

# Shakespeare Seminar

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Shakespeare's Libraries

*Shakespeare Seminar* 20 (2023)

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# INTRODUCTION

LUKAS LAMMERS AND KIRSTEN SANDROCK

## Shakespeare's Libraries

2023 marked the 400th anniversary of *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, known as the First Folio, published in 1623. It included 36 plays, some of which had not been published before. On the website of what is arguably the most famous library dedicated to Shakespeare's work, The Folger Shakespeare Library, readers are invited to "learn more about Shakespeare's language, life, and the world he knew," suggesting that we might be able to unlock, or at least better understand, Shakespeare's works by studying what he and his contemporaries not only read but also saw or heard. One of Shakespeare's earliest editors, Samuel Johnson in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare's works ventured, "There are a few passages which may pass for imitations, but so few that the exception only confirms the rule; he obtained them from accidental quotations, or by oral communication" (Preface). Johnson's comment arguably makes a claim for Shakespeare's 'originality,' but it also draws attention to the importance of hearsay and oral transmission for the production and reception of Shakespeare's works – 'libraries' that we can access only indirectly at best. Geoffrey Bullough's multivolume *Narrative and Dramatic Sources* of Shakespeare remains the most comprehensive attempt to document possible sources of Shakespeare. However useful, impressive, and illuminating, this multivolume work focuses almost exclusively on written works. Much has been written about 'Shakespeare's books,' and the notes in critical editions attest to the enormous spectrum and continued interest in possible sources. But what counts as a source? Digitisation and the use of AI in literary studies as well as transcultural and anthropological approaches to Shakespeare have opened new chapters in this debate. Current developments ask us to reflect critically on conceptions of authorship and authenticity in Shakespeare studies, on the role of orature as a source as well as the historical prioritisation of particular kinds of 'sources' that reflect on our understanding of Shakespeare's libraries and, indeed, Shakespeare's role in world literature, then and now.

An enduring question to ask, therefore, is what might be meant by 'Shakespeare's libraries'. Papers at the Shakespeare Seminar 2023 explored this topic from a variety of angles, a selection of which is presented here. The first article, "Shakespeare's (Fake) Library, Book Ownership, and Historical Evidence" by Tim Sommer, in a sense considers the most literal meaning: what happened to Shakespeare's books? The article reviews the intriguing case of William Henry Ireland, who, in the 1790s, caused a stir when he announced that he had discovered part of Shakespeare's original library: "dozens of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century books with copious annotations supposedly in the author's own hand appeared out of thin air" (5). Ireland, as Sommer reminds us, even created a 'virtual library,' a catalogue, a detailed account that conveniently lists all of Shakespeare's works. Instead of simply dismissing the forgery

as a curious anecdote, the article revisits some of the arguments that ultimately led scholars to call the bluff and explores their reverberations.

In Marlene Dirschauer's contribution, "'The Secret of Perpetual Life': Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare," the library in question is not Shakespeare's but Woolf's. Noting that "[Virginia] Woolf's appraisal of the egalitarian character of literature is in stark contrast to her critique of the patriarchal institution of the library as expressed in *A Room of One's Own*," (16) Dirschauer explores Woolf's somewhat ambivalent relation to Shakespeare. The article shows how Woolf, unable to simply 'inherit' Shakespeare from a male tradition, made the writer her contemporary and envisioned him as a pool of language that she was free to "tap into, explore, and transform" (17). Reading a scene in *Jacob's Room* as symbolic of Woolf's coming into her own, the article suggests that, paradoxically, Woolf had to 'drown' Shakespeare to make his language fully available. In doing so, Dirschauer argues, Woolf "helps preserve the living library that is Shakespeare" (22). Ultimately, therefore, "Shakespeare needs Woolf just as much as she needs him" (21).

In "Rethinking Shakespeare Source Studies: Shakespeare's Trans\*Textual Encounters and the Plausibility of African Re\*Sources," Susan Arndt challenges us to entertain the idea of a library that consists not just of books but also of oral traditions. The article is interested in how folktales from Africa may have served Shakespeare as a library of sorts. In an attempt to address – and, at least partly, redress – a double neglect, Arndt invites us to ponder the question, "why not consider that Shakespeare might indeed have known folktales from all around the world, including Africa?" (28). Where and how might Shakespeare have come across African folktales? The article submits that "[w]ithin the current confines of Shakespeare source studies – namely, identifying a direct impact traceable to a written document – it is impossible to claim beyond doubt that Shakespeare's work was influenced by African orature" (31). It therefore proposes to complement the concept of "source" with that of "re\*source." As an example, Arndt discusses relations between Shakespeare's *Othello* and two possible re\*sources, the "Handsome Stranger" and "Un capitano moro." To capture connections between Shakespeare's works and non-European, oral tales, the article puts forward three related concepts: "re\*source," "rhizomatic remixing," and specific understanding of "trans\*textuality."

Together the articles in this issue might serve as a reminder that even if we were to find 'Shakespeare's library,' it will never be complete.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Sophie Schönfeld for the diligent help with formatting the articles in this issue of *Shakespeare Seminar Online*.

# READING TRACES: SHAKESPEARE'S (FAKE) LIBRARY, BOOK OWNERSHIP, AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE<sup>1</sup>

by

TIM SOMMER

## “The Greatest Mystery in Literature”

Did Shakespeare own a personal library? Did he leave traces of his intimate reading experience in copies of books that were once in his possession? There is some (although, as usual with Shakespeare's biography, not *much*) evidence to suggest that he may indeed have had a library of some kind at his disposal. When the husband of his daughter Susanna, the physician John Hall, died in 1635, he left his descendants what his will described as a “study of Bookes,” located at New Place, the Shakespeare family home in Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>2</sup> Scattered references such as this, however, ultimately raise more questions than they answer. Were the books mentioned by Hall Shakespeare's own books? If so, why does Shakespeare's own will of 1616 famously mention his “second best bed,” but none of his books? Did the 1635 “study” or library at Stratford already exist during his lifetime? And what happened to the collection after it became dispersed in the late 1630s as the result of a legal dispute?<sup>3</sup> The uncertainties that surround Shakespeare's library are thus many, with a recent popular history of the subject going so far as to dub it “the greatest mystery in literature” (Kells). Hyperbole aside, questions like the above have remained tantalising since the seventeenth century. In what follows, I propose to reconstruct a distinctive chapter not so much in the real history of Shakespeare's actual book collection as in the cultural history of attempts to come to terms with its manifest absence. If the material library itself remains an elusive entity, I want to argue, the story of its afterlives in eighteenth-century Britain (and in the twenty-first-century digital sphere, as I will suggest in my conclusion) tells us something about shifting investments in ideas of individual authorship and book ownership as well as about the persistence of Shakespeare's library as an image and an index of academic and popular “bibliofetishism” (Cummings 249).

The status of Shakespeare's library was a key question for the scholars who began systematically to research his life and work in the eighteenth century. Then as now, enquiring into his book collecting formed part of a larger debate about the extent of his learning, which had been around at least since Ben Jonson's famous remark in the

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1 This article was originally published in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 160 (2024): 104–19.

2 Hall's will is held by the National Archives (PROB 1/38). A digitised version is available at <https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/file/prob-138>. On the will, see Wells 177. For biographical contexts on the will and on its significance for the library question, see Weis 280–81.

3 Rejecting Weis's conjectures on the existence of the Stratford library, William D. Rubinstein notes that “[t]here is no evidence [...] that this ‘study’ had been ‘created’ by Shakespeare” and that the books contained in it “had been owned by Shakespeare, or concerned anything besides medicine” (55).

elegiac verses he contributed to the 1623 First Folio that Shakespeare had “small Latin and less Greek.”<sup>4</sup> Such contemporary diagnoses notwithstanding, eighteenth-century editors and critics combed the texts of the plays and poems for traces of influence via reading. Yet source studies were hardly an invention of the period. The quest for the materials out of which early modern English dramatic texts had been fashioned in fact has its origins in the late seventeenth century. Lists such as Gerard Langbaine's *A New Catalogue of English Plays [...] with Divers Remarks, of the Originals of Most Plays; and the Plagiaries of Several Authors* (1687) had aimed, relatively early on, to provide “a more large Account of the Basis on which [...] Play[s] [were] built” in order to facilitate the practice of “comparing” a given “Play with the Original Story” (vii). What changed by the second half of the eighteenth century was that this encyclopaedic interest in sources was taking on a more distinctly personalised form. That commentators were no longer necessarily interested in the intertextual indebtedness of early English plays in general but instead began to focus extensively on the specific borrowings of individual authors can be gauged from the dedication with which Shakespeare editors from Alexander Pope to Samuel Johnson and beyond discussed the question of possible influences. The latter type of interest in author-specific source studies culminated in Charlotte Lennox's multivolume *Shakespear Illustrated* (1753–1754), which retraced Shakespeare's debts to Plautus, Saxo Grammaticus, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Holinshed, and others (see Lennox).<sup>5</sup>

Despite such increasingly more fine-grained analyses, no critical consensus about Shakespeare's bookishness emerged over the course of the eighteenth century. To Pope, writing in 1725, it was “plain” that Shakespeare “had much Reading” in “the *Greek* Authors,” “the Ancients of his own country,” and “[t]he modern *Italian* writers of Novels” (ix, ix, xi, xi, xi). A decade after Pope, Lewis Theobald thought that it was “likely” that Shakespeare had had access to at least “a slender Library” (xxix). Emphasising Shakespeare's aesthetic autonomy, commentators a generation later argued the opposite. In his 1759 *Conjectures on Original Composition*, Edward Young adopted and reversed the bibliographical language used by Theobald and others when he suggested that Shakespeare “was master of two books, unknown to many of the profoundly read [...]; the book of nature, and that of man” (81–82).<sup>6</sup> Johnson, in the influential preface to his 1765 edition, made a similar point: Shakespeare's knowledge, he wrote, was “such knowledge as books did not supply” (xxxviii). Such disagreements obviously tell us more about the critical tastes of the eighteenth century than they reveal about the actual realities of book ownership and use in the early seventeenth century. But it would be too simple to reduce this debate, as is often done, merely to a set of conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable images of Shakespeare as a neoclassical *poeta*

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4 For a discussion of the complexities of Jonson's phrasing and its wider implications, see Burrow 1–2.

5 Here and in the following, all nonstandard spellings of Shakespeare's name are reproduced as they appear in the original sources.

6 Young's anti-intellectualism leads him to characterise Shakespeare's “genius” through a negative comparison with Jonson's excessive learning: “*Johnson [sic]*, in the serious drama, is as much an imitator, as *Shakespeare* is an original. He was very learned, as *Sampson* was very strong, to his own hurt: Blind to the nature of tragedy, he pulled down all antiquity on his head, and buried himself under it” (80).

*doctus* or a proto-Romantic natural genius. Rather, what seems to me to be worth emphasising here is that writers like Pope, Theobald, Young or Johnson created their ideal images of Shakespearean authorship through an emphatic use of the tropes of the book and the library.

