events taking place in Shakespeare's comedy too (as at 1.1.173, 2.2.87, 2.2.102, 3.1.104, 4.1.102ff.; see also Brooks 132). Yet the essential correspondence is the representation of a cosmic dispute between powers fighting over a small or young object they both crave, a struggle that erupts into a colorful depiction of natural waste and barrenness (cf. the brief analysis in Steppat, "*Midsummer*"). Does the nominally Athenian domain disguise a culturally rich Yoruba landscape?

We can safely assume that the popular myth was already circulating by the 16th century. Abosede's research shows that its genetic context is the neolithic stage of Yoruba culture in South-Western Nigeria, until about 500 BCE, when its inhabitants were "food gatherers and hunters" whose "ideas about the world around them" reflected their socio-economic life; Ajàlọrun was responsible for "peace and good order on earth" on condition that Ajàláyé paid him "regular

and due obeisance" (Abosede 140). The condition could be said to be apt for the Oberon-Titania relationship as well, two powers who with some setbacks are in transition toward a kind of bond characterized by firmly patriarchal demarcation of differential authority and strength. To the substance of the myth, divinatory details may have been added in later Yoruba cultural periods (see Abosede 143).

The Myth's Presence

African myths are not included in any accounts of influences on Shakespeare. This is not surprising: with nationalist underpinnings, "a time-honored colonial strategy" claims that such objects are "primitive, discarded, or valueless," so that the British Bard's precursors are, as it were, "disinherited": the "riches of world culture" are fulfilled only in Shakespeare's exploitation of their contents (Newcomb 27). It would not be exaggerating much to guess that "[i]n the assured estimation of these European men of culture, Africa had no history, no literature, no culture [...]" (Tsaaior, 2013, p. xiii). Such a myth as that related above could be taken as nothing more than an objectified Other, an exotic and at best semi-literary analogue, which happens to have certain thematic or actional similarities – and definitely not the kind of metropolitan discourse (printed in prestigious Latin or French or English) which Shakespeare and his theatrical colleagues would have encountered at all, let alone taken seriously.

That provokes the question: could anyone in the acting company have possibly acquired any knowledge about the myth, and about other artifacts from south of the Mediterranean? Admittedly, modals are hard to avoid in source study. Even so, from the painstaking archival research of Imtiaz Habib and Gustav Ungerer we now know more. In the sixteenth century, there was quite a community of Africans in London and other English towns. They have been easy to overlook in the scholarly past as "an invisible, secret population" in the Tudor period, being neither alien nor legally poor and thus excluded from "civic sight" (Habib 5, 7). It appears that there are 89 records of Black and colored people in Elizabethan London (Habib 265). What is of special relevance in our context is that "the black presence is documentated [*sic*] in 90 percent of the neighborhoods dominated by the theatre industry," so that we can assume "an empirical awareness" of London's Black population among theatre people, with an impact on the capital's "cultural life" (Habib 268, 270). In fact, a skillful silk weaver nicknamed Reasonable Blackman presumably made costumes for the London theatres, not only contributing to the Renaissance theatre's "material capital" but even inspiring stage depictions (Habib and Salkeld 141; see also Kaufmann Chapter 5, Salkeld 146). We thus have grounds to surmise that an "Africanist presence" (to adapt Morrison's term [46]; see also Hall 14) constitutes at least some elements of an early modern White subjectivity.

We can imagine Shakespeare, as a man of the theatre, engaged in a constant exchange of experiences with the players, the apprentices, musicians, attendants, all operating in the theatre's communicative domain (see also

Hunter 59). Perhaps some audience members too. Any of these would be likely to encounter Africans in various locations – taverns are likely meeting places in the urban setting. And surely they would communicate. In conversing and dealing with the ethnic majority, many Blacks would on occasion convey some of the cultural heritage of the regions of their birth and upbringing. We can plausibly assume that at least some Africans would be acquainted with a range of traditional tales and their highly expressive performative aesthetic; with the right incentive, meeting places would give scope for characteristic forms of narrative performance, not lacking suitable translators and interpreters. Such conditions of textual transmission enable "translocal mnemonic forms" to enter "local repertoires" (Erll 14-15).

