

The African Imprint in Shakespeare

By Michael Steppat*

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 cultural orbit of the continent. But is it accurate to assume that Shakespeare's achievements are mainly 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 is 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.

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 culture of the age? Such a proposition would open a different perspective on early modern England and its sociocultural context. The purpose of this essay, 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. A further tragedy that, as an instance, would reward study from this perspective is *Othello*, which this essay will touch on briefly,¹ while space will not allow more

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1. See also Diana Adesola Mafe, "From Ogun to Othello: (Re)Acquainting Yoruba Myth and Shakespeare's Moor," *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 3 (2004): 46-61; Susan

in-depth discussion. 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.² 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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 (with a West African myth and a classical African source) extending to the tragedy (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 European in its inspiration. The emphasis is mostly on printed books and thus on Shakespeare’s reading.⁵ The World Shakespeare Bibliography effectively shows

Arndt, “Trans*textuality in William Shakespeare’s *Othello*: Italian, West African, and English Encounters,” *Anglia* 136, no. 3 (2018): 393-429. These valuable comparative studies discuss the tragedy in connection with African myth without necessarily claiming a direct influence.

2. Dennis Austin Britton and Melissa Walter (Eds.), *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study: Audiences, Authors, and Digital Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2018), 17.

3. Lori Humphrey Newcomb, “Toward a Sustainable Source Study,” in *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study: Audiences, Authors, and Digital Technologies*, edited by Dennis Austin Britton and Melissa Walter (London: Routledge, 2018), 27.

4. Newcomb, “Toward,” 32.

5. See the following studies: Robert S. Miola, “Seven Types of Intertextuality,” in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Intertextuality*, edited by Michele Marrapodi (Manchester University Press, 2004), 13-25; Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare’s Reading* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977); Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, 2001, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

the record of research on the provenience and the types of sources as well as influences. Information on Shakespeare's sources was first collected by Gerard Langbaine in 1688 and 1691.⁶ Scholars continue to explore relationships between Shakespearean plays and European texts written predominantly (apart from English) in French, Latin, Italian, and sometimes Greek. When influences from elsewhere have received attention, it is often only marginally, and oral transmission not much more. At the same time, it cannot 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 below). One can also focus on "sable" Terence as an influence on Shakespeare, as in the case of *Titus Andronicus*,⁷ while Bullough in his magisterial overview of sources does not include any African-based materials for that tragedy. By mapping a perceptual space for Africa, a mnemonic process that goes beyond the singular culture – as translocal memory – would conceivably open the receptive horizon of early modern authors 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.⁸ Shakespeare's use of folktales is granted in principle,⁹ and it is discussed more substantially by Artese,¹⁰ yet the emphasis remains on materials from Western Europe.

It is not difficult to understand why. For scholars find it is "reassuring" to learn that a possible source text "was accessible in print."¹¹ 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,¹² and possible parallels, not necessarily

6. Gerard Langbaine, *Momus Triumphans: Or, The Plagiaries of the English Stage* (London, 1688); *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (London, 1691).

7. See Misha Teramura, "Black Comedy: Shakespeare, Terence, and *Titus Andronicus*," *ELH* 85 (2018): 877-908.

8. Theodor Echtermeyer, Ludwig Henschel, and Karl Simrock, *Quellen des Shakspeare in Novellen, Märchen und Sagen*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Finckesche Buchhandlung, 1831; 2nd ed., Bonn: Adolf Marcus, 1870).

9. Britton and Walter, *Rethinking*; Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Vol. 1 (1957), Vol. 5 (1964)); Miola, "Seven" and *Shakespeare's*.

10. Charlotte Artese (Ed.), *Shakespeare and the Folktale* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Charlotte Artese, *Shakespeare's Folktale Sources* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press, 2015).

11. Harold F. Brooks (Ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1979), lxiv.

12. See Abdulla M. Al-Dabbagh, *Shakespeare, the Orient, and the Critics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Nilay Avci, "Forbidden Love of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Fuzûlî's Layla and Majnun," *International Journal of Literature and Arts* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1-4;

influences, in African culture.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ But access to universals, we should not forget, is only possible through other experiences and civilizations (“le sens des autres expériences et des autres civilisations”).¹⁵ In a suggestive article, Arndt has shown how it is possible to be strongly sensitive to this.¹⁶

Methods

The task requires scrutinizing a textual interface between source and recipient 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,¹⁷ discovering parallels would allow a more accurate understanding of the cultural positionality of the playscript. 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.”¹⁸

As'ad E. Khairallah, “The Story of Majnūn Laylā in Transcultural Perspectives,” in *Studying Transcultural Literary History*, edited by Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 232-243.

13. See Lekan Balogun, “Ajubaba: Shakespeare and Yoruba Goddess,” *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies* 1, no. 3 (2013): 18-25; Mafe, “From Oḡún,” 46-61.

14. Nick Hostettler, *Eurocentrism: A Marxian Critical Realist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2012), 20, 138.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le Philosophe et la Sociologie,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 10 (1951): 62.

16. See Arndt, “Trans*textuality” (as in note 1).

17. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (Yale University Press, 1985).

18. Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), 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 is 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 world of nature:

[...] never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,

[...] 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 [First Folio: petty] 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,
 [...] 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 [...] (MND 2.1.82ff.)

Titania's vivid complaint illuminates the strength of natural forces in the action of 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 pivotal episode of the play when royal Titania is forced to make love to ... an ass. We will return to the ass plot.