What is nonetheless striking about most of such eighteenth-century commentary is that it avoids making concrete statements about the size, the contents, or the whereabouts of Shakespeare's actual library. There were good reasons for such caution. Eighteenth-century scholars were painfully aware of the fact that they did not have a single item from Shakespeare's conjectured personal collection to test their hypotheses about the extent, or the lack, of his engagement with sources – and with *printed* sources, in particular. That such concerns keep haunting Shakespeare studies today can be seen, for example, in contributions to the debate about Shakespeare's reading made by Robert Miola (2000), Leonard Barkan (2001), Jeff Dolven and Sean Keilen (2010), and others since around the turn of the millennium. Modern scholars have largely given up on the idea of ever recovering Shakespeare's library, but their eighteenth-century predecessors were still hoping for a miracle.

### A Mystery Solved?

In the 1790s, their prayers suddenly appeared to have been heard when dozens of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century books with copious annotations supposedly in the author's own hand appeared out of thin air. One of these titles was a 1603 English reprint of Baldassare Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*, originally published in Venice in 1528 and later translated by Sir Thomas Hoby. Castiglione's treatise on courtierly behaviour had had a massive impact throughout Renaissance Europe, and most commentators at the end of the eighteenth century agreed – as, indeed, modern Shakespeare scholarship does – that implicit and explicit references to the *Cortegiano* abound in the plays, and that Shakespeare therefore must have had some kind of contact with the book itself.<sup>7</sup> The allure of the 1603 copy which surfaced in the mid-1790s was practically irresistible because it promised to provide tangible evidence to back up such observations. What had previously been confined to the realm of philological conjecture (assumptions about stylistic similarities and intertextual allusions) could now seemingly be upgraded to the status of solid historical fact. That Shakespeare had been the owner and an avid reader of the book in question was suggested by the presence of a manuscript ownership inscription and by handwritten marginalia and glosses that appear throughout the volume. The words "William Shaksper" are prominently placed on the title page directly under Castiglione's name, almost as if to imply a sense of co-authorship (see Figure 1). On the verso of the same page, there is a comprehensive list of reading notes. It opens with a statement emphasising that the copy in question has not just been owned but also diligently and profitably worked through by Shakespeare ("Thys lyttle Booke I haue reade withe mucche pleasure"), and it ends with yet another signature at the bottom

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7 On the influence exerted by Castiglione, see Burke. For diagnoses of connections between Shakespeare's work and Castiglione's book, see, for example, Barbara A. Johnson and Baldini.





For the caricaturist John Nixon, the fabricated association copies were thus firmly part of the picture. The Ireland case today tends to be remembered for its more scandalous forgeries (mainly the faux letters and play manuscripts), but the fake library is in fact an equally important and instructive element of the story.

Ireland had been quite methodical in going about assembling what he himself referred to as the “Shaksperian Library” (194). He acquired genuine sixteenth- and seventeenth-century titles from London booksellers – most of them reasonably cheap and easily available pamphlets and religious texts in quarto format – and subsequently added signatures and marginalia to suggest that these titles had indeed, as he claimed, “originally been in the possession of our bard” (ibid.). In an extensive *Confession* he published in 1805, Ireland explained in detail how he had gone about covering his tracks and obscuring the provenance of the genuine books he used as part of his forgery scheme:

[T]o Messers. White in Fleet Street, and Mr. Otridge in the Strand, I am indebted for many of the volumes whereto I afterwards annexed the Shaksperian notes; [...] it was from these gentlemen I made many large purchases. From numerous volumes of tracts procured from them, I selected those particular pamphlets whereto I penned the annotations. It was therefore utterly impossible for them to make any affidavit of the books having been recently in their libraries without the strictures so introduced by me on the margins. (Ibid. 200–1)

Since ornamenting a whole library of second-hand books with marginalia would have been a Herculean task beyond the strengths of a single forger, Ireland at some point decided to create a virtual collection in addition to the real set of copies which he simultaneously kept on producing. He drew up what he passed off as a “Manuscript Catalogue of Shakespeare’s Library,” which – in his fanciful secretarial hand and fake-archaic spelling – was headed “These bee the Nvmbre ande Orderre o mye Bookes.”<sup>9</sup> Seven leaves of this inventory have survived, listing a total of more than two hundred and fifty titles, which amounts to a substantial collection for an early seventeenth-century English reader. At the peak of the craze caused by Ireland, it was rumoured that “the whole Library of Shakspeare [...] consist[ed] [...] of eleven hundred volumes” (Malone 335).

Shared by Ireland and many of his contemporaries, the assumption that Shakespeare must have possessed a sizeable book collection of his own was historically something of an anachronistic projection. The notion of the writer’s library had become naturalised by the latter half of the eighteenth century, which saw both a widening access to printed matter and the rise and expansion of the (antiquarian) book trade (see Hunt), but for authors – and especially dramatic authors – of Shakespeare’s generation it would have been unusual to own the kind of “well-furnisht” personal collection for which the seventeenth-century legal scholar John Selden admired a figure like Ben Jonson (qtd. in McPherson 5). Indeed, the idea that the individually owned printed book should have been Shakespeare’s primary or, indeed, his only way of accessing his sources is the product of a post-Renaissance, Enlightenment mindset in the context of which book

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9 The “Catalogue” is now at University College, London (Special Collections, MS Ogden 54/1). For a physical description of the document (which, like Ireland’s marginalia, is exceptionally difficult to decipher) and a conjectured reconstruction of its genesis, see Robinson 249–50.

possession and library building was gradually turning into a mass phenomenon (see Darnton and Bivens-Tatum). What this emerging obsession with the author's library and the individual codex copy implied was the marginalisation of a diverse set of early modern reception practices: reading texts at the printer's shop, hearing them being read aloud or summarised in conversation, accessing them via manuscript circulation, borrowing books from friends and acquaintances or consulting them in nascent institutional collections, and so on.<sup>10</sup> The single owner, single user library had clearly been the exception rather than the rule around 1600, but the image of reception as silent private reading and of literary access through personal book ownership had become a convincing retrospective fiction by around 1800.

The Shakespeare who becomes legible to us through the medium of Ireland's annotations is thus, not surprisingly, a distinctly late eighteenth-century reader. He is a representative of what the French textual geneticist Daniel Ferrer calls "marginalists," readers who "brand" a text "with idiosyncratic marks, adorn it with commentaries of all kinds," and "embrace it with their own writing" (Ferrer's prime example of this type of book user is Samuel Taylor Coleridge) (7–8). The author/reader we encounter in the British Library's 1603 copy of Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and in other titles containing Ireland's pseudo-Shakespearean marginalia is someone who annotates his books in intimate, impulsive, and unpredictable ways that have little to do either with the learned glosses and carefully applied cross-references of an early seventeenth-century book owner like Jonson or with the sociability of reading and textual exploration characteristic of the early modern period.<sup>11</sup> That few of the practices mentioned above leave tangible traces helps to explain why Ireland's counterfeit association copies could become popular and potentially plausible for readers looking for objective knowledge in the concrete form of physical evidence.

### Detection and Debunking

John Nixon's 1797 caricature of the Ireland family engaged in crafting Shakespeareana implied that many of the forgeries were so egregious that they should have been spotted as fakes straight away. Although Ireland was ultimately not so foolish as to have Shakespeare annotate books which were only printed after his death, the clumsiness with which he crammed manuscript traces of Shakespeare's presence into the copies in question did eventually arouse suspicion. As part of an extensive refutation of the whole set of the forgeries, published in March 1796, the Shakespeare scholar and editor Edmond Malone drew attention to the oddity and awkwardness of the annotations that featured in the ostensible association copies:

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of such forms of engagement, see Hackel, Roberts, and Anderson and Sauer.

<sup>11</sup> On Jonson's reading habits and their material traces, see McPherson. An example of how one of Shakespeare's contemporaries annotated and excerpted Castiglione's book is afforded by the commonplace book of Edward Pudsey (1573–1613) (Bodleian Library Oxford, MS. Eng. poet. d. 3). For details on Pudsey's practice of commonplaceing, see Schurink and Kiséry 267–79. On early modern practices of book annotation, more generally, see Sherman, Orgel, and Acheson.



In the margins of several of these books [...] are displayed remarks by Shakspeare, each of which is subscribed with his name; and very properly, – for how else should the inspector have known that these books came out of his Library? This trick of our author [i.e. the forger] is quite peculiar to himself. Few scribblers in books think of appropriating their marginal remarks by this kind of subscription to each of them [...]. (337)

Malone's chief argument was that the books in question did not look like the result of private study and contemplation but rather like a deliberate fabrication aimed at an audience and catering to popular demand. “[A]fter [...] the name of William Shakspeare has been written in the upper, lower, and side margin of twenty or thirty pages,” he observed, “it becomes a most valuable relick, miraculously preserved for near two hundred years, and now first displayed to the gazing world, an undoubted and invaluable original” (339).

Malone here put his finger on a key point. Ireland's forgeries had been a result of – and, indeed, a direct response to – Shakespeare source criticism, which was starting to thrive as a critical industry in the closing decades of the century. Ireland, in other words, had doctored the historical evidence to make it square with contemporary critical expectations. Browsing the shelves of London antiquarian booksellers, he systematically targeted titles with well-established Shakespearean connections. One of the books that he hunted but ultimately failed to acquire was a copy of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which, as Ireland knew with confidence, “our bard consulted on writing so many of his dramas” (201). This failure was in part the result of the intensification of Shakespeare worship and the popularisation of source criticism in the late eighteenth century – developments that would in turn be pivotal for the success of Ireland's library scheme. As Malone noted in 1796, “[w]ithin these few years past the price of Holinshed's Chronicle has doubled, in consequence of his having been pointed out as the author whom Shakspeare followed in his Historical Plays, and of our poet's daily-increasing reputation” (336). Reflecting about his fake Shakespeare annotations in an original set of the first editions of the two parts of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* – published in 1590 and 1596, respectively – Ireland later recalled that he “was most particular in [his] comments; well aware that a writer of such celebrity as Spenser must have attracted the notice of Shakspeare” and “fully convinced that such notes would be regarded with the strictest scrutiny” by the experts summoned to inspect them (196). Like all effective forgeries, Ireland's fake library was thus successful because it provided a solution for a known unknown. It enabled a collective fantasy, propelled by the excitements of philological wish-fulfilment. Both astonished and embarrassed that the volumes produced by Ireland could “have made any impression on any one” in his profession, Malone concluded his discussion of the matter by exclaiming, “Let us [...] hear no more of Shakspeare's Library” (335, 339).