Likely enough traders and mariners, too, would learn about features of narrative artifacts. We can assume that travel descriptions by returning seamen had some influence at home, as we can gather from Richard Hakluyt's second edition of *Principall Navigations*: the seamen had experience in being on shore – learning about "the maners of the people" and "the wonders [...] engendred in Africke" (Hakluyt 6:175, also 150, 219). English mariners spent time in African captivity, such as the recorded cases of John Fox in Morocco or John Reynard in Egypt (Matar, "English"). Returning sailors, as well as traders, captives, and pirates would transmit fictional and also "factional" descriptions to their communities (Matar, *Turks* 81). Skilled seamen had African servants (Fury, "Elizabethan" 30; *Tides* 247-48). Orally transmitted narratives would circulate in the capital's lively communicative network. This means, as has recently been pointed out, that drama scripts "performed by actors in a public space" provide "a connection with storytellers' oral performances of folk narratives" (Artese, *Shakespeare's* 7). Thus actors and theatre staff, from musicians to apprentices – not Shakespeare alone – had adequate occasions to pick up performative or narrative stimuli which were easily communicable to playwrights.

In light of these findings, it's not so surprising that we can discern suggestive parallels between African myth and Shakespearean drama, ones we should not ignore as palpable influence. Is Shakespeare really writing "White verse" (Mafe 47)? A cautious approach is nonetheless apposite: in another context it has been proposed that there are "axial points of intertextual affiliation between Shakespearean text and Yoruba myth" with "an extant discourse between these traditions" (Mafe 59) – a discourse that is culturally significant even where we cannot know for sure (hence the caution) whether the dramatist himself was aware of overlaps. It reaches further, in principle, to embrace the playgoer and reader. This is contiguous with the concept of trans*textuality, a term for textual encounters "within wider networks" in a "criss-crossing of genres" (Arndt 400). We are dealing with "a causal and rhizomic dis*continuum of oral*written*literature" (Arndt 402, see also Elhanafy 39).

Rethinking Sources .....

What does this tell us about source study, and about Shakespeare? As we have seen, the study of influences has mainly focused on Shakespeare's books, his library and his reading. With some justice it is maintained from within this focus that "more works will always be claimed as Shakespearean sources than will be widely credited" (Gillespie 2). Researchers focus on the author's "reading and remembering" to discern how a source text shapes a target text and its content, with variable "calibration of intertextual distance" depending on one's knowledge of the author's working habits (Miola, "Seven" 19, 20). However, we can argue for a fresh look at materials which "in an often oblique and subtle manner acted as stimuli during the development of Shakespeare's thematic and verbal concepts," stimuli whose effect may be "either conscious or subconscious" (Steppat, "Shakespeare's" 255). From these study directions, we can now extend the traditional notion of Shakespeare's sources toward the folk narrative, as Charlotte Artese is doing. She rightly declares that Shakespeare's folktale sources "remain largely neglected," even though oral tradition plays a significant role in Shakespeare's culture; when we find resemblances between a drama by Shakespeare and a folk narrative, this can "help to explain Shakespeare's place at the center of the Western literary canon" (Artese, *Shakespeare* 2, 4). Artese is concerned with a "Western" canon, however, hence with European folk narratives, the kind that in some cases would be available in written literary shapes – and in print.