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 metatropé for selection and combination in textual production; creativity is most successful when it operates as "transformative intertextuality."¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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'. [...]"²¹ It is 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.

19. Kai Mikkonen, "Theories of Metamorphosis: From Metatropé to Textual Revision," *Style* 30, no. 2 (1996): 329.

20. R. A. Foakes (Ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 6.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 1981), 361.

It is likely that Shakespeare drew generally on descriptions in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.477-486), where the emphasis is on excessive sun ("sol nimius") along with rain and wind.²² One could add, from the Deucalion context, the flattening of cornfields, which saddens the peasants, the ruin of their crops and the waste of a year's labor ("Sternuntur segetes et deplorata coloni / vota iacent, longique perit labor inritus anni" (1.272-273)) – or Aeacus's account of heat and plague (7.528-541).²³

Seneca's *Medea* (752-767) has been claimed as a complementary source,²⁴ rightly called unconvincing by Holland²⁵ seeing that the focus there is on summer blooms ("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).²⁶ Brooks glances at Edmund Spenser's "December" in *The Shepheardes Calender* (lxi),²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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 plausibly dismisses this as not being a convincing influence.²⁹

West African Myth (as Source One)

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 parallel for the depiction that a power struggle is going on between natural energies, and that it is this which engenders enduring turmoil. From a shared commonsensical ground, scholars have not looked beyond Europe for possible sources. Yet a West African myth transcribed and annotated by Wande Abimbola, professor of Yoruba language and literature, comes surprisingly close to what happens in Shakespeare's comedy.

In the myth, the universe comprises two levels of the world, "ayé (earth) and òrun (heaven)," which are not entirely detached from each other.³⁰ A quarrel ensues between the lord of the earth Ajáláyé and the king of heaven, Ajàlòrun:

22. P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, edited by Hugo Magnus (Gotha: Perthes, 1892).

23. For Ovid, see also Brooks, *Midsummer*, 137-138.

24. L. Annaeus Seneca, *Tragoediae*, edited by Rudolf Peiper and Gustav Richter (Leipzig: Teubner, 1921); also Brooks, *Midsummer*, lxiii.

25. Peter Holland (Ed.), *William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1994), 159.

26. For Seneca as putative source, see especially Brooks, *Midsummer*, lxiii and 139ff.

27. Brooks, *Midsummer*, lxi.

28. Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*. Renaissance Editions.

29. Foakes, *Midsummer*, 144.

30. Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (Paris: UNESCO, 1975), 261.

“Ọré ni Ọba Ajàláyé àti Ọba Ajàlórun. [...]”³¹ In Abimbola’s English rendering, these two powers are on good terms and decide to go hunting, 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.³² 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 Ajàlórun disputes that claim and demands the right to take away the rat. The quarrel grows “very bitter”; angry Ajàlórun 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.” The “small” rivers (Abosede: “little”) come very close to the “pelting” or “petty river” in *MND*.³³ Eventually the diviners resolve that there should be a sacrifice for Ajàlórun, and Ajàláyé should “beg” Ajàlórun sufficiently. Ajàláyé thereupon sends a messenger to Ajàlórun with the sacrifice, a centerpiece being the disputed bush rat, and the task being to express “complete submission” so that Ajàlórun 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, scholar of Ifá traditional religion, has no substantial differences,³⁴ though in other cases of oral narrative variants of detail in the transmission history might need consideration.

Whereas Ajàláyé in a few versions of the myth can be constructed as a masculine counterpart of Ajàlórun, that is not necessarily so: Ajàláyé is characteristically the female spirit of earth.³⁵ 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

31. Abimbola, *Sixteen*, 264.

32. Abimbola, *Sixteen*, 265ff.

33. The First Quarto’s reading, adopted in the critical edition, is authoritative. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “pelting” *adj.*1 = petty; the Folio’s “petty” *adj.*3 = small.

34. Emanuel Abosede, *Ọdun-Ifa (Ifa Festival)* (Lagos: West African Book Publishers, 2000), 141-142.

35. See E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. Revised ed. (New York: Original Publications, 1994), 46-47; Babatunde Lawal, “Ejiwapo: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture,” *African Arts* 41, no. 1 (2008): 25; Annette Lyn Williams, *Our Mysterious Mothers: The Primordial Feminine Power of Ajé in the Cosmology, Mythology, and Historical Reality of the West African Yoruba*. Diss. California Institute of Integral Studies (San Francisco, 2014), 187-188.

offering to mighty Ajàlòrun. Hunting and chasing in the forest, as well as images of fire, are events taking place in Shakespeare's comedy too (as at *MND* 1.1.173, 2.2.87, 2.2.102, 3.1.104, 4.1.102ff.³⁶). Yet the essential correspondence is the representation of a cosmic dispute between powers fighting over a small or young prize they both crave, a struggle that erupts into a colorful depiction of natural waste and infertility.³⁷ 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 history 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; Ajàlòrun was responsible for "peace and good order on earth" on condition that Ajàláyé paid him "regular and due obeisance."³⁸ 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.³⁹

The Presence of the Myth

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.⁴⁰ 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. [...]"⁴¹ Evidently there is politics involved in canon formation with standards for in- and exclusion, "grounded in material, ideological, and socio-cultural

36. See also Brooks, *Midsummer*, 132.

37. Cf. the brief yet focused analysis, expanding on source materials, in Michael Steppat, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and African Source Materials," *ANQ* Oct. (2020). Information therefrom is used by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd., gratefully acknowledged.