### Afterlives

Yet the books that Ireland had furnished with a Shakespearean provenance turned out to have a shelf life that Malone and his late eighteenth-century contemporaries would no doubt have found surprising. Several of the embellished copies – which Ireland himself estimated were “about the number of eighty” (194) – have survived to this day, with sets

of a dozen or more titles kept at the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library, respectively. Originally passed off as authentic fragments of a writer's working library, after their debunking they became collectibles in their own right. The books Ireland had gifted to his father were auctioned off after the latter's death in 1800 and attracted the attention of "a range of curiosity seekers" (Freeman). Publicly disgraced as a fraudster, Ireland acquired a notoriety of his own which paradoxically enough helped him to stay financially afloat through manufacturing "forged forgeries" (Lynch 468) for a market of eager buyers. Like Thomas Chatterton, whose pseudo late-medieval writings had sparked controversy a generation before, Ireland turned from a mere forger into something of a Romantic genius. Authorship and literary celebrity had become so powerful as discourse and reality by around 1800 that collecting the products of an infamous forger could become a surrogate of sorts for collecting unavailable original Shakespearean material.

Many of the books with Ireland's spurious marginalia that survive today (some of which perhaps the result of later stages of his career) were eventually incorporated into modern institutional repositories. The titles now at the British Library include political and theological writing such as Thomas Nun's *A Comfort Against the Spaniard* (1596), Gabriel Powell's *The Catholikes Supplication unto the Kings Maiestie* (1603), and Hugh Broughton's *A Seder Olam, that is, Order of the World* (1613).<sup>12</sup> Among the Folger Library's holdings, there are copies of Roger Cotton's *A Spirituall Song: Containing an Historicall Discourse from the Infancie of the World, vntill this Present Time* (1596), John Hayward's *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie the IIII* (1599), and of the 1603 edition of King James's *Daemonologie*. Other books with Ireland's Shakespeare marginalia are at institutions that include the Huntington Library, Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, and University College, London.<sup>13</sup> Digitised versions of some of these copies – made available, for example, by the Folger Library via its "Luna" Digital Image Collection – allow us to virtually reassemble Ireland's now globally dispersed "Shaksperian Library." At Johns Hopkins' Sheridan Libraries, Ireland-related material forms part of the aptly named "Bibliotheca Fictiva," a collection of book and manuscript forgeries whose existence testifies to an abiding cultural fascination with the fake and the make-believe.

There is an irony here that is difficult to overlook. Ireland's fake library is still very much intact, whereas Shakespeare's actual library – in whatever form it may have originally existed – has been lost. Indeed, one could argue that the Ireland forgeries have survived precisely because Shakespeare's books have *not*. Early Shakespeare source studies created a lacuna, a sense of material absence – and a corresponding desire for the presence of "true Originall Copies," which Ireland systematically exploited. That this desire persisted even after the exposure of the fakeness of the "Shaksperian Library" can be seen in the amount of resources and energy that has been invested in the collecting and the digitisation of the manipulated books over the past two centuries. Post-Ireland, Shakespeare scholars may have resigned themselves to the realisation that

<sup>12</sup> The British Library shelf-marks for the copies are Stowe MSS 995–1009. Catalogue details are available at [https://hviewer.bl.uk/IamsHViewer/Default.aspx?mdark=ark:/81055/vdc\\_100000000035.0x00035e](https://hviewer.bl.uk/IamsHViewer/Default.aspx?mdark=ark:/81055/vdc_100000000035.0x00035e).

<sup>13</sup> For a selection of transcribed excerpts from Ireland's marginalia in copies now at the British Library and the Folger Library, see Hunt and Wolfe.

Shakespeare's actual library is ultimately and irretrievably beyond their grasp, but there is nevertheless a lingering sense that research into the question of sources and influences might after all be able to recover what has been lost. How else to explain the insistence with which source studies from the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first century has evoked images of bibliographical materiality? The spectre of the missing print object haunts projects like John Payne Collier's 1844 collection of "the romances, novels, poems, and histories used by Shakespeare as the foundation of his dramas," which is programmatically entitled *Shakespeare's Library*.<sup>14</sup> A similarly melancholic materialism surfaces in Stuart Gillespie's more recent *Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources* (2001), which has *Shakespeare's Books* as its main title.<sup>15</sup> My larger point here is that such word choices imply a residual longing for the concreteness of the book and for the neatness of tangible evidence of historical reading. For audiences past and present, the "charisma of the apparent availability of a real, human reader, encoded in marks on the printed page" (Smith 572) has been an intriguing promise, which has proved all the more alluring in the case of a reader who is not merely a book owner and annotator but a revered writer notoriously hard to pin down biographically.

Despite an awareness of the essentially futile nature of such a fixation with the physical traces of Shakespeare's reading, what I have been suggesting throughout is that thinking about his library requires us to approach the subject in a material and bibliographical sense before we do so in a more speculative and non-literal manner. What might Shakespeare's actual – rather than his mental – library have looked like, if it ever existed in the first place? Which clues does the larger history of early modern reading and book ownership provide to solve this conundrum? And, most importantly, how has the epistemic vacuum of the missing library been felt and filled since the later seventeenth century?<sup>16</sup> Combining book history and a "historical metaphorology" (Blumenberg 3) of the library (as both a real and an imaginary space) along such lines allows us to think of phenomena as different as eighteenth-century forgeries, nineteenth-century source collecting, and twenty-first-century digital archives as similar responses to a common challenge: as coping strategies for dealing with the physical absence of Shakespeare's library.

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<sup>14</sup> In his preface to the first volume of the *Library*, Collier justified his choice of title through an emphasis on Shakespeare's conjectured book ownership: "We have ventured to call the work 'Shakespeare's Library,' since our great dramatist, in all probability, must have possessed the books to which he was indebted, and some of which he applied [...] directly and minutely to his own purposes" (i). Collier was, of course, himself a noted forger of Shakespeare-related material.

<sup>15</sup> This is obviously not to deny that more recent scholarship has started to move beyond the book – and, indeed, beyond the text – to reconsider and dematerialise the source concept. For examples of this approach, see the essays collected in Britton and Walter.

<sup>16</sup> While there has been a series of important studies of Shakespeare and the history of the book, such work has mainly tended to focus on the printing, selling, and reading of books rather than on the kind of questions I am outlining here. See, for example, Kastan, Erne, Hooks, and Meek, Rickard, and Wilson. For an overview of the field, see Knight.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Der vorliegende Aufsatz nähert sich dem Thema "Shakespeares Bibliotheken" durch einen Fokus auf Shakespeares eigene – zu seinen Lebzeiten eventuell existente, aber heute verschollene – Buchsammlung. Im Zentrum des Interesses stehen dabei die Strategien, Topoi und Affekte, mit denen die Shakespearephilologie in historischer Perspektive auf das epistemische Vakuum der unauffindbaren Autorenbibliothek reagiert hat, wobei ein Schwerpunkt auf dem 18. Jahrhundert und der sich in diesem Zeitraum formierenden Quellen- und Einflussforschung liegt. Als Fallstudie wird die Karriere William Henry Irelands herangezogen, der Mitte der 1790er Jahre authentische Bücher des 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhunderts mit gefälschten Besitzvermerken und Annotationen versah und sie anschließend als Teile der originalen "Shaksperian Library" präsentierte. Der Beitrag zeichnet die Geschichte dieser Fälschungen und ihrer Enttarnung nach und untersucht darüber hinaus das institutionelle Nachleben von Irelands Buchartefakten in modernen Bibliotheksinstitutionen und digitalen Archiven.

# “THE SECRET OF PERPETUAL LIFE”: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S SHAKESPEARE

by

MARLENE DIRSCHAUER

## Introduction: Entering her father’s library

The seeds of Virginia Woolf’s career as a writer and critic were sown in her father’s library. From an early age, she was allowed the “free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. [...] Read what you like,” Woolf later remembers her father telling her – and read she did (*The Captain’s Death Bed* 73). As Alice Fox notes, Woolf “was already set on a rigorous course of reading by the time of the first diary, when she was fifteen. The sheer numbers are impressive, and the difficulty of the works might have staggered readers years her senior” (2). Shakespeare’s plays held a special place among the many books she read. As Woolf’s autobiographical writings suggest, he was part of the family’s intellectual inventory, and his works were read and quoted regularly. Woolf’s childhood and teenage encounters with the poet were the beginning of what would become a lifelong engagement with his works. She read and re-read Shakespeare throughout her life, and both her fiction and non-fiction are shot through with Shakespearean echoes and references. Her reading notes “cover over twenty of Shakespeare’s plays, a few times recording two separate readings; and it is clear that notes on other readings once existed” (Fox 19). In fact, among the many writers that inspired and shaped her work, Shakespeare might be the single most important influence. Woolf counted herself among the “company of worshippers” (*Letters I* 45), and more than once pictured Shakespeare as a kind of larger-than-literature figure:

Evidently the pliancy of his mind was so complete that he could furbish out any train of thought; &, relaxing lets fall a shower of such unregarded flowers. Why then should anyone else attempt to write. This is not ‘writing’ at all. Indeed, I could say that Shre [sic] surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant. (Woolf, *Diary III* 300-301)

However, her assessment of the poet was no blind bardolatry. Woolf comments on Shakespeare’s major characters that they “might have been cut with a pair of scissors – as far as mere humanity goes” (*Letters I* 45). She also privately finds *Othello* too wordy (*Diary III* 183), wonders whether “Shakespeare spoil[s] his psychology on account of the play” (*Letters V* 447), and states that after reading Milton, even Shakespeare “would seem a little troubled, personal, hot & imperfect” (*Diary I* 193). Still, she was perpetually drawn to him. If she once wrote about her brother that Shakespeare was the “place where he got the measure of the daily world. He took his bearings there; and sized us up from that standard” (Woolf, *Moments* 142), then to Woolf, Shakespeare was the place where she got the measure of literature. She took her bearings there; and sized all other writers, including herself, up from that standard.

While the hours Woolf spent behind books certainly laid the foundation for, and would continue to shape her own writing, her reading also had to compensate for what she did *not* have: unlike her brothers, she lacked a formal education. Given how much she owed to books, it is not surprising that she would later argue that “[l]iterature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground” (Woolf, *Collected Essays II* 181), and that she would conceive of literature as a democratic space: “One may think about reading as much as one chooses, but no one is going to lay down laws about it. Here in this room, if nowhere else, we breathe the air of freedom. Here simple and learned, man and woman are alike” (Woolf, *Selected Essays* 63). Woolf’s appraisal of the egalitarian character of literature is in stark contrast to her critique of the patriarchal institution of the library as expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*:

[...] here I was actually at the door which leads to the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction (*A Room* 7)

Thus, Woolf’s definition of literature as a “common ground” must be taken with a pinch of salt – especially when it comes to Shakespeare. The Shakespeare that Woolf first inherited from the literary world represented by her father and brother was one that firmly lay in the hands of male readers and critics, a fact that threatened to stifle the very “air of freedom” she would come to associate with reading. Paradoxically, then, Shakespeare could simultaneously be the freest, and the least available of poets to a woman writer of the early twentieth century. This essay claims that Woolf’s liberating Shakespeare from the grip of patriarchy for her own sake, was beneficial to them both.