In a wider sense, a story would be taken from a popular oral source, "carried across continents or preserved through centuries" and retold to other entertainers (Stith Thompson, qtd. in Artese, *Shakespeare's* 5). Even before transcontinental migration, such processes lead to variations in a folk narrative's precise shape, such as the minute differences in versions of the West African myth as recorded by Abimbọla and then Abosede. In terms of books and reading, Shakespeare in particular was "well aware of the variety of tellings to which the tale was liable," and was "assiduous in collecting variant sources" (Hunter 59-60). For *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as an instance, he would have sought inspiration from a range of sources or subtexts, going beyond reading to embrace hearing as well. Rather than a linear and conterminous descent from a particular document, that is, we are likely to be dealing with "a rhizomic network" of "multi-layered encounters" (Arndt 399, 400) as variant sources come together. In this nexus, literacy and orality are not discrete traditions (see also Artese, *Shakespeare's* 13; Arndt 396). What's more, in Saussurean terms the sound-image is material and sensory, seeing that the sound creates a "psychic imprint" which we can understand as a trace (Derrida, *Grammatology* 63). There is a difference between "sensory appearing" and "its lived appearing" or "mental imprint," a difference or even *différance* which enables a "chain of significations" (*Grammatology* 66), perceivable in a dramatic script's materialization and especially performance. The script thus becomes a "play of presence and absence, a place of the effaced trace" (*Grammatology* lvii) as the original Africanist presence, its subjectivity with its articulating body become invisible for later generations – and for

mainstream scholarly study (see also Habib 270). It's apposite to say that the identification of sources "disperses into *différance*, spreading genealogies, and the silences of history" (Britton and Walter 9).

. ..... And rethinking Shakespeare

But: why should Shakespeare stoop at all to oral sources? It's customary not only among scholars to envision Shakespeare as a more or less educated person (albeit largely self-taught) with a study and a desk, perhaps a bookshelf. It would at times feature heavy volumes from Sir Thomas North's racy translations of Plutarch to Edward Hall's chronicles. We thus tend more or less explicitly to construct Shakespeare as a kind of gentleman usually immersed in books, as a scholar might do, so that we create or assimilate him in our own image. Evidently, this construction of The Bard marginalizes any orally transmitted influences from well beyond the study. We should, however, begin to take seriously the notion that dramatists would *not* just be sitting at their desk, like us, poring over somewhat hegemonic and prestigious printed volumes. Instead, they would more likely and characteristically be among those with curious minds venturing whenever possible outdoors, seeking to encounter people (see also Arndt 397), since they would be especially interested in picking up diverse forms of cultural knowledge around the thriving metropolis. In any such case, there will be "remoulding" in a way that "revises, displaces and recasts the precursor" as the later author seeks to "clear a space for his own imaginative originality" (Eagleton 159; for the metamorphic process, see above). This involves cultural competition: the later poet won't simply replicate or reproduce the earlier form.

Recent work on folktales assumes that Shakespeare would tend to adapt tales well known to theatre audiences, ones that circulated in print as well as orally (see Artese, *Shakespeare's* 2). If poetic records originating at the intersection of Europe with non-European regions have been considered as possible source materials (see for instance Knight 8:344), they have been culturally absorbed or have gained only marginal treatment—at least before Elhanafy's study of Arabic/Persian pre-texts.

<u>Asinus Aureus (as Source Two)</u>

Transformation

At this juncture, let's return to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If a potential influence from south of the Mediterranean can arguably be discerned, as analyzed above, it can be strengthened further: there is a second main layer of evidence. The play's most significant transformation is that of Bottom the common weaver into a monster with ass's head in Act 3 Scene 1 and into Act 4. What happens is that Oberon's mischievous helper Puck has watched the weaver with his comrades rehearse a playlet in the woods, which they are hoping will be chosen to celebrate Theseus's wedding. Finding their antics strange, Puck without a comment or other dialogic presence changes Bottom's shape. This is instrumental to Oberon's cruel oppression of his spouse, prompted by jealousy (2.1.24, 81), hence a consequence of the natural realm's

topsy-turvydom: "What thou seest when thou dost wake, / Do it for thy true love take; / [...] Be it ounce, or cat, or bear [...]" (2.2.26-29).