38. Abosede, *Odun-Ifa*, 140.

39. See Abosede, *Odun-Ifa*, 143.

40. Newcomb, "Toward," 27.

41. James Tar Tsaaio, *African Literature and the Politics of Culture* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), xiii.

realities."⁴² In an unduly competitive discursive domain, 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 elsewhere in England. 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.”⁴³ It appears that there are 89 records of Black and colored people in Elizabethan London.⁴⁴ What is of special relevance in our context is that “the black presence is documented [*sic*] in 90 percent of the neighborhoods dominated by the theatre industry,” so that we can assume “an empirical awareness” of the Black population in London among theatre people, with an impact on the capital’s “cultural life.”⁴⁵ In fact, a skillful silk weaver nicknamed Reasonable Blackman presumably made costumes for the London theatres, not only contributing to the “material capital” of the Renaissance theatre but even inspiring stage depictions.⁴⁶ We thus have grounds to surmise that an “Africanist presence” (to adapt Morrison’s term)⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ Perhaps some audience

42. Manish Kumar, “Interrogating the Politics of Canon Formation: A Theoretical Purview,” *MEJO* 5 (Feb. 2021), 155. Canon politics concerns literary artifacts of diverse kinds, including those that become sources, and cultural legacies.

43. Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (London: Routledge, 2008), 5, 7.

44. Habib, *Black*, 265.

45. Habib, *Black*, 268, 270.

46. Imtiaz Habib and Duncan Salkeld, “The Reasonables of Boroughside, Southwark,” *Shakespeare* 11, no. 2 (2015): 141; see also Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (London: One World, 2017), Chapter 5; Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare and London* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 146.

47. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 46; see also Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 14.

48. See also G. K. Hunter, “Shakespeare’s Reading,” in *A New Companion to Shakespeare*

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.”⁴⁹ When they are capable of entering such repertoires, they might even cease being experienced as non-English, so that cultural boundaries become porous.

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.”⁵⁰ English mariners spent time in African captivity, such as the recorded cases of John Fox in Morocco or John Reynard in Egypt.⁵¹ Returning sailors, as well as traders, captives, and pirates would transmit fictional and also “factional” descriptions to their communities.⁵² Skilled seamen had African servants.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ Thus players and other theatre members, from musicians to apprentices – not Shakespeare alone – had adequate occasions to respond to performative or narrative stimuli which were easily communicable to playwrights.

Studies, edited by Kenneth Muir and Samuel Schoenbaum (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 59.

49. Astrid Erll, “Traveling Memory,” *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 14-15.

50. Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589, 2nd ed. 1598-1600). Vol. 6 (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1904), 175, also 150, 219.

51. Nabil Matar, “English Accounts of Captivity in North Africa and the Middle East: 1577-1625,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2001): 553-572.

52. Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 81.

53. Cheryl A. Fury, “Elizabethan Seamen: Their Lives Ashore,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 10, no. 1 (1998): 30; Cheryl A. Fury, *Tides in the Affairs of Men: The Social History of Elizabethan Seamen, 1580-1603* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 247-248.

54. Artese, *Shakespeare’s*, 7.

In light of these findings, it is not so surprising that we can discern suggestive parallels between African myth and Shakespearean drama, ones we should not ignore as palpable influence. While Titania's watery world may resonate with echoes from the Deucalion description, that is not likely to be the whole or the dominant story. The point is not to isolate any migrant textuality, but to inquire about the mutual implications of influences from various origins. We can then ask: Is Shakespeare really writing "White verse"?⁵⁵ 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"⁵⁶ – 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."⁵⁷ We are dealing with "a causal and rhizomic dis*continuum of oral*written*literature."⁵⁸

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."⁵⁹ Researchers focus on the author's "reading and remembering" to discern how a source text shapes an absorbing text and its content, with variable "calibration of intertextual distance" depending on one's knowledge of the author's working habits.⁶⁰ 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."⁶¹ 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

55. Mafe, "From Ogún," 47.

56. Mafe, "From Ogún," 59.

57. Arndt, "Trans*textuality," 400.

58. Arndt, "Trans*textuality," 402; see also Taghrid Elhanafy, *Trans*textual Shakespeare: The Arabic and Persian Pre-texts of Romeo and Juliet* (Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2020), 39.

59. Gillespie, *Shakespeare's*, 2.

60. Miola, "Seven," 19, 20.

61. Michael Steppat, "Shakespeare's Response to Dramatic Tradition in *Antony and Cleopatra*," in *Shakespeare: Text, Language, Criticism*, edited by Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1987), 255.

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."⁶² The distinction between center and margin can easily grow blurry. 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.⁶³ 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 Abimbola and then Abosedo. 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."⁶⁴ 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" as variant sources come together.⁶⁵ Hence we should aim for a *dialogic analysis* of source materials, as pre-textualities (and people) speak to and through each other in the process of shaping an absorbing (or a recipient) text.⁶⁶ In this nexus, literacy and orality are not discrete traditions.⁶⁷ What is 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.⁶⁸ 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,"⁶⁹ 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"⁷⁰ as the original Africanist presence, its subjectivity with its articulating body become invisible for later generations – and for mainstream scholarly study.⁷¹ It is apposite to say that the

62. Artese, *Shakespeare*, 2, 4.

63. Stith Thompson, qtd. in Artese, *Shakespeare's*, 5.

64. Hunter, "Shakespeare's," 59-60.

65. Arndt, "Trans*textuality," 399, 400.

66. In a slightly different sense, Arndt ("Trans*textuality," 401) affirms that generations "seek dialogue with senior ones."