First, I argue that because Woolf lacked the authority that came with ‘inheriting’ Shakespeare, she circumvented the politics of the paternal line by making him her contemporary. Insisting, again and again, not only on the timeliness, but on the ‘nowness’ of Shakespeare, was a way of making him more accessible to herself. Secondly, I show that Woolf shifted the focus from “Shakespeare as a man” (which, tellingly, is the title of her father’s essay on the poet) to Shakespeare as the creator of a language that she was free to tap into, explore, and transform. The idea that Woolf’s feminist appropriations of the poet and his works ultimately not only served herself, but Shakespeare, too, will underly both strands of my argument.

### **Leaving her father’s library: A Will of her own**

Growing up as a girl who experienced firsthand the educational inequality between the sexes left Woolf with a sense of inadequacy that even the free access to her father’s library could never entirely make up for. She felt her lack most acutely when comparing herself to her brother Thoby, who was one and a half years her senior, and whose intellectual education was of particular interest to their father (Woolf, *Moments* 119). The two siblings, “attracted by some common admiration,” often discussed Shakespeare (Woolf, *Moments* 142). Decades later, Woolf wrote about her brother that he “had consumed Shakespeare, somehow or other, by himself. He had possessed himself of it,

in his large clumsy way” (*Moments* 142-43). She describes Thoby as “ruthless; exasperating; downing me, overwhelming me” in their arguments, and observes how he seemed to her “equipped; as if placing it all. I felt (not only then) that he knew his own place; and relished his inheritance” (Woolf, *Moments* 142). Woolf’s portrait of her brother resonates with the broader argument she makes in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she points to the inequality of opportunity between the sexes when addressing the received idea that “women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare” (42). Her choice of words to describe her brother’s relation to Shakespeare – “consume,” “possess” – indicates the male claim, if not monopoly on Shakespeare as a literary figure, while the fact that Shakespeare makes her brother feel “equipped” and “relishing his inheritance” as a man also signals the poet’s unique role in shaping British male identity.

Woolf’s more or less autodidactic apprenticeship often left her feeling intimidated by her brother’s more academically trained assessment of literature in general, and Shakespeare, in particular. As a nineteen-year-old, she writes to Thoby questioning the humanity of Shakespeare’s characters, but then quickly rows back, claiming that his characters are “beyond her”. Half-jokingly, she asks: “Is this my feminine weakness in the upper region?” (Woolf, *Letters I* 45). As if afraid of her own courage, she tentatively brings forth her criticism of Shakespeare only to immediately ask her brother to “explain” Shakespeare to her. “Just explain this to me – and also why his plots are just cracky things – [...] What a dotard you will think me! but I thought I must just write and tell you –” (Woolf, *Letters I* 45-46).

In several letters to Thoby, in which she touches upon the differences of their positions, her resentment lies barely hidden beneath this surface jocularly: “Oh dear oh dear – just as I feel in the mood to talk about these things, you go and plant yourself in Cambridge,” Woolf writes (*Letters I* 46), and in another letter, dated from May 1903, she complains:

I dont [sic] get anybody to argue with me now, and feel the want. I have to delve from books, painfully and all alone, what you get every evening sitting over your fire and smoking your pipe with Strachey etc. No wonder my knowledge is but scant. Theres [sic] nothing like talk as an educator I’m sure. Still I try my best with Shakespeare – (Woolf, *Letters I* 77)

Tellingly, she felt more at ease discussing Shakespeare with her female friends. She meets Katherine Mansfield, and recounts Mansfield’s shared “passion for writing,” and how the two of them held “religious meetings together praising Shakespeare” (Woolf, *Letters II* 382). It is in a letter to her intimate friend Vita Sackville-West that she most explicitly comments on the reasons for what Briggs in her essay title calls Woolf’s “silence on master William”: “These professors hem one down in their hen-coops. What is poetry and so on: their replies to questions have kept me dumb,” and it seems to take the shared effort to overcome this sense of inferiority: “Shall we write a little book together?” (Woolf, *Letters III* 227). The book never came to fruition, a fact that is somewhat symptomatic of Woolf’s relationship to Shakespeare. For while I agree with Alice Fox that “there is no question of the centrality of Shakespeare in Woolf’s imagination” (19), this centrality is rather the effect of a lifelong accumulation of notes that were often made in the margins. Thus, Woolf writes:

His fame intimidates and bores [...] Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling fingers. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin. (*Collected Essays IV* 436)

This might explain why Shakespeare is not once the *central* figure of any of her essays; and yet at the same time, Woolf never stopped making notes about him, and her scribbling fingers never stopped encircling him. Shortly before her death, she observed that “the truest account of reading Shakespeare would be not to write a book with beginning middle and end; but to collect notes, without trying to make them consistent” (qtd. in Briggs 9) which, as Julia Briggs rightly says, “is largely what she did” (9).

If already her father, Leslie Stephen, who, after all, was one of the most eminent men of letters of the nineteenth century and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, begins his essay on Shakespeare by applying the performative contradiction that “no one should write about Shakespeare without a special licence” (1), Woolf felt the pressure of this licence even more keenly, and what is more, she detected its gendered bias. How, then, did she defy the constraints she felt issuing from a “paternal government” that seemed to have the poet in its grip? And how did she get from being a “dreamy amateur” (Woolf, *Diary III* 210) who timidly brought forth her own readings of Shakespeare, to not only being a critic whom several people specifically urged to write *about* Shakespeare, but to also being a writer whom several critics actually compared *to* Shakespeare?

### Shakespeare across the ages: Asking Hamlet to tea

What most evidently complicates the thesis of a mutual dependency of these two canonical authors is the temporal distance between them. Yet, Woolf herself repeatedly relativised this distance by creating, in Robert Sawyer's words, “a new contemporary vision of [Shakespeare]” (2). Her diaries and letters convey her sense of a strikingly intimate relationship with Shakespeare. When her husband, Leonard Woolf, teasingly told her that “I'm the only person who [understands you],” Woolf replied: “You and Shakespeare” (*Letters IV* 327). She sometimes looked at reality as if through the poet's eyes, so that contemporary life gained a Shakespearean quality: “At any rate I thought of him when the singing was doing – Sh[akespear]e I thought would have liked us all tonight” (Woolf, *Diary II* 223). The gap between the past and the present seems to become negligible as Woolf imagines the early modern poet as her contemporary, while attributing present-day reality with the ability to produce Shakespeare:

Indeed, it was so lovely in the Waterloo Road that it struck me that we were writing Shakespeare; by which I mean that when live people, seeming happy, produce an effect of beauty, & you dont have it offered as a work of art, but it seems a natural gift of theirs, then – what was I meaning? somehow it affected me as I am affected by reading Shakespeare. No: its life; going on in these beautiful surroundings. (Woolf, *Diary II* 273).

Woolf here goes as far as to equate Shakespeare with life. Rather than being a monumental, untouchable, set-in-stone figure, she pictures him as a continuing, ever adapting and adapted presence, on par with life itself.



Woolf's unfailing remedy against a Shakespeare who "intimidates and bores," was entering into intimate dialogue with his works. As Hermione Lee puts it, "at the heart of the pleasure of reading is the delight in a free union, like a very intimate conversation or an act of love" (410). This becomes evident in passages such as the following one from her essay "Middlebrow": "All you have to do is to read [Shakespeare]. [...] If you find Hamlet difficult, ask him to tea. He is a highbrow. Ask Ophelia to meet him. She is a lowbrow. Talk to them, as you talk to me, and you will know more about Shakespeare than all the middlebrows in the world can teach you" (*Collected Essays II* 201).

The meeting point between the two authors was language itself; it was the "common ground" they shared. "Remote and extravagant as some of Shakespeare's images seem," Woolf writes,

at the moment of reading they seem the cap and culmination of the thought; its final expression. But it is useless to labour the matter in cold blood. Anyone who has read a poem with pleasure will remember the sudden conviction, the sudden recollection (for it seems sometimes as if we were about to say, or had in some previous existence already said, what Shakespeare is actually now saying), which accompany the reading of poetry, and give it its exaltation and intensity. (*Selected Essays* 70)

Claiming a close conspiracy between Shakespeare and his readers, Woolf portrays the poet as a mouthpiece of ideas already thought or yet to be expressed.

Because Woolf took the liberty of breaking the temporal barriers between literary eras (a liberty most fully at work in her novel *Orlando*, whose protagonist's lifespan stretches from Shakespeare's to Woolf's age), she was able to redefine the relationship between Shakespeare and herself, and to make it one of direct competition, as the following diary entry reveals: "I never yet knew how amazing his stretch & speed & word coining power is, until I felt it utterly outpace & outrace my own, seeming to start equal & then I see him draw ahead & do things I could not in my wildest tumult & utmost press of mind imagine" (Woolf, *Diary III* 300-301). Woolf's words attest to her obvious reverence for the poet, but more importantly perhaps, they also reflect on herself: to be able to "start equal" one must compete in the same league. Shakespeare may "outpace & outrace" her, but they are both after the same thing, and entrants in the same contest, as if the three centuries that lie between them didn't matter.

While her letters and diaries are scattered with allusions that evoke the nowness of Shakespeare, it is in *A Room of One's Own* that Woolf most explicitly elaborates her idea of how the voices of the past are "continuing presences" (102). Drawing on Coleridge's concept of an androgynous mind, she cites Shakespeare as the primary example: "The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; [...] it transmits emotion without impediment; [...] it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous [...] mind" (*A Room* 89). Only a writing that originates in an androgynous mind, Woolf goes on to argue, "explodes and gives birth to all kinds of other ideas, and that is the only sort of writing of which one can say that it has the secret of perpetual life" (*A Room* 91).

Her concept of androgynous writing not only defies rigid lines between the sexes and the ages, but it also implies a move away from the individual person – historical, gendered, mortal – to the writing itself – impersonal and potentially immortal. To Woolf, the great works of art are intimately interconnected, and, as Beverly Ann Schlack

observes, “Shakespeare in particular has achieved that impersonal, archetypal truth in which individual personality is transcended” (125). Thus, Woolf famously claims: “Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (Woolf, *A Room* 59). By moving from the personal to the impersonal, from the individual to the collective, Woolf indirectly challenges the idea of the male genius whose work ‘autogenetically’ creates itself. Instead, she emphasises the “mass behind the single voice” and draws attention to the conditions that are necessary for the individual to produce a masterpiece. Literary history thus appears as a dynamic, ever evolving process in which one book gives life to the next, and in which the books to come keep alive the books of the past.