A major parallel here is in the *Metamorphoses* or *Asinus aureus* of the writer, philosopher, and rhetorician Lucius Apuleius (late 2nd century), who lived in Madauros (modern M'Daourouch) in Numidia. A biography offered by his English translator William Adlington in 1566 introduces him as "LVcius Apuleius African, an excellent folower of Plato his sect, borne in Maudara [...] situate, and liyng vpon the borders of Numidia & Getulia, whereby he calleth him selfe, halfe a Numidian, and halfe a Getulian" (front matter). Recent research takes the geography seriously enough to consider Apuleius as being *genere mixto*, and has begun reassessing Apuleius in terms of "'hybridity' and 'creolization' in the study of Roman colonization" – or of "discrepancy" between pre-Roman and Roman cultural forms (Finkelpearl et al. 2, 3, 6). Salman Rushdie writes about how he "pass[es] much time in the excellent company of a Moroccan writer of the second century AD, Lucius Apuleius [...]" (364). The recent research proposes considering Apuleius from a "dialectic between his simultaneous multicultural identities," and explores several of his works extending to the *Metamorphoses* as "fundamentally local productions of Africa" (Lee 313, 320).

Adlington's rendering was popular enough to go through three printings by 1596; Shakespeare may have known both the Latin and the English versions (McPeek 69, see also Gaisser 293). We have Stephen Gosson's testimony that Apuleius's work was "throughly ransackt, to furnish the Playe houses in London" (sig. D5v). A founding document of *serio ludere*, the *Metamorphoses* with its Milesian genre has been said to have exerted "a profound influence" on the *Dream*'s author (Carver 444, also 434). Sister Generosa has indicated some parallels in general "ideas" between the comedy and episodes in Apuleius, though not in textual correspondences (Generosa 198); whereas Brooks, Chaudhuri, and Gillespie ignore her article, subsequent discussions (including this one) nonetheless remain indebted to her pioneering work. What is relevant for Bottom's experience is Lucius's transformation to become *asinus mysteria portans*, which Apuleius describes in Book 3 chapter 17. His accomplice Fotis gives him a magic ointment to change him into a bird – yet what actually happens is totally astonishing for him:

> AFter that I had wel rubbed euery parte & member of my bodie, I houered with mine armes, & moued my selfe, lokinge still when I should be chaunged into a birde as Pamphile [the hostess] was, and beholde neither feathers nor apparaūce of feathers did burgen out, but verely my heare did turne into ruggednes, & my tender skinne waxed tough and harde, my fingers and toes lesing the nūber of fiue chaunged into hoofes, and out of mine arse grewe a great taile, now my face became monstruous, my nosethrilles wide, my lippes hanginge downe, and mine eares rugged with heare. [...] (Apuleius 32)

We could read this against Reginald Scot's narrative (5.3), which Bullough prints (1:401) without mentioning that Scot repeatedly refers to Apuleius (in 5.1, 5.4, and 5.7). When Shakespeare has Bottom enter with just

an ass's head, it has been emphasized that this contrasts with Apuleius's depiction of a complete transformation (Holland 71-72). Yet Apuleius shows the head as being particularly affected when it retains some human faculties, while Shakespeare offers a hybrid creature whole body needs donkey-like nourishment (see Shakespeare, *MND* 4.1.31ff., and also Generosa 199). Hence the transformation does concern the whole weaver, embracing the *pars pro toto* trope (see also Carver 438); moreover, both figures retain a human consciousness (see also Mariko 128). We can take Apuleius as the likeliest source (see also Muir 68), with Bottom emerging as "an Actaeon of the Apulian and Platonic kind" (Barkan 354). We ought to acknowledge at this stage that the text type of a literary document with a long Western reception and transmission history is generically not homologous with African myth. Nonetheless, fables with ambivalent animal/human identities, though not replicating the Apuleian manner of transformation, have always been popular across the African continent (see e.g., Finnegan 334), whence they could make their pathway northward.