67. See also Artese, *Shakespeare's*, 13; Arndt, "Trans*textuality," 396.

68. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 63.

69. Derrida, *Grammatology*, 66.

70. Derrida, *Grammatology*, lvii.

71. See also Habib, *Black*, 270.

identification of sources “disperses into *différance*, spreading genealogies, and the silences of history.”⁷²

..... *And Rethinking Shakespeare*

But: why should Shakespeare stoop at all to oral sources? It is 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,⁷³ 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.”⁷⁴ This involves cultural competition: the later poet will not simply replicate or reproduce the earlier form, be it European or classical or non-European.

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.⁷⁵ That would highlight European proveniences. If post-classical poetic records originating at the intersection of Europe with non-European regions have been considered as possible source materials,⁷⁶ they have been culturally absorbed or have gained only marginal treatment—at least before Elhanafy’s (*Trans*textual*, 2020) study of Arabic/Persian pre-texts.

72. Britton and Walter, *Rethinking*, 9.

73. See also Arndt, “Trans*textuality,” 397.

74. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 159. For the metamorphic process, see above.

75. See Artese, *Shakespeare’s*, 2.

76. See for instance Charles Knight (Ed.), *The Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, and Poems of William Shakspeare*, 2nd ed. Vol. 8 (London: Charles Knight, 1843), 344.

Asinus Aureus (as Source Two)

Transformation

At this juncture, let us 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 most significant transformation in the play is that of Bottom the common weaver into a monster with the head of an ass 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 (*MND* 2.1.24, 81), hence a consequence of the topsy-turvydom in the natural realm: "What thou seest when thou dost wake, / Do it for thy true love take; / [...] Be it ounce, or cat, or bear [...]" (*MND* 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).⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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. [...]"⁷⁹ 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."⁸⁰ We should be aware that in classical times (and not only

77. Lucius Apuleius, *The xi. bookes of the Golden asse conteininge the Metamorphosie of Lucius Apuleius*, translated by William Adlington (London, 1566).

78. Ellen Finkelpearl, Luca Graverini, and Benjamin Todd Lee, Introduction, in *Apuleius and Africa*, edited by Benjamin Todd Lee, Ellen Finkelpearl, and Luca Graverini (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2, 3, 6.

79. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Penguin, 1991), 364.

80. Benjamin Todd Lee, "A Sociological Reading of A.V. (*Africae Viri*)," in *Apuleius and Africa*, edited by Benjamin Todd Lee, Ellen Finkelpearl, and Luca Graverini (New York: Routledge, 2014), 313, 320.

then) the Mediterranean was an interdependent contact zone, a cultural melting pot bringing together Africa and Europe. In a general sense, Henry Ebel has discussed Apuleius's significance when his work is read in a new way after the mid-twentieth century.⁸¹

Adlington's rendering was popular enough to go through three printings by 1596; in this transmission history Shakespeare may have known both the Latin and the English versions.⁸² We have Stephen Gosson's testimony that Apuleius's work was "throughly ransackt, to furnish the Playe houses in London."⁸³ A founding document of *serio ludere*, the *Metamorphoses* with its Milesian genre has been said to have exerted "a profound influence" on the author of the *Dream*.⁸⁴ Sister Generosa has indicated some parallels in general "ideas" between the comedy and episodes in Apuleius, though not in textual correspondences;⁸⁵ whereas Brooks, Chaudhuri, and Gillespie ignore her article,⁸⁶ 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 monstrous, my nosethrilles wide, my lippes hanginge downe, and mine eares rugged with heare. [...]⁸⁷

We could read this against Reginald Scot's narrative (in his section 5.3), which Bullough prints without mentioning that Scot repeatedly refers to Apuleius

81. Henry Ebel, "Apuleius and the Present Time," *Arethusa* 3, no. 2 (1970): 155-176.

82. James A. S. McPeck, "The Psyche Myth and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1972): 69; see also Julia Haig Gaisser, *The Fortunes of Apuleius and The Golden Ass* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 293.

83. Stephen Gosson, *Playes confuted in fiue actions* (London, 1582), sig. D5v.

84. Robert H. F. Carver, *The Protean Ass: The Metamorphoses of Apuleius from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 444, also 434.

85. Sister M. Generosa, "Apuleius and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*: Analogue or Source, Which?" *Studies in Philology* 42, no. 2 (1945): 198.

86. Brooks, *Midsummer*; Sukanta Chaudhuri (Ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Gillespie, *Shakespeare's*.

87. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 32.

(in his sections 5.1, 5.4, and 5.7).⁸⁸ When Shakespeare has Bottom enter with just the head of an ass, it has been emphasized that this contrasts with Apuleius's depiction of a complete transformation.⁸⁹ Is Apuleius remote from the comedy here? Yet we should consider that Apuleius shows the head as being particularly affected when it retains some human faculties, while Shakespeare offers a hybrid creature whose whole body needs donkey-like nourishment.⁹⁰ Hence the transformation does concern the whole weaver, embracing the *pars pro toto* trope;⁹¹ moreover, both figures retain a human consciousness.⁹² We can with some confidence take Apuleius as the likeliest source after all,⁹³ with Bottom emerging as "an Actaeon of the Apulian and Platonic kind."⁹⁴ 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,⁹⁵ whence they could make their pathway northward.