Ironically, to keep Shakespeare alive, Woolf first had to kill him. Shakespeare drowns in the very novel that is Woolf’s first truly modernist one, *Jacob’s Room*, published in 1922. It is the novel about which Woolf said that in writing it she finally found her own voice. It is *also*, and perhaps not coincidentally, the novel that she wrote as an elegy to her older brother Thoby. In *Jacob’s Room*, the protagonist, Jacob Flanders – who is roughly modelled on Thoby – is sailing along the Cornish Coast, having taken Shakespeare as holiday reading. According to the narrator, this was a bad idea, because

[w]hat’s the use of trying to read Shakespeare, especially in one of those little thin paper editions whose pages get ruffled, or stuck together with sea-water? Although the plays of Shakespeare had frequently been praised, even quoted, and placed higher than the Greek, never since they started [their journey] had Jacob managed to read one through. (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 38)

Indeed, Jacob’s endeavour to read Shakespeare on a boat ends badly for Shakespeare: “The sail flapped. Shakespeare was knocked overboard. There you could see him floating merrily away, with all his pages ruffling innumerable, and then he went under” (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 39).

In Freudian terms, this was a necessary patricide: just as Woolf was, in hindsight, grateful for her father’s death because his life would have “entirely ended [hers]” and would have made writing impossible (*Diary III* 208), Woolf needed to make Shakespeare float merrily away and go under. By demystifying him and mocking a distinctly male-dominated bardolatry, her own modernist *and* feminist voice was free to emerge. Yet crucially, Shakespeare does not disappear completely in that scene. If Woolf’s humorous use of metonymy is here taken literally, then Shakespeare, rather than his writing, is drowning. While Shakespeare “goes under,” his work resurfaces: for Woolf of course implicitly references the drowning of Prospero’s book in *The Tempest*: “And, deeper than did ever plummet sound, / I’ll drown my book” (5.1.56–57). The scene offers an intriguing performance of the death of the author, while simultaneously ensuring the survival and continued significance of his words for the present.

This idea of a continuous presence of the past, which underlies Woolf’s understanding of literary history as something that is not a static entity, but very much alive, prevents old books – including the works of Shakespeare – from ending up as dusty objects on library shelves. On that account, Shakespeare needs Woolf just as much as she needs him, for “as always, Woolf’s echo brings something new to her allusion, transforming and reactivating its words” (Briggs 21). As I will show in the last section of this essay,



her creative engagement with Shakespeare's works breathes life back into them, and thus helps preserve the living library that is Shakespeare. The focus will be on some exemplary moments of transformation which reveal how Shakespeare's images "give birth" to scenes in Woolf's fiction; or, to argue from the vantage point of the filial generation, how scenes from Woolf's fiction revive Shakespeare's images.

### Words giving birth: The productivity of influence

Woolf's fiction perfectly exemplifies the productivity of influence addressed in *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf, as has been mentioned above, characterises androgynous writing such as Coleridge's or Shakespeare's as one that "explodes" in the minds of others and "gives birth to all kinds of other ideas" (*A Room* 91). It is the micro-level of language – the single word, phrase, or line – that proves most fertile to Woolf. Her meticulous focus on Shakespeare's language helped her to push past the potentially barren idea that "everything was in Shakespeare," as her brother would have it (Woolf, *Moments* 142) – an idea that naturally begs the question "why then should anyone else attempt to write?" (Woolf, *Diary* III 301). Instead, her "formalist" approach, as Briggs calls it (21), offered Woolf a gateway to access Shakespeare anew as a female reader and writer. Thus, she calls him "a great master of words" (Woolf, *Diary* III 182), and emphasises his "power to make images": "Shakespeare must have had [this power] to an extent which makes my normal state the state of a person blind, deaf, dumb, stone-stockish & fish-blooded" (*Diary* III 104). Woolf's microscopic interest in Shakespeare's language is particularly tangible in her essay "On Craftsmanship". Reflecting on the "suggestive power" of some Shakespearean images, she draws on one of the most famous passages in *Macbeth*:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. (2.2.59–62)

Woolf comments: "The splendid word 'incarnadine,' for example – who can use that without remembering 'multitudinous seas'? [...] Words belong to each other, although, of course, only a great poet knows that the word "incarnadine" belongs to 'multitudinous seas'" (*Collected Essays* II 248-49).

The fruit of Woolf's meticulous reading also show in the above-quoted letter to her brother in which she criticises Shakespeare for the inhumanity of his major characters, while she at the same time emphasises the superbness of certain lines in *Cymbeline*:

I have spotted the best lines in the play – almost in any play I should think – Imogen says – Think that you are upon a rock, and now throw me again! And Posthumous answers – Hang there like fruit, my Soul, till the tree die. Now if that doesn't send a shiver down your spine, even if you are in the middle of cold grouse and coffee – you are no true Shakespearian! (*Letters* I 45-46)

A few years later, Woolf would return to *Cymbeline* when writing her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, where Imogen's and Posthumous' lines provide Woolf with rich material to depict one of the key encounters between her own protagonists, Rachel Vinrace and Terence Hewett. And yet, her characters, of course, also depart from their Shakespearean

predecessors in significant ways, as the following conversation between Rachel and Terence makes clear:

‘You’re not beautiful,’ he began, ‘but I like your face. I like the way your hair grows down in a point, and your eyes too – they never see anything. Your mouth’s too big, and your cheeks would be better if they had more colour in them. But what I like about your face is that it makes one wonder what the devil you’re thinking about – it makes one want to do that –’ He clenched his fist and shook it so near her that she started back, ‘Because now you look as if you’d blow my brains out. There are moments, [...] when, if we stood on a rock together, you’d throw me into the sea. Hypnotised by the force of his eyes in hers, she repeated, ‘If we stood on a rock together –’ (Woolf, *The Voyage Out* 281)

Terence’s unflattering blazon of his fiancée is reminiscent of sonnet 130, with Rachel’s colourless cheek evoking Shakespeare’s verse, “But no such roses see I in her cheeks” (Sonnets 130, l. 6). Moreover, both women are attributed with curiously unilluminating eyes, which “never see anything” and “are nothing like the sun” (Sonnets 130 l. 1), while Terence’s clenching fist faintly echoes the stage-direction in *Cymbeline*, where Posthumous, not yet recognising his beloved, strikes Imogen so violently that she falls (5.5.228).

The scene heavily draws on Shakespeare, but it lacks both the reconciling volta of Shakespeare’s sonnet, and the tenderness of Posthumous’ “hang there like fruit my soul / Till the tree dies” (5.5.263), a line that reinforces the ultimate inseparableness of the lovers. The fact that Shakespeare’s lovers embrace, while Woolf’s are somewhat lost in words, is central here. The stage direction that directly follows on, and thus renders impossible, Imogen’s “and now / Throw me again” (5.5.262) (Imogen utters these words while she is “[Embracing him]”) helps explain Posthumous’ otherwise non-sequitur remark, “hang there like fruit my soul / Till the tree dies”: the embracing bodies on the stage mimic the image of a tree (Posthumous/the body) from which hangs a fruit (Imogen/the soul); thus entwined, the tree can only “throw” its fruit when it itself falls (i.e., when Posthumous dies). Woolf takes up on this imagery to push Shakespearean romance to its limits: *her* lovers essentially lack this sense of unity and of completing each other. In Woolf’s modernist spin, the Shakespearean image disintegrates. Rachel does not marry, but dies a lonely, feverish death, depicted as a drowning underneath the surface of reality, so that it is, ironically, her, and not Terence, who is eventually ‘thrown’ from the rock and into the watery depth as which Woolf pictures her protagonist’s death. Echo-like, and endowed with no voice of her own, Rachel can only repeat Terence’s allusion to Shakespeare. Yet mere repetition is not viable; the vision, as Woolf writes in *To the Lighthouse*, “must be perpetually remade” (197). This not only concerns the genesis of individual works of art, but, more generally, the phylogenesis of literature: “How could they go on with poetic plays after Shakespeare?” Woolf asks Sackville-West and advances her most radical view of intertextuality: “It is one brain, after all, literature; and it wants change and relief. The text book writers cut it up all wrong [...] Literature is all one brain” (*Letters IV* 4).

The afterlife of another passage from *Cymbeline* in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* offers a particularly beautiful illustration of the intricate workings of this “one brain,” which, if we are to believe Woolf, engendered both Shakespeare’s play and her own novel. Scholars such as Diana E. Henderson and Jane de Gay have thoroughly analysed the

significance of Shakespeare's "Fear no more the heat of the sun" to Woolf's novel; in addition, I would like to draw closer attention to the wider significance of Guiderius and Arvirágus' song, especially the ensuing lines, "Fear no more the frown o' th' great; / Thou art past the tyrant's stroke" (*Cymbeline* 4.2 264–265). While these lines are not directly quoted in Woolf's novel, they resonate beautifully with her continuous reminders to herself not to fear the "frown" of the male critic. The indifference toward worldly concerns thus turns into an indifference toward the patriarchal voice. Woolf increasingly freed herself from the constraints of the "tyranny" of narrative conventions she had so vividly described in her modernist manifesto "Modern Fiction". In the essay, she expresses her growing impatience with the dominant trend of contemporary fiction, arguing that

[t]he writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in his thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest [...] The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. [...] Must novels be like this? (*Common Reader I* 149)

By the time she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf had realised that they do not. The lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* offer an intriguing example of the different ways, either tacit or explicit, in which Shakespeare's words fell on the rich soil of Woolf's creative mind, generating new transformations, and being thereby themselves transformed.

### Conclusion: "We are the words"

To grasp the extent of Woolf's indebtedness to Shakespeare, *and* the extent of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Woolf, the two writers must be read and re-read in conversation with each other, non-hierarchically, and across the temporal gap that separates them. To make this conversation possible, Woolf had to demolish the monumental Shakespeare passed onto her through the patriarchal line – one that could never become completely hers: she had to throw overboard the kind of Shakespeare that lay in the hands of the male critic, the kind of Shakespeare that was idolised by university boys who took him on their sailing trips as the figurehead of their intellectual prowess. For her own sake but also, as I argued, for Shakespeare's, Woolf needed to drown and bury the idea of Shakespeare as the male genius writing in the vacuum of his own greatness. Instead, she emphasised the democratic openness that his works embody, which not only made him available to her, but which was also the prerequisite for his works to be "perpetually remade" – by passing on the "secret of perpetual life," they were themselves transformed, and thus, able to survive.

It is in this light that I read Woolf's enigmatic comment in her autobiographical fragment "A Sketch of the Past": "there is no Shakespeare. [...] We are the words" (*Moments* 85). Woolf's Shakespeare is not for the happy few, but for the many. Her radical de-personalisation and feminist democratisation of the poet, which at the same time reinforced the continuing omnipresence of his words, made it possible for a female writer born four hundred years after him to draw Shakespeare into the present of her

writing and to claim him not only for herself, but for future generations, because, for better or worse, “we are the words.”