Erotic Involvement

Bullough finds nothing else in Apuleius's narrative that qualifies as a "possible source" (1:398), discouraging further attention. Other authorities offer strongly diverging perceptions of the question of an Apuleian influence. Muir, Holloway, and Chaudhuri, for instance, overlook or at least pay no attention to Apuleius's later depiction of the beast saving a young gentlewoman who had been kidnapped (Book 6 chapter 23), "sweetely kiss[ing]" her tender feet, while she murmurs:

> I will brauely dresse the heares of thy forehead, and then I wil finely kembe thy mane, I wyll tie vp thy rugged tayle trymly, I will decke thee rounde about with golden trappes, in suche sorte, that thou shalt glitter like the Starres of the skie, I will bringe thee dayly in my apron the kyrnelles of nuttes, and will pamper the vp with deintie delicates, I will sette stoore by thee, as by one that is the preseruer of my lyfe: Finaly, thou shalt lacke no maner of thinge. (Apuleius 64)

This appears a likely influence on the tender romance of *MND* 4.1, as Foakes (10) acknowledges; Muir and Chaudhuri don't while Carver (439) only alludes vaguely to it. Shakespeare's Titania tells her servants to lead the ass to her bower, where she imagines the moon lamenting "some enforced chastity" (3.1.193). We should note that her abode in the play is in the "forests wild" (2.1.25): this is not what an otherwise illuminating study calls "the Palace woods of Theseus" (McPeek 76), which would characterize her as not being independent of Theseus's authority, thus skewing the play's realms. We should hear Titania's utterances as against Apuleius's young gentlewoman in connection with the ass's narration of a young and noble matron of Corinth who grows amorous of him (Book 10 chapter 46, see also Starnes 1032):

> she kissed me, not as thei accustome to doo at the stewes, or in brothell houses, or in the courtisant schooles for gayne of money, but purely, sincerly, and with great

> affection, castinge out these and like louinge woordes: Thou arte he whome I loue, thou arte he whome I onely desire, without thee I cannot liue [...] therewithall she eftsones embrased my bodie round about, and had her pleasure with me. (Apuleius 109-110)

Unlike Book 6 chapter 23, and unlike Foakes, Muir (68) and Chaudhuri (225) see *this* as an influence when Shakespeare's Titania similarly sends her servants away and murmurs "I will wind thee in my arms. [...] So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle / Gently entwist" (4.1.39, 41-42). What Apuleius had to offer Shakespeare is thus construed quite differently, leading inevitably to diverging perceptions of the drama's "transformative intertextuality" (see above). One perception is Apuleius's "strident bestiality" as stressed by Chaudhuri (57) – yet for all the physicality, poetically modulated in Shakespeare's censor-controlled theatre, we should be sensitive to the young gentlewoman as well as the ass's highlighting of "purely, sincerly," embedded in a narrative context that on careful reading reveals more than one layer of significance (for which see also Carver 441).

Psyche

Nor is this all. Apuleius can be found to contribute also to the description of the fairy rulers' bitter strife in Shakespeare's drama (see McPeek 74-75). In Book 5 chapter 22, after the young princess Psyche, of "singuler passinge beautie and maidenly Maiestie" (4.22), disobeys and even inflicts a quasi-accidental injury on her husband Cupid, people complain that "the marriages are not for any amitie, or for loue of procreatiō, but ful of enuy, discorde, & debate," and even that Cupid and his mother Venus "are now become no more gratious, no more pleasaunt, no more gentle, but inciuill, mōstruous & horrible" (Apuleius 54). Psyche's fear of what might turn out to be her husband's secretly "dyre" and serpentine nature is behind this, and effectively augments the correspondences from the West African myth introduced further above.

Because of this "discorde," Shakespeare's Oberon humiliates Titania. Bewailing the "injury" to his honor (2.1.147), he announces to his servant Puck: "I'll streak her eyes, / And make her full of hateful fantasies" (2.1.257-258) – gleefully aware that she is sleeping where "the snake throws her enamell'd skin, / Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in" (2.1.255-256). Titania's misery arguably draws on Apuleius's story of Venus and Psyche (in Book 4 chapter 22, p. 44). Holland barely mentions this in passing (71), but it deserves more attention. The young princess Psyche is revered by thousands for her beauty as if "she weare Ladie Venus in deede" – amounting to "contempt" of the real goddess Venus. As a result, "[t]his sodeine chaunge and alteration of celestiall honour did greatly inflame & kindle the minde of very Venus," goading her to declare that the princess, who "hath vsurped mine honour, shall shortly repent her of her vnlawfull estate." Calling in her son Cupid (who is "sufficient prone to woorke mischiefe"), Venus enjoins him to charm his wife "y^{t} she may fall in loue with the moste miserablest creature liuinge, the most poore, the most crooked, and the most vile, that there may be