Erotic Involvement

Bullough finds nothing else in Apuleius's narrative that qualifies as a "possible source," discouraging further attention.⁹⁶ Other authorities offer strongly diverging perceptions of the question of an Apuleian influence. Muir, Holloway, and Chaudhuri, for instance,⁹⁷ 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), "sweetly kiss[ing]" her tender feet, while she murmurs:

88. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), edited by Brinsley Nicholson (London: Elliot Stock, 1886); Bullough, *Narrative*, 1:401.

89. Holland, *Midsummer*, 71-72.

90. See Shakespeare, *MND* 4.1.31ff., and also Generosa, "Apuleius," 199.

91. See also Carver, *Protean*, 438.

92. See also Kazuko Mariko, "'Felicity' 'in the Body': Allusion to Paul, Erasmus, and Apuleius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Reading* 37 (2016): 128.

93. See also Muir, *Sources*, 68.

94. Leonard Barkan, "Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis," *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no. 3 (1980): 354.

95. See for instance Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 334.

96. Bullough, *Narrative*, 1:398.

97. Muir, *Sources*; Julia Bolton Holloway, "Apuleius and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Bottom's Metamorphoses," in *Tales within Tales: Apuleius Through Time*, edited by Constance S. Wright and Julia Bolton Holloway (New York: AMS, 2000), 123-137; Chaudhuri, *Midsummer*.

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.⁹⁸

This can be read as a likely influence on the tender romance of *MND* 4.1, as Foakes acknowledges; Muir and Chaudhuri do not, while Carver only alludes vaguely to it.⁹⁹ Shakespeare's Titania tells her servants to lead the ass to her bower, where she imagines the moon lamenting "some enforced chastity" (*MND* 3.1.193). We should note that her abode in the play is in the "forests wild" (*MND* 2.1.25): this is not what an otherwise illuminating study calls "the Palace woods of Theseus,"¹⁰⁰ which would characterize her as not being independent of Theseus's authority, thus skewing the realms of the play. 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:¹⁰¹

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.

Unlike Apuleius's Book 6 chapter 23, and contrasting with Foakes, Muir and Chaudhuri 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" (*MND* 4.1.39, 41-42).¹⁰² What Apuleius had to offer Shakespeare is thus construed quite differently, leading inevitably to diverging perceptions of the "transformative intertextuality" of drama (see above). One perception is Apuleius's "strident bestiality" as stressed by Chaudhuri¹⁰³ – yet for all the physicality, poetically modulated in Shakespeare's censor-controlled theatre, we should be sensitive to the young gentlewoman as well as to the ass's highlighting of "purely, sincerly," embedded in a narrative context that on careful reading reveals more than one layer of significance.¹⁰⁴ We do not have to situate presumable influences along a linear scale of proximity.

98. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 64.

99. Foakes, *Midsummer*, 10; Muir, *Sources*; Chaudhuri, *Midsummer*; Carver, *Protean*, 439.

100. McPeck, "Psyche," 76.

101. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 109-110 (Book 10 Chapter 46); see also D. T. Starnes, "Shakespeare and Apuleius," *PMLA* 60, no. 4 (1945): 1032.

102. Foakes, *Midsummer*; Muir, *Sources*, 68; Chaudhuri, *Midsummer*, 225.

103. Chaudhuri, *Midsummer*, 57.

104. For narrative levels, see also Carver, *Protean*, 441.

Psyche

Nor is this all. Apuleius can be found to contribute also to the description of the bitter strife of the fairy rulers in Shakespeare's drama.¹⁰⁵ In Book 5 chapter 22, after the young princess Psyche, of "singuler passinge beautie and maidenly Maiestie,"¹⁰⁶ 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 procreatio, but ful of enuy, discorde, & debate," and even that Cupid and his mother Venus "are now become no more gracious, no more pleasaunt, no more gentle, but inciuell, mo'struous & horrible."¹⁰⁷ 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. This conjunction can indeed appear highly significant for any understanding of the play.

Because of this "discorde," Shakespeare's Oberon humiliates Titania. Bemoaning the "injury" to his honor (*MND* 2.1.147), he announces to his servant Puck: "I'll streak her eyes, / And make her full of hateful fantasies" (*MND* 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" (*MND* 2.1.255-256). Titania's misery arguably draws on Apuleius's story of Venus and Psyche.¹⁰⁸ Holland barely mentions this in passing, but it deserves more attention.¹⁰⁹ 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 mischief"), 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 "amongst the softe and tender hearbes, as in a bedde of soote and fragrant flowres" set in "a pleasaunt woodde"¹¹⁰ – anticipating Titania's "flowery bed" (*MND* 4.1.1). She is not allowed to look at Cupid, who becomes her husband, while her sisters tell her "there is a

105. On the fairy rulers, see McPeck, "Psyche," 74-75.

106. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, here Book 4 Chapter 22.

107. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 54.

108. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 44, in Book 4 Chapter 22.

109. Holland, *Midsummer*, 71.

110. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 46, in Book 5.

great Serpent full of deadly poyson, with a rauenous and gaping threate, that lieth with thee."¹¹¹

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,"¹¹² 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"¹¹³ in adhering to their respective male lovers despite some grossly insensitive treatment. The foundations of both the myth and the main stories of the play do resemble each other fairly strongly, enabling us to gather that we can understand Shakespeare as remaining "essentially true" to Apuleius.¹¹⁴ 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 chief and conjoined intellectual stimuli of the play.¹¹⁵ This interplay should remind us that the Shakespearean work is a cultural hybrid. It should also remind us that a narrow search for particular source materials would be inadequate, and in a dialogic analysis the interplay might be explored for other dramas that arguably show traces of Apuleian imprints.