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Der vorliegende Essay argumentiert, dass Virginia Woolfs feministische Aneignung Shakespeares nicht nur ihrem eigenen Schaffen diene, sondern auch zum Weiterleben des Dichters beitrug. Anhand verschiedener autobiografischer Passagen wird zunächst aufgezeigt, wie Woolf die Tradition einer patriarchalisch geprägten Deutungshoheit über Shakespeares Werk infrage stellt und stattdessen die demokratische Offenheit seiner Dichtung betont, deren Transformierbarkeit nicht nur in ihrem eigenen Schreiben zutage tritt, sondern die Shakespeares Werk insgesamt zu einer Art ‚lebendigen‘ Bibliothek macht. Anschließend wird entlang ausgewählter Textmomente die wechselseitig fruchtbare Beziehung zwischen Shakespeare und Woolf exemplarisch untersucht.

# RETHINKING SHAKESPEARE SOURCE STUDIES: SHAKESPEARE'S TRANS\*TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS AND THE PLAUSIBILITY OF AFRICAN RE\*SOURCES

by

SUSAN ARNDT

## 1. Introduction

Literature is, as Ottmar Ette (2004) argues, a transnational storage medium of transcultural life knowledge on the move. Authors are at home in the libraries of the world. They inhabit the space of global narrations and their histories. The lack of language competencies might, of course, be compensated by the merits of translation. Yet, this is still far from a 'happily ever after' cosmopolitanism of flying libraries. Literary encounters have always been shaped by global histories of power, even in our digital age. Influence does not happen. It is done. In the midst of global power constellations.

Literary creations are interlinked polydirectionally by entangled histories, thus intertwining nations and languages, discourses and knowledge, imagination and aesthetics. Thus framed, a global and multilayered net of literatures emerges which functions as a "poetics of (global) relation" (Glissant 1990) and guarantees a "unity of liberating diversity" (Glissant 1996: 14, 71). This diversity does not operate in any linear manner. It works rhizomically. This rhizomic pattern is as unpredictable as difficult to pin down. Rhizomically, literature spreads out, encountering and cross-linking texts in an unpredictable, fluid and polyphonous way.

Power has always also affected the ways in which global literatures and their encounters have been perceived and discussed, studied and mapped. Correspondingly, authors and texts have received uneven recognition due to a politics of canonisation, which has in turn affected source studies in general and Shakespearean source studies in particular. So far, this discipline has been burdened by a Eurocentric and script-centred attitude. The dominant guideline is summarised by Robert Miola as follows: "Shakespeare created much of his work from his reading" (Miola 2000, 1) of published texts written in or translated into languages he is believed to have been able to (at least) read, namely above all, (Medieval) Latin, Greek, English and Italian. Consequentially, when suggesting that a source could be anything "that an author previously knew or read" (Miola 2000, 19), Miola has mainly the Roman-Italian tradition in mind. But writing also exists in African or Asian languages; and knowing has always been informed by what you read and what you encounter otherwise. Along these lines Stephen Greenblatt maintains that Shakespeare's muse was also kissed by English cultural events such as morality plays and plays performed by travelling theatre troupes (e.g., *commedia dell'arte*) which he might have come across as a child, for instance during festivities (28-30). Greenblatt's point might lead us to consider the significance of other forms of



popular culture circulating orally, such as folktales. Thus, Artese points out that “[o]ral tradition played a great [...] role in Shakespeare’s culture” (5). Folktales, in particular, provided him with a “common [discursive] ground” (Artese 3) with his audience. And Shakespeare would not have failed to exploit them at the Globe. The importance of orality to Shakespeare’s work can be deduced from the observation that some of his characters speak of the art as well as the power of storytelling. So, for example, when accused of having used magic to seduce Desdemona, Othello counters: the “only [...] witchcraft I have used” is that of storytelling. This point was elaborated on earlier by Othello in the course of his famous story-telling monologue. For example, Othello stresses: “I will a round unvarnished tale deliver / Of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms” (1.3. 91-92), while also hinting at the fact that Brabantio and Desdemona urged him to tell stories: Brabantio “bade me tell it” (1.3.134) and “loved ... oft invited” (1.3.129) him to “tell” “the story of my life (1.3.129-34). And Desdemona “bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story / And that would woo her” (1.3.164-67).

Moreover, Shakespeare refers to folktales and his plays mobilise folktale motifs, while also utilising plot elements similar to those found in folktales. And yet, “[g]enerations of Shakespeare scholars have [...] largely neglected” (Artese 2) his folktale sources. Despite acknowledging that “folktales show a remarkable ability to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries” (Artese 8), Artese herself maintains a largely Eurocentric point of view. More than two-thirds of the 43 folktales compiled in her anthology are European; and only 13 originate from India, the MENA region, the African diaspora and Chile. This premise leads her to the equally Eurocentric conclusion that the Bard’s drawing “from the tales in the culture of the time” (Artese 4) help to understand Shakespeare predominant role for the Western literary canon. Yet, why culture, in the singular? Why focus on European folktales, especially given the fact that an understanding of Europeanness was only to emerge in early modern times. Why not think of literary encounters in a more global way, especially given the fact that colonialism accelerated the mobility of people and textualities that had brought stories from all around the globe within Shakespeare’s reach? (Elhanafy 2023)

So, why not consider that Shakespeare might indeed have known folktales from all around the world, including Africa? Even if these had not been translated into and written down (in English) in Shakespeare’s time, he could have encountered them in retellings, which is the actual gist of storytelling – isn’t it? In other words, why not consider a vaster narrative landscape and think of ‘library’ in a more metaphorical sense? This would open the door to also considering African oral literatures (orature) as Shakespeare’s sources. This option has been nearly completely ignored by Shakespeare source studies scholars (with the exception of, for example, Simrock (1870), in the late nineteenth century), including Artese. This systemic abnegation is to be challenged in this paper. In doing so, it struggles with methodological challenges that need to be solved.

## 2.0. Methodological Challenges and Responses

The pursuit of determining whether African orature might have inspired Shakespeare's imagination and narratives involves numerous methodological challenges. First of all, they were mainly documented in writing in post-Shakespearean times. Neither their dates of composition nor their original authors are truly traceable. Secondly, textual parallels need to be distinguished from archetypes (Genette 1992, Propp 2013). Thirdly, while being bound to certain plot elements, didactic dynamics and conflict resolutions, African (like all) folktales, myths or legends grant their performers aesthetic liberties every time they are renarrated – and thus the possibility of adapting them to new social contexts (Arndt 1998). Inasmuch as oral texts spread rhizomically through times and places, Shakespeare might have become familiar with different, complementary local versions, upon which he then applied his creativity (cf. Artese 2). And the less Shakespeare would know the culture, the more independent he might have felt when adapting the oral text. We also have to admit that there is a gap between whatever we read today and how a folktale was narrated some centuries ago. Or, as Artese puts it, folktales contemporaneous to Shakespeare might not be “his sources” but the “later members of the genus of his sources” (2).

Much of this also applies to Shakespeare's indebtedness to European folktales and none of this should stop scholars from looking into Shakespeare's indebtedness to folktales in general and to African ones in particular. After all, the history of these (re)narrations is what is present in his plays, palimpsest-like.

So how to proceed from here?

1. Firstly, it might be helpful to talk about possibilities. How could Shakespeare have encountered African oral literature?
2. Secondly, plausibility could be looked at. To me, acknowledging the presence of Black knowledge and perspective in his work makes it very plausible that Shakespeare did inhabit spaces in which he could have also met African folktales.
3. Thirdly, textual similarities between Shakespeare's plays and African folktales can be traced.

### 2.1. Possibilities: Meeting of persons and (their) texts

As a dedicated writer and businessman, whose work had to bring profitable revenue to the Globe Theatre, Shakespeare must have actively sought inspirations for new ideas for plots and characters. While visiting libraries or people with letterpresses, he might have read books that could also entail Africa-related travel literature or histories, including unpublished ones. Shakespeare could have also been impressed by narrative illustrations or other visual adaptations featured in carpets, paintings, or tableware.

Moreover, it would not be far-fetched to imagine him approaching European travellers, traders, seamen and enslavers who had been in personal contact with Africans. Given the violent framing of such “encounters” (Pratt 33-40), *white* European travellers would maybe not see actual performances and would anyways rather summarise than renarrate the folktales for fellow English people. But the material would



be out there. Or, perhaps, Shakespeare was a traveller himself and thus encountering early modern “contact zones” (Pratt 33-40) with colonial spaces and narrations directly?

Another group of people who could have made African (oral) literatures available to Shakespeare in London, even in vivid performances, are Black people in London, most of whom would be enslaved people. The case of Lucy Negro is particularly noteworthy: she might have been an enslaved woman of African descent, forced into prostitution, as well as the figure whom Shakespeare might have versified in his so-called Dark Lady Sonnets (Salkeld 2016). Another Black person within Shakespeare’s reach would be Reasonable Blackman, who lived at Southwark and, as a silk weaver, also made theatrical costumes for London’s stages (Kaufmann 2017). We might not be able to provide definitive proof of such encounters, but it was not only possible for Shakespeare to encounter Black persons and Black narratives; it was also very probable.

## 2.2. Black Knowledge & Perspectives

The plausibility of Shakespeare encountering African orature can also be deduced from the fact that some of his works stage Black knowledge and perspectives that even display a critical stance on colonialism and slavery. I am particularly thinking of the Sonnets, *Othello* and *The Tempest* here.

There have been disputes about the meaning of “black(ness)” in the so called “dark-lady”-sonnets. The verses “In the old age black was not counted fair / [...] But now is black beauty’s successive heir” (127, 1, 3) as well as other traces offered in Sonnets 127-152 suggest that the lyrical I praises the beauty of Blackness in a very literal sense of referring to a racial and/or religious other rather than to a white woman with darkish brunette hair – particularly since “dark” is used only once in the entire so called “dark-lady”-sonnets. Reading Blackness literally, though, suggests that what the lyrical I praises as the beauty of Blackness is in fact that of Africanness. At least, Shakespeare’s lyrical I does not mind having the beauty of Blackness allude to Africanness. This, however, would so obviously fly in the face of Elizabethan moralities and the emergent racism thereof that stating it bluntly and brazenly could have landed Shakespeare in “a sea of troubles,” (3.1.58) including imprisonment. In a way, to him, there was no other way to celebrate African beauty than by leaving traces in his works that are ambiguous enough to both disguise and disclose this idea (Arndt 2015).

It is true, the lyrical I’s praise of Blackness is not tantamount to Shakespeare having met a Black person. And yet, his take on Blackness lays more than one trace towards Shakespeare having encountered Black perspectives and narrations. This is also supported by looking at *Othello* and *The Tempest* (Arndt 2009). After all, Othello is the first Black protagonist on an Elizabethan stage. And even though the femicide is outrageous and the fact that Othello murders Desdemona out of rage seemingly confirms racist stereotypes of his time, *Othello* invites empathy and understanding, because the play is about how Iago’s racism rages him into this deed. As for *The Tempest*, Caliban is neither the monster nor animal the white characters blame him to be. Rather, he insists on being human and on being treated accordingly. He longs for freedom, thus giving Prospero a very hard time on the island. This is a perspective on colonialism that is hardly shared by any other white British person at that time.