none founde in all the worlde of like wretchednes." Apollo thereupon prophesies that Psyche's husband will be "no wight of human seede / But Serpent dyre and fierce as may be thought." Psyche is couched "emongst the softe and tender hearbes, as in a bedde of soote and fragrant flowres" set in "a pleasaunt woodde" (Book 5, p. 46) – anticipating Titania's "flowery bed" (4.1.1). She is not allowed to look at Cupid, who becomes her husband, while her sisters tell her "there is a great Serpent full of deadly poyson, with a rauenous and gapinge threate, that lieth with thee" (p. 51).

With these and further correspondences, there can be little doubt that Shakespeare's Titania emerges as a Psyche figure. It has been claimed that the young boy whom Titania refuses to yield to Oberon is an Apuleian "Cupid figure" (McPeek 74), yet this is not convincing as the boy does not at any time become Titania's husband. Instead, and more plausibly, when Apuleius's Psyche is represented as constantly devoted to her love despite adversity, Shakespeare's two young women characters Hermia and Helena become "manifest Psyches" (McPeek 70) in adhering to their respective male lovers despite some grossly insensitive treatment. The foundations of both the myth and the play's main stories do resemble each other fairly strongly, enabling us to gather that we can understand Shakespeare as remaining "essentially true" to Apuleius (McPeek 70). The Madauran makes use of Neoplatonic registers which appear to be used in "pastiche, a display of styles, multiple arguments, and intertextuality" playing against Ovidian discourse, both of which together form the comedy's chief and conjoined intellectual stimuli (Carter para. 31). This interplay might be explored for other dramas that show traces of Apuleian imprints.

Extending the Perspective

Complementary Impulses .....

In at least two complementary ways, then, it appears plausible to regard narratives from south of the Mediterranean as shaping this significant comedy, which with its thoroughly European setting would not suggest such influences. Originating in different periods and different regions of Africa, the narratives come together in a creative conjunction to gleam through the early modern drama's textual surface. Shouldn't we assume that there are further cases in the work of Shakespeare (and contemporaries) where African impulses make themselves felt, for the playgoer and reader and quite likely for the playwright, not only in isolated dialogic elements but in more comprehensive ways? One might expect this to happen in dramas with a setting or characters associated with Africa, *but* not only these: it was proposed decades ago, for instance, that Apuleian correspondences may make themselves felt in as many as nine of Shakespeare's works, and that the Bard read *Asinus aureus* several times (see Starnes).

..... And the Case of Antony and Cleopatra

Connections subtly link Shakespearean works, from this and related perspectives. A non-classical African-derived source, somewhat as in the comedy, is likely to have contributed to the major tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*: Leo Africanus's *Geographical Historie of Africa*, translated by John Pory in 1600 (Book 8 pp. 312ff.). The work has been analyzed as an influential element in *Othello* (see Hadfield). Though not recognized by either Bullough or Bevington, and apparently being too marginal for Muir, it offers useful accounts of the life-giving Nile which shape a key interpretive feature in the Egyptian/Roman drama's unfolding dialogue (see also Neill 212, Wilders 163; for Nilotic analysis Chiari and also Laroque). Its scope goes beyond the immediate topographical images, reaching to the West African mythical Ọṣun's movement of waters. When the river's rising is said to be due to the tears of Isis (see Pausanias 10.32.18), we again meet Apuleius as pre-text: it is the goddess who releases Lucius from his bestial identity, initiating him into her priesthood (Apuleius's Book 11). The Isis cult is especially prominent in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which for that matter like the comedy is partly set in Athens – while the cult also requires study when it plays a key role in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (Book 5, with implications for other Books). In the tragedy, the Egyptian queen characteristically appears "[i]n th'abiliments of the Goddesse *Isis*" (TLN 1768), identifying herself with the deity. Not all of the tragedy's modern editors show awareness of Apuleius: like Bullough, Neill ignores him, as does the chief German study edition (Daphinoff). Yet Bevington (11) is more careful and does admit an influence of Apuleius's Isis, and for an understanding of Cleopatra's "creative" influence on Mark Antony it is meaningful not only to discern the way her functions in the drama resemble Apuleius's Isis, but also that as she approaches her death she again parallels the Madauran's spiritualizing depiction (Lloyd 91, 93). From there one could trace an Apuleian influence on Shakespeare's generic concept of romance drama.