Extending the Perspective

Complementary Impulses

In at least two complementary ways, then, it appears plausible to regard narratives and partly narrative performers from south of the Mediterranean as shaping this significant comedy, which with its thoroughly European setting would not suggest such influences, intertwined with possible implications from European textualities. Originating in different periods and different regions of Africa, the narratives come together in a creative conjunction to gleam through the textual surface of early modern drama. It is precisely this process that adds depth to interpretive analyses of what audiences are witnessing, then as now.

111. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, 51.

112. McPeck, "Psyche," 74.

113. A term used by McPeck, "Psyche," 70.

114. McPeck, "Psyche," 70.

115. Sarah Carter, "From the Ridiculous to the Sublime: Ovidian and Neoplatonic Registers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 12, no. 1 (2006), para. 31.

Should we not assume that there are further cases in the work of Shakespeare (and contemporaries) where African impulses become effective, 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* it happens not only there: 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.¹¹⁶ In each case, dialogic analysis that also takes European textual influences into complementary account could become fruitful.

..... 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* (ca. 1606): this is Leo Africanus's *Geographical Historie of Africa*, translated by John Pory in 1600.¹¹⁷ The work has been analyzed as an influential element in *Othello*;¹¹⁸ we are now focusing, however, on the Egyptian/Roman tragedy. Not recognized by either Bullough or Bevington, and apparently being too marginal for Muir,¹¹⁹ Leo's work nonetheless offers useful accounts of the life-giving Nile which shape a key interpretive feature of the unfolding dialogue in this drama which contrasts the values and the forms of political action embodied in Egypt and in Rome.¹²⁰ The measure of the river's flowing or of overflowing, according to Leo's account, makes possible the Egyptian poetic claim (or even perspective) of a renewable life-energy that transcends the specifically European and finite rationality as

116. See Starnes, "Shakespeare," 1050.

117. Joannes Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, translated by John Pory (London: George Bishop, 1600), Book 8 pp. 312ff. The author's authentic name is **al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyātī** (or **al-Fāsī**); born in Granada, he was raised and educated at Fès and died ca. 1554 in Tunis or in Morocco.

118. See Andrew Hadfield, "Race in *Othello*: the history and description of Africa and the Black legend," *Notes and Queries* 46, no. 3 (1998): 336-338. Further archival research on such lines of influence is surely desirable.

119. Bullough, *Narrative*, Vol. 5; David Bevington (Ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*. The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Muir, *Sources*.

120. See also Michael Neill (Ed.), *William Shakespeare: The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra*. Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1994), 212; John Wilders (Ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (London: Routledge, 1995), 163; for Nilotic analysis Sophie Chiari, "Overflowing the Measure: Cleopatra Unbound," *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* 37 (2019); and François Laroque, "Le Nil dans *Antoine et Cléopâtre*," in *Le fleuve et ses métamorphoses*, edited by François Piquet (Paris: Didier Erudition, 1994), 437-442.

manifested in conquering Rome. Symbolically, the scope of the energy goes beyond the immediate topographical images, because it reaches out to the West African mythical Ọṣun's healing movement of waters in a process enabling life, together with a rebirth of vital energies.¹²¹ Cleopatra, who is driven to taking her life, is the "Serpent of old Nyle" (*Antony*, TLN 552)¹²²: The waves of the river associate the waters (not necessarily extending to the open sea) with the movement of the serpent, which in the final scene of Act 5 becomes the queen's chosen instrument of death and thus, in the mythical dimension, presumably of new life, enabling her to turn into the air which carries the seeds of generation and which is itself engendered of water (*Antony*, TLN 3540).¹²³ The transmission

121. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (Eds.), *Ọṣun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), Introduction p. 2: Ọṣun heals by water, the name is related to "the source of a river," and she represents "the perpetually renewing source of life," preserving life for creation. See also Jacob K. Olupona, "Orisha Ọṣun: Yoruba Sacred Kingship and Civil Religion in Oṣogbo, Nigeria," in the same volume, 51.

122. The Through-Line-Numbering system is adopted here, as a standard reference for the First Folio text and its diplomatic reprint; it is used in William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*. A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, edited by Marvin Spevack, Michael Steppat, Marga Munkelt (New York: MLA, 1990).

123. George Olusola Ajibade, "Water Symbolism in Yorùbá Folklore and Culture 1," *Yoruba Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2019), 111: Ọṣun is praised as the "one who moves snake-likely" (again 114). For the air, see Plutarch's "Of Isis and Osiris" (p. 1305) – Isis, being male and female, "sendeth forth and sprinkleth in the aire, the seeds and principles of generation" – and see "Of the Oracles That Have Ceased To Give Answers" (p. 1327) on transmutation: "Of earth is ingendred water, of water aire, and of aire fire." Both treatises appear in *The philosophie, commonlie called, the morals*, translated by Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603). Apart from his own sojourn in Egypt, about which little is known, Plutarch's chief source in the "Isis" treatise is a priestess who has been consecrated in the rites of Osiris. As to the air, it is again specified as the life-enabling element, also termed wind, in a Hymn to Osiris: It is Isis who makes the air come into being in order to enable her to generate new life and an heir from the body of her spouse/brother Osiris. See E. A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, Vol. 1 (London: The Medici Society, 1911), 94; *The Papyrus of Ani*, edited by E. A. Wallis Budge (London: Longmans, 1895), liii, 360. The early modern era may not have been familiar with particulars of these writings about the afterlife.