Acknowledging the presence of Black knowledge and perspective in Shakespeare's work makes it very plausible that he did indeed inhabit spaces in which he could have come across African folktales. Seen the other way around, ignoring Black narrations as re\*source of Shakespeare\*s work was a systemic necessity to defend the British Empire's claim of superiority by appropriating Shakespeare: we have Shakespeare, and whom do you have? This narrative needed to comprise controlling the ownership of Shakespeare by controlling how he was read and mapped. As a result, Shakespeare scholars, like Harold Bloom (1998), whitewashed the sonnet's Black woman, denied that *Othello* stages racism critically and that *The Tempest* stages colonialism to challenge it. To acknowledge this would have opened the option to diversify Shakespeare beyond being an icon of white superiority. By reconfiguring such policies of silencing, Shakespeare's indebtedness to Black knowledge may be restored. And playing along the rules is totally possible in this respect as well.

### 2.3. Textual parallels

According to Gillespie, sources may be identified along modes of adaptation, imitation and borrowings that refer to "thematic functions," "story or plot," "motif," "characters and their constellations," "conflict composition and resolution" as well as "structural parallelism," "scenic form," "ide-ational or ima-gistic conca-te-nation" and "rhetorical strategy" (Gillespie 3). Most of such elements of source study analysis (not all of them) can be mobilised when looking at the relatedness of African oral literatures and Shakespeare's work.

### 2.4. Yes, but: From Source to Re\*Source as Categories within Rhizomic Re\*Mixing

Within the current confines of Shakespeare source studies – namely, identifying a direct impact traceable to a written document – it is impossible to claim beyond doubt that Shakespeare's work was influenced by African orature. This makes it somewhat impossible to label African folktales as "sources." This, however, is in no way reason enough to rule this hypothesis out. But rather than using the present parameters of Shakespeare source studies to argue against considering (African) oral literature as having influenced Shakespeare, Shakespeare source studies may accommodate new approaches that enable scholars to look beyond the pattern of written and European texts only, while both retaining and reconfiguring its established methodology. This is more than justified given the fact that Shakespeare studies have been framed, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by *white* supremacist interests to sell Shakespeare as a proof of *white* superiority (Cf. e.g. Muir 2009). Acknowledging Black impacts on Shakespeare's oeuvre or even the fact that Shakespeare criticises racism and colonialism, would have been counter-intuitive to this goal. Therefore, it feels legitimate to now cancel the cancel culture that has ignored the possibility of Shakespeare's being connected to textualities from beyond Europe – thus also transferring contemporary postcolonial Shakespeare studies (Hall 1998, Lomba 1998; 2002; Habib 2001, 2007) to the field of Shakespeare source studies.

To facilitate this move, Artese's "genus of sources" and Miola's notion of "remote sources" that points towards a concept that may be termed "indirect source" may be mobilised and advanced – just as much as Lynch's claim that "[t]he study of sources goes beyond focussing on specific pre-texts; rather, they are read as "interventions in preexistent fields of textuality" (1). Thus framed, I would like to propose complementing the concept of "source" with that of "re\*source": while source is a clearly identifiable asset, a re\*source is much more encompassing as a materiality, a meaning, an action or a strategy. A re\*source is basically everything that might have affected the un\*conscious knowing of a writer (Jameson 1981). In doing so, it is available for being adopted to create something new, energise it or make it happen – continuously yet differently every time. The fluidity between "source" and "re\*source" may be expressed via the asterisk's visualization of opening up into all directions. Thus tuned, 're\*source' expresses the complexity of textual encounters that crisscross spaces, genres and media, while amalgamating direct and indirect contacts into a mode of rhizomic remixing.

This is to say that text C may have influenced text D, yet text C did not spring out of a vacuum; rather, text C has a shared history with texts A and B. Consequently, when text C impacts text D, the latter contains texts A and B as well – regardless of the authors' or the readers' awareness of these processes, or lack thereof. Even if the author of text D never heard of text A or B; they might still be there, like a palimpsest, because of text's C bridging them all, while allowing re\*sources to traverse in\*direct and un\*traceable routes.

To give an example, Shakespeare's *Othello* is known to have been influenced by many texts, primarily by George Peel's "Battle of Alcazar" (1594) or Cinthio's "Un capitano moro" (1565). "Un capitano moro" and *Othello*, in turn, contain similarities to the "Tale of Three Apples" from *Alf Layla wa Layla* and to the famous West African folktale of the "Handsome Stranger." In addition to that, each of these texts has been part of other textual flows, such as *Othello* being impacted by Leo Africanus's "Descrittione dell'Africa" (1550) as well as by the trickster character of West African folktales (Arndt 2018, Burton 1998, Whitney 1922). Ahmed Yerima's play *Otaelo* (2002) adapts both the folktale of the "Handsome Stranger" and *Othello*, and by remixing them, he makes their parallels apparent, while other pre-texts are present, too (Arndt 2018). Having Ahmed Yerima's play at hand is a gift that grants cultural memory as gaze from the present onto its past. Cultural memory describes the phenomenon that African directors or playwrights cannot help but see African oral literatures as palimpsest-like re\*sources of Shakespearean plays. This often causes them to have their plays allude to certain trans\*textualities.

This rhizomic relationship is to be discussed briefly in the following, focussing on the triangular relationship between *Othello* and its re\*sources the "Handsome Stranger" and "Un capitano moro." In doing so, I rely on Gillepsie's categories of modes of adaption, imitation and borrowing. While following the plot's grammar to trace textual parallels, given dis\*continuities are traced.

### 3. Rhizomic Remixing and Re\*sources in *Othello*

To start, there are many motifs that feature parallels between *Othello* and its re\*sources the “Handsome Stranger” and “Un capitano moro.” For example, the folktale’s protagonist uses magic to charm his future wife into falling in love with him, while Othello is accused of having used magic to seduce Desdemona. This latter “witchcraft,” however, is the unique enchantment conjured by “storytelling.” Storytelling as such becomes a shared motif of all three texts. Cinthio’s “Un capitano moro” and *Othello*, though, also share a motif with the “Tale of Three Apples”: a token of love (handkerchief or apple) that the husband gives to his wife, who, in turn, loses it – which is then turned by the husband into alleged evidence of her infidelity. This might be a parallel that is archetypal in nature. And archetypal may be the fact that *Othello*, Cinthio’s short story and the folktale all feature a beautiful young woman who violates her society’s marriage conventions by marrying a “stranger” against her father’s/parents’ will. But the ways in which the conflict evolves into catastrophe features textual agencies beyond archetypal motifs. Immediately after the marriage, all three couples leave the bride’s home and shelter, resulting in the bride’s living beyond her parents’ and society’s reach and protection: forest or Cyprus. It is in this “third space”-setting that the tragedy unfolds and the husbands turn into ‘monsters’. In the folktale, the husband unmask himself, resuming his actual, monstrous shape. And in “Un capitano moro” and *Othello*, the husbands turn from love to rage. In Cinthio’s version Ensign stresses: “I will pluck [...] out that tongue of thine” (6). In this vein, Desdemona laments that her husband “has become another man” (9). Similarly, Othello turns into a “green-eyed monster” (3.3.168) of jealousy.

As for further character traits, all three husbands share the characteristic of being strangers who are both mistrusted and feared, yet also considered “esteemed” (Cinthio 1) – as long as they pretend to be somebody else – or, rather, somebody they can never truly be(come). The husband in the folktale is an “evil spirit,” often called “demon” or “devil,” who is sent by the ancestors to punish the beautiful protagonist for not obeying the marriage politics of her society. Although somewhat “esteemed” in this respect, he is despised by society nevertheless. Having the shape of an animal, he disguises himself as a handsome man:

He was very ugly, like all the other devils. He had one leg, one hand, one eye – and he was short. He wore tattered clothes, and his skin was covered with craw-craw. [...] He went to one man’s house and borrowed a leg. From another man he borrowed a hand; from another, an eye; from another, soft shiny skin; from another, rich and elegant robes. By the time he came to Adamma’s village, no one would have recognised the ugly devil. (Bordinat 89, cf. Ekwensi 1954, Umeasiegbu 1982, Egudu 1983)

And while the female protagonist falls for him, her folks warn her against marrying him: he is a stranger and this, in itself, is fearsome enough to them.

This is also narrated in Cinthio’s and Shakespeare’s Black husbands: they are “highly esteemed” (Cinthio 1) and yet meet with societal distrust and fear. Othello, in particular, is considered by some an “extravagant and wheeling stranger” (1.1.134) and antagonised as an animal and a devil. Aptonymically, OtHELLO and DesDEMONa refer to the demonic background of the folktales’ husband. In line with this, Brabantio, Iago and

Roderigo call Othello by all sorts of racist names such as “ram” (1.1.87) or “Barbary horse” (1.1.110) and “devil” (1.1.90). Accordingly, to Brabantio Othello must be “what she [Desdemona] fear’d to look on” (1.3.102). Quite aware of being “read” as a fearsome stranger by *white* people but trying to cope with it, both Cinthio’s unnamed protagonist and Othello pretend to be someone else while knowing all too well that being esteemed is but an illusion.

Regarding the characters, there is another parallel between “The Handsome Stranger” and *Othello*, which sets them apart from “Un capitano moro.” “The Handsome Stranger” and *Othello* have a trickster with a West African profile: he violates societal norms and is thus both reproached (for his overstepping of laws) and adored for it (because it feels somewhat right to the rest of the society and also because he is witty). Consequently, while gaining some reward, he nevertheless faces punishment by death in the end.

In the folktale, it is the husband who acts as the manipulative trickster. He represents societal norms and to restore them, he violates them. In doing so, he tricks and manipulates his (future) wife into learning a lesson the hardest way, by dying. Therefore, he is as accepted as feared. Since he acts on behalf of the ancestors, his murder may feel right to the descendants. And yet, he is somewhat punished, too. He dies again, committing a symbolic suicide. He will return to his home (which is a reward), while this home is where evil and death reside side by side with ancestral pride.

In Cinthio’s and Shakespeare’s texts, the role of manipulator is played by the “wicked Ensign” (3) in the former and by Iago in the latter. Ensign, though, is not a trickster. But Iago is. And one that corresponds to the profile of the West African trickster at that. Both the Ensign’s and Iago’s racist interventions into interracial marriage were sanctioned by societal conventions, for cosmopolitan Venice’s claim to faring unaffected by racism was ultimately far from the truth. What is hypocritically hidden by some at first is visible in Brabantio, Roderigo and Iago from the beginning. Iago’s Spanish name alludes aptonymically to Santiago de Matamoros, and thus to Spain’s orientalist racism as an alleged antipode to Venetian cosmopolitanism (Everett 2000, 66). Motivated by racist hatred (Cf.: “I hate the M.” 1.3.385), he uses his wit to manipulate Othello into murdering Desdemona. Despite reaching his goal of ending the marriage (which is his “reward”) and despite his success in scheming and outsmarting everyone, Iago is eventually caught and punished. Off stage, he faces torture and thus the very “hell pains” (1.1.171) that he hates as much as he hates Othello.