But there is more. Shakespeare associates Antony with the sun and Cleopatra with the moon (as at TLN 2951, 3011, 3490) – then both in conjunction (TLN 3297). Scholarship has not gone very far in identifying the cultural inspirations, but Horapollo Niliacus's frequently translated *Hieroglyphica* says about the Egyptians: "AEVVM innuentes [*sic*], Solem ac Lunam pingunt, quod æterna sint elementa" (*De symbolica* 7). In Cleopatra's grand concluding dream the two cosmic bodies come together to constitute Antony's face, which assumes a celestial dimension wherein "stucke / A Sunne and Moone" (TLN 3296-97). It has been noted that this recalls Zeus (*Orphica* fragment 123 and Vincenzo Cartari), but not that it's at least as pertinently a feature of Ra which is subsequently given to Horus (e.g., Armour 8, 52). Available to Shakespeare, like Horapollo, was Plutarch, who describes how worshipers "solemnize the feast of the nativity or birth of *Orus* eies: at what time as the Sunne and Moone be in the same direct line: as being perswaded that not onely the Moone but the Sunne also is the eie and light of *Horus*" (p. 1308 = section 52). We should not forget that Horus is Isis's son, so that

Cleopatra is blending her dream image with Caesarion (her son with Julius Caesar), and by this means subtly enhancing the dynastic threat to Octavius.

But the power claim of a related mythical dimension goes beyond this, when Isis is associated with the moon and Osiris at rhythmic intervals with the sun/Ra (Plutarch sect. 52, Smith 302ff.); Isis and Osiris consorted together and married (e.g., Plutarch sect. 12, 27). The mythical knowledge becomes standard in alchemical literature: *Rosarivm Philosophorvm* features a "conivnctio sive coitus" of sun and moon fleshed out into a male and a female monarch who are entwined in a body of water (sig. F iii^{v}) – "de imperfecto facis perfectum." In another, materialized vein, Albertus's *Liber Mineralium* presents a conjugal union of sun and moon in a ring (as heading of Tractatus 3 Book 2). Studying early modern cosmology, S. K. Heninger explains Albertus: "[t]he endless circle of the ring is, of course, a common symbol of eternity [...] its alpha and its omega are congruous, so that its end is its beginning, and so on"; it becomes "an icon for the completed opus, another stasis which subsumes all change" (Heninger 3-4). As the early moderns knew, however, European brands of alchemy originated in northern Egypt (Zosimos of Panopolis), its mysticism revealed by none other than Isis (as in "Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus"), and Albertus for instance acknowledges "mathematicas scientias primū extitisse circa egiptū" (sig. I iv^{v}). We should not detach the later alchemical literature from the Isis/Osiris material. Indeed, Shakespeare's Egyptian queen shows herself fully aware of alchemy's curative and transformative power, "that great Med'cine" (TLN 565). Accordingly, it's worth considering that alchemy inspires the whole signifying structure (as McAlindon 239, based on Heninger, put forward)—if we bear in mind its roots in Egyptian myth.