The fire with which Cleopatra identifies herself together with air (*Antony*, TLN 3540) appears in the Hermetic explanation of "the things that are": "untempered fire leapt up from the watery nature to the height above"; this fire "was nimble and piercing and active as well, and because the air was light it followed after spirit and rose up to the fire away from earth and water" owing to "a holy word" (*Hermetica*, 1992, Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus, 1). The mind, as "the most penetrating of all the divine thoughts, has for its body fire, the most penetrating of all the elements"; another expression for this is that the mind, once free of "the earthy body," puts on "a tunic of fire" (*Hermetica*, 34). The ideas appear to show an influence of the Isis cult (see *Hermetica*, 163). The Corpus Hermeticum,

pathway of the African understanding toward London and theatre would be similar to that of the cosmic myth that is turning out to be relevant for *Dream*.

When the rising of the river is said to be due to the tears of Isis,¹²⁴ we again meet Apuleius as pre-text: it is the goddess who releases Lucius from his bestial identity, initiating him into her priesthood.¹²⁵ The Isis cult is especially prominent in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the central part of which play is set in Athens – where the comedy too is located. The cult also requires study when it plays a key role in Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (Book 5 or the Legend of Justice, with implications for other Books). As in the *Dream* comedy, in the tragedy it is the coming together of influences from different periods that has especially salient analytical import. In the tragedy the Egyptian queen, who is closely associated with the Nile, characteristically appears "[i]n th'abiliments of the Goddess Isis" (*Antony*, TLN 1768), identifying herself with the deity and finally with her celestial manifestation. Not all of the modern editors of the tragedy show awareness of Apuleius: like Bullough, Neill ignores him, as does the chief German study edition.¹²⁶ Yet Bevington is more careful and does admit an

originally from Hellenistic Egypt, was translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino and Lodovico Lazzarelli in the 15th century. In connection with royalty, we should also consider the fire of the uraeus, which defends the ruler and protects Osiris as well. See John Coleman Darnell and Colleen Manassa Darnell, *The Ancient Egyptian Netherworld Books* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 217, 308, 434. The uraeus was not unknown in the Renaissance.

In alchemy, the fire is able to clothe elements in glory for a divine state, intimately and mystically related to childbirth. See *Antony* (TLN 3562-3) as well as the anonymous, presumably Alexandrian "Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra" from Codex Marcianus graecus 299, for which see *The Alchemy Reader*, edited by Stanton J. Linden (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44-45: Elements, plants, and stones are "not mature until the fire has tested them. When they are clothed in the glory from the fire and shining color thereof, then rather will appear their hidden glory, their sought-for beauty, being transformed to the divine state of fusion. For they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in its mother's womb, and when the appointed month approaches is not restrained from issuing forth." Standard editions of the tragedy focus instead on the Stoic idea of fire and air being hot and dry and associated with men (Neill, *Anthony*, 319) or being lighter than earth and water (Bevington, *Antony*, 254); Cleopatra's "air" is interpreted as "the breath of the actor" (Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard, "The Mediterranean Dream in Perspective," *Caliban* 58 (2017)). Joshua Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas's *La Sepmaine*, as a highly influential European poetic reference, speaks of fire and air as possessing "vitall spirits," but then specifies that air is associated with blood and fire with choler (*Du Bartas his deuine weekes*, London, 1611, 26).

124. For this, see Pausanias, *Periegesis, Description of Greece*, edited by W. H. S. Jones. 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918), section 10.32.18.

125. Apuleius, *xi bookes*, Book 11.

126. Bullough, *Narrative*, Vol. 5; Neill, *Anthony*; Dimiter Daphinoff (Ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra: Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe* (Tübingen: Francke, 1995).

influence of Apuleius's Isis,¹²⁷ 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 those of Apuleius's Isis, but also that as she approaches her death she again parallels the Madauran's spiritualizing depiction.¹²⁸ From there, one could trace further aspects of an Apuleian influence contributing to Shakespeare's generic concept of romance drama as his final compositional innovation.

But there is more, and this analysis of influences cannot but be work in progress. Shakespeare associates Antony with the sun and Cleopatra with the moon (as at *Antony* TLN 2951, 3011, 3490) – then fuses both cosmic bodies to appear in conjunction (TLN 3297). Scholarship has not gone very far in identifying the cultural inspirations, but Horapollo Niliacus's frequently translated *Hieroglyphica* (5th century CE) says that the Egyptians represent eternity by depicting sun and moon, which are eternal elements: "AEVVM innuentes [*sic*], Solem ac Lunam pingunt, quod æterna sint elementa."¹²⁹ 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" (*Antony* TLN 3296-3297). This recalls Zeus,¹³⁰ perhaps, but it has not been observed that Shakespeare's construction is at least as pertinently a feature of Ra which is subsequently given to Horus.¹³¹ 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*."¹³² 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 ultimately futile dynastic threat to Octavius. Yet critics and probably modern playgoers who are not aware of cultural connotations of lines 3296-3297 find that the sun/moon conjunction only brings about an unsatisfactory "imbalance" with "analogical clumsiness" and "asymmetry" without much meaning.¹³³

127. Bevington, *Antony*, 11.

128. Michael Lloyd, "Cleopatra as Isis," *Shakespeare Survey* 12 (1959): 91, 93.

129. Horapollo, *De Symbolica Aegyptiorum Sapientia* (Cologne, 1631), 7. The author appears to have belonged to the priesthood in the Alexandria region.