Thus framed, a decisive difference between “Un capitano moro” and *Othello* comes to light. In the absence of a trickster, Cinthio’s husband character is portrayed as a wicked simpleton – easily fooled when merely told that Desdemona has “betrayed him,” also because she has “taken an aversion to ... [his] blackness” (5). He simply fulfils *white* racist stereotypes of a stranger who should therefore be feared. Or to cite Desdemona: “Nay, but you m. are so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge” (5). It is, however, much more challenging to deceive Othello: Iago has to go to great lengths to derail Othello’s trust in Desdemona. It takes Iago all his wit to drive Othello “into a jealousy so strong / that judgement cannot cure” (2.1.299-300). Yet the more trickster-wit Iago needs to expend, the more intelligence, pain and psychological depth is granted to Othello. Consequently, the audience becomes more



engaged with his character and can see the racist deed beyond the femicide, thus eventually mourning and condemning both intersectionally.

In line with the divergent profile of the husband's murder, the manner in which the three texts culminate in catastrophes that conclude the narration varies. All three women are punished with death, the husbands die, too. Ensign's death is a happy end. Othello's, however, is not. Cinthio's protagonist is brutally murdered and dies in disgrace. But just like the handsome stranger's suicide is about being respected by the ancestors, Othello regains some dignity and justice by committing suicide with a "sword of Spain" (5.2.251) that metonymically alludes to Iago's racism. This is very much in line with the textual conclusion.

While "Un capitano moro" and the folktale suggest that the woman's decision needs to be punished like this, *Othello* argues otherwise. Not Desdemona's marriage to Othello is the problem, but the society's racist disagreement thereof. While the folktale's husband returns to the dead with an accomplished mission, the Black husband and the Ensign in Cinthio's story are tortured and eventually killed. Though Iago is tortured, too, and Othello faces death as well, Shakespeare also seeks the audience's empathy for Othello's suffering and, finally, his suicide. Being committed with a "sword of Spain" metonymically alludes to Iago's role: Othello lives up to racist stereotypes that he had tried to repudiate, yet he is driven into them by racism itself. This is condemned symbolically by Iago's having to face the "hell pains" of torture.

The textual dynamics correspond to the folktale wife's concluding remarks as well as the text's own conclusion. The vicious murder of both the folktale's and Cinthio's Desdemona affirms their respective societies' codes of wedlock warning them not to marry strangers: "You were too choosy about a husband ... You chose" a handsome stranger and he "destroyed you" ("A Girl and A Python" 102). Likewise, in "Un capitano moro," Desdemona holds, "I fear that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents, and that the Italian ladies may learn from me not to wed a man who nature and habitude of life estrange from us" (9).

While the folktale's didactic moral is geared towards prohibiting girls from marrying strangers, and Cinthio's "Un capitano moro" issues the racist verdict that a *white* Christian woman should not marry a Black man, Shakespeare's *Othello* turns this dogma upside down. What is more, the tragedy does not blame the failure of the marriage on the husband's being a stranger or a Black man marrying a *white* woman, but on the society's racist denial to facilitate a sense and space of belonging for whom they call a "stranger" and for a marriage of *white* and Black spouses. Shakespeare stages racism to challenge it. Thus, despite of thematic and plot parallels, the texts travel to different conclusions. "Un capitano moro" confirms the racism of his time, while it is challenged by Shakespeare's *Othello* (Arndt 2018).

#### 4. Towards Trans\*Textuality as Source Studies' Theoretical Frame

Given the theoretical and conceptual frame discussed above, the folktale of the "Handsome Stranger" and the trickster character in West African folktale as well as "Descrittione dell'Africa" and "The Tale of Three Apples" can be considered re\*sources that have a rhizomic, palimpsestic presence in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Such textual

routes as well as the pillaring concepts of “re\*source” and “rhizomic remixing,” in turn, may be best accommodated by the theoretical framework of “trans\*textuality.”

My usage of trans\*textuality sets itself apart from a specific and narrow interest in linear, direct textual encounters between two or more texts. Likewise, it differs from a most general understanding of intertextuality á la Kristeva as well as from the idea of archetypes. Like Genette’s transtextuality, it is oriented towards the agency of readers, but it also considers the authors’ creativity, textual agencies and the dominant power constellations as pertinent. In a nutshell, trans\*textuality posits textual encounters as textual contact zones that have grown rhizomically, while being framed by power constellations and the respective scope of agencies. Trans\*textuality is about a polylogicity that has been informed by the interplay of direct and indirect textual encounters, which thus accounts for the rhizomic roots and routes of remixing across genres and media.

First of all, trans\*textuality stresses that any text is created out of and into a textual landscape in which texts are not clearly demarcated but rather blend into each other, as re\*sources. This rhizomic remixing of re\*sources also embraces pre-texts that travel via in\*direct and un\*traceable routes. Such landscapes and encounters are moulded by power and its discourses, as well as the agency of writers and readers. Authorship and readership matter inasmuch as texts do not simply happen; they are made by complementary agencies of writers, texts/textualities and readers that keep wrenching texts out of and into new contexts and discourses.

Accordingly, and secondly, trans\*textuality is not about similarities and parallels alone. It also asserts that texts that know and serve one another as re\*sources may still contradict each other – a strategy well known from the poetics of writing back, for example. In other words, re\*sources or pre-texts may be wrenched “out of context” (Miola 2014, 4). This also comprises to be moulded by conflicting, competing and complementary (textual) agencies, interests and contingencies across genres and media.

Thirdly, trans\*textuality holds that any text’s roots and routes can be found via its futures. This is what *cultural memory* is about: highlighting re\*sources. When translating, adopting or staging (and thus culturally or linguistically translating) a play, the artist(s) may very well be aware of the presence of the literatures belonging to their own cultural histories in a certain Shakespearean text. They may therefore make this interface between the Shakespearean text and the oral text of their own culture visible by emphasising similarities between the two. This is, for example, the case with Ahmed Yerima’s *Otaelo*, which features the textual parallels between *Othello* and “The Handsome stranger,” while also emphasising the trickster-features of Iago as well as displaying parallels to Leo Africanus and the “Tale of Three Apples,” which are his re\*sources. Thus tuned, trans\*textuality is capable of framing the reconfiguration of Shakespeare source studies by looking at orality, beyond Europe, and in\*direct, rhizomic encounters of remixing.

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### Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel diskutiert die intertextuelle Verbindung zwischen Shakespeares *Othello* (1604) und westafrikanischer Oralliteratur im Allgemeinen und dem nigerianischen Märchen „The Handsome Stranger“ im Besonderen. Oralliteratur aus Afrika als Quelle Shakespeares herzuführen, versteht sich als eine Intervention in die eurozentristische Ausrichtung der Shakespeare Source Studies. Die dafür erforderliche theoretische und methodische Rahmung wird im Artikel hergeleitet, indem „re\*source“ als Konzept und „Trans\*textualität“ als Theorie diskutiert wird. Die ästhetische Präsenz afrikanischer Wissensproduktion, so die These des Artikels, korreliert damit, dass Shakespeares *Othello* eine Kritik am Rassismus in Szene setzt, der, insbesondere in Gestalt von Iago, Othello in den Femizid an Desdemona treibt. Diese intersektionelle Awareness in Shakespeares Tragödie wird als Gegenerzählung zu *Othellos* wichtigstem Quellentext, Cintios „Un capitano moro,“ hergeleitet.

## ***CALL FOR STATEMENTS – SHAKESPEARE SEMINAR 2024***

### **“Who’s in, who’s out”: Community and Diversity in Shakespeare**

Time and again, Shakespeare demonstrates the frailty and contingency of the many historical and “imagined” communities (Anderson) that feature in his works. Many of his plays evolve around the conflict between individuals and society, depicting the bonds between friends, lovers, family members or even whole nations being put to the test by desire, jealousy, and ambition. If Shakespeare’s communities are unstable to begin with, then discussions of diversity bring to light that very instability even further. His works have been both hailed for showcasing the universality of human nature and critiqued for implicitly reinforcing a Western, Eurocentric world view. Shakespearean drama walks a fine line between incorporating diverse facets of early modern life – including gender and sexuality, race, and religion – and perpetuating insidious mechanisms of marginalisation and othering, as the fates of some of the figureheads of Shakespearean diversity, such as Shylock, Othello and Caliban, show. On Shakespeare’s stage, community and diversity are intimately but uneasily paired and expose the various ways in which “difference”, as Goran Stanivukovic writes in *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality* (2017), is “based on suppression, occlusion and semantic difference of allied vocabulary” (24). Shakespeare thus makes us ponder the question “who’s in, who’s out” (*King Lear* 5.3.16) both in early modern times and in ours. While the dramatic representations of these conflicts are inevitably bound to the historical contexts that helped produce them, the theatre itself always had and still has the potential to renegotiate them and to newly create communities, just as it is capable of diversifying Shakespeare, and making his works more inclusive for 21st century audiences.

In light of this complex nexus, we invite short papers on how Shakespeare’s works, their performance, and reception engage with community, diversity, and the difficult dynamics between them. Topics may include, but are in no way limited to:

- Representations of inclusion and exclusion in Shakespeare’s works
- Community and diversity in the early modern period
- Shakespeare’s treatment of marriage, friendship, family, and kinship
- Intersectional Shakespeare
- Shakespeare and (trans)national communities
- Diversifying the Shakespearean canon through ‘non-canonical’ readings
- Adapting and appropriating Shakespeare’s works to build more inclusive communities
- Institutional (lack of) diversity and community in Shakespeare studies
- Teaching Shakespeare more ‘diversely’
- Accessible Shakespeare

Our seminar will address these issues with a panel of six papers during the annual conference of the German Shakespeare Association, *Shakespeare-Tage*, which will take place from 19–21 April 2024 in Bochum, Germany. As critical input for the discussion, we invite papers of no more than 15 minutes that present concrete case studies, concise examples and strong views on the topic. Please send your proposals (abstracts of 300 words) by **01 December 2023** to the seminar convenors:

Dr. Marlene Dirschauer, University of Hamburg: [marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de)

Dr. Jonas Kellermann, University of Konstanz: [jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de)

The Seminar provides a forum for established as well as young scholars to discuss texts and contexts.

Participants of the seminar will subsequently be invited to submit extended versions of their papers for publication in *Shakespeare Seminar Online (SSO)*. While we cannot offer travel bursaries, the association will arrange for the accommodation of all participants in a hotel close to the main venues.

For more information, please contact Marlene Dirschauer and Jonas Kellermann. For more

information about the events and publications also