It's enticing to explore the implications further, to gain a more adequate sense of the at least partly effaced African imprint – never isolated in a mythemic syncretism – on this prominent tragedy. Yet such analytical dimensions are denied or dismissed by critics who instead submit the tragedy to a purely "Renaissance reading" (e.g., Simonds 223), hence taking a reductive Roman perspective and focusing rather on what is then constructed as Cleopatra's insidious sexual bait for a foolish Antony. Impulses from much further south accordingly become invisible, as Shakespeare is reappropriated in a self-enclosed Euromorphic sphere of signification. That may be congruous with the reconstructed receptive horizon of an educated Renaissance playgoer or reader steeped in emblem literature and Graeco-Roman historiography, but not in any dimensions of a cultural heritage originating outside Europe. Yet that does not exhaust the receptive options, then as now. We might do well to listen to Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and 1986 Nobel Prize winner, when he stresses that Shakespeare's Cleopatra is "evoking the deeper mysteries of the cult of Isis" in verse lines whose "awesomeness [...] can only be fully absorbed by an Egyptian, or one steeped in the esoteric cults of Egypt," cults possibly extending to Islam (Soyinka 6). The result is that in this drama as in none other "Shakespeare's sensuous powers climaxed," when his imageries "finally come home" to Egypt – the Bard's own *terra firma* (Soyinka 8, 10).

Conclusions

The dramas we have discussed, a famous comedy and a major tragedy, are just two instances in Shakespeare's work where we find suggestive African equivalents and presumable impulses. The top-level, transcontinental research cluster in Germany's Excellence Strategy which is devoted to "Africa Multiple" (and which owes much to inspirations from Susan Arndt) is exploring the potential impact of African cultural knowledge on the drama, the very first time this is happening. It's likely to be unearthing more over time, in examining further relevant artifacts mainly from West Africa (possibly other African regions as well). This essay's scope can only focus succinctly on evidence from two major drama genres. It seems fairly safe to surmise that much of Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre would be unthinkable without such strongly translocal impulses, as West African mythical narratives complement literary works composed earlier by authors of northern African provenience. Parallels in several categories between Shakespearean drama and a corpus of such textualities, as transtextual affiliation (see Mafe 59), await closer study. Considering the various categories of works with an African background in light of each other enables a fresh perspective on the cultural substance, including legacies of knowledge culture originating from south of the Mediterranean, that is written into early modern English – and not only English – literary art. That *does* make a difference.

There are limitations and caveats. Definitive proof of influence and filiation, rather than probability scaling, is not possible for Shakespearean and other contemporary literature, as sources remain mostly unacknowledged and the plausibility of evidence rests on criteria as specified further above. Also, one should never forget, as Tobin tends to do, that the Bard was "attracted to narratives available in multiple forms" (Artese, *Shakespeare's* 3), so that any one source may not exhaust the genealogy and the import of a particular work or its parts. Sources, that is, hardly exist in isolation. Moreover, evidence should not depend on themes and lexical parallels that are early modern commonplaces, or on instances traceable to several analogous publications or documentable earlier European source materials.

In light of the balance of probability, in any case, we should begin regarding key achievements of Shakespeare's work as being inherently non-European, and even African in their cultural germination – the opposite of what tends to be assumed. Pursuing this perspectival shift from within a European institution, as the present essay does, should be understood as responding to initiatives like Lekan Balogun's, who has tentatively suggested that Shakespeare himself subsumes Plutarch's Cleopatra and the tragedy's process in the Yoruba ritual archetype of *orisha*, as both a physical and a spiritual female identity (21).

Anti-colonial cultural projects have aimed to prove the richness of indigenous African languages and literary imagination, so that Shakespeare's work came to be skillfully translated (into Tswana by Sol T. Plaatje and into Kiswahili by Julius Nyerere) and subsequently adapted with creative

intercultural transfer (for these contexts, see Plastow). It has thus enabled African and African-diasporic adaptations by Welcome Msomi (South Africa), Thomas L. Decker (Sierra Leone), Abiola Sobo and Ahmed Yerima (both Nigeria), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and others. Now that a new departure is emerging, however, it's time to turn this around: we need to (re)discover the richly complex African imprint on what we like to think of as being Shakespeare's – and early modern Europe's – "own" work.

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