130. *Orphica*, recensuit Eugenius Abel, *Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum* (Leipzig and Prague: G. Freytag, F. Tempsky, 1885), Fragment 123; then later Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagines deorum qui ab antiquis colebantur* (Lyon, 1581), 88-89, De Iove, as partly recorded in Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 98.

131. For this feature, see for instance Robert A. Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (New York and Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 8, 52.

132. Plutarch, "Of Isis and Osiris" in *Philosophie*, 1308 = section 52.

133. As in Yu Jin Ko, *Mutability and Division on Shakespeare's Stage* (Newark: University

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;¹³⁴ Isis and Osiris consorted together and married.¹³⁵ The mythical knowledge becomes standard in alchemical literature: *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550) features a “conivntio sive coitus” of sun and moon fleshed out into a male and a female monarch who are entwined in a body of water – making perfection or rather completion out of imperfection, “de imperfecto facis perfectum.”¹³⁶ In another, materialized vein, Albertus’s *Liber Mineralium* (1518) presents a conjugal union of sun and moon in a ring.¹³⁷ Studying early modern European 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.”¹³⁸ As the early moderns knew, however, European brands of alchemy originated in northern Egypt (as in the “Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra,” then Zosimos of Panopolis), its mysticism revealed by none other than Isis as in the anonymous and fragmentary treatise “Isis la prophétesse à son fils” (transmitted in a number of manuscripts), and Albertus for instance acknowledges that the mathematical sciences originate in Egypt as a cultural legacy: “mathematicas scientias primū extitisse circa egiptū.”¹³⁹ We should then not detach the later alchemical literature from the Isis/Osiris material. Indeed, Shakespeare’s Egyptian queen shows herself fully aware of the curative and transformative power of alchemy, “that great Medicine” (*Antony* TLN 565). Accordingly, it is worth considering that alchemy inspires the whole signifying structure of the drama¹⁴⁰ – if we bear in mind its roots in Egyptian myth.

It is enticing to explore the implications further, to gain a more adequate sense of the at least partly effaced African imprint – never disconnected in a mythemic syncretism – on this prominent tragedy. Yet such analytical dimensions are denied or dismissed by critics who instead submit the tragedy to

of Delaware Press, 2004), 108.

134. Plutarch, *Philosophie*, “Isis” section 52; see also Mark Smith, *Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 302ff.

135. As in Plutarch, *Philosophie*, “Isis” sections 12, 27.

136. *Rosarium Philosophorum. Secvnda Pars* (Frankfurt a. M.: Cyriacus Jacobus, 1550), sig. F iii^v.

137. Albertus Magnus, *Liber Mineralium* (Oppenheim: Köbel, Jakob, 1518), heading of Tractatus 3 Book 2.

138. S. K. Heninger, Jr., *The Cosmographical Glass* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1977), 3-4.

139. Albertus Magnus, *Liber*, sig. I iv^v.

140. T. McAlindon, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 239, has put this forward, referring to Heninger.

a predominantly moral “Renaissance reading,”¹⁴¹ hence taking a somewhat 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. This may possibly be read as 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 also 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.¹⁴² 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*.¹⁴³

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, while these in an adequately dialogic analysis should, like all influences, never be considered on their own. 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 dramatic oeuvre, the very first time this is happening. It is likely to be unearthing more over time, in examining further relevant artifacts mainly from West Africa (possibly other African regions as well). The scope of this essay 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 (and other source materials as well). Parallels in several categories between Shakespearean drama and a corpus of such textualities,

141. For instance Peggy Muñoz Simonds, “‘To the very heart of loss’: Renaissance Iconography in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 22 (1994): 223.

142. Wole Soyinka, “Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist,” *Shakespeare Survey* 36 (1983): 6.

143. Soyinka, “Shakespeare,” 8, 10.

as transtextual affiliation,¹⁴⁴ await closer study, while we should bear in mind the politicized process of identity formation which is at stake in canon construction and which affects sources as it does any other literary artifacts and cultural legacies.¹⁴⁵ The construction should be constantly re-negotiated, seeing that exclusion or minimization of the Other actually diminishes the semiotic energies of the Self. 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,¹⁴⁶ that the Bard was “attracted to narratives available in multiple forms,”¹⁴⁷ 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, as we have seen. 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. With this in mind, we can nonetheless assume that influences do not remain separate and detached from a recipient text but rather, on the contrary, become an integral part of it.

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 partly 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 process of the tragedy in the Yoruba ritual archetype of *orisha*, as presenting both a physical and a spiritual female identity.¹⁴⁸

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

144. See Mafe (“From Ogún,” 59) for the expression, in a related but not identical context.

145. See also Kumar, “Interrogating.”

146. John J. M. Tobin, *Shakespeare’s Favorite Novel: A Study of The Golden Asse as Prime Source* (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1984).

147. Artese, *Shakespeare’s*, 3.

148. Balogun, “Ajubaba,” 21.

Nyerere) and subsequently adapted with creative intercultural transfer.¹⁴⁹ It has thus enabled African and African-diasporic adaptations by Welcome Msoni (South Africa), Thomas L. Decker (Sierra Leone), Abiola Sobó and Ahmed Yerima (both Nigeria), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and others. Now that a new departure is emerging, however, it is time to turn this around: we need to (re)discover the richly complex though never isolated African imprint on what we like to think of as being Shakespeare's – and early modern Europe's – "own" work.

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149. For these contexts, see Jane Plastow (Ed.), *Shakespeare In and Out of Africa*. African Theatre 12 (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2013).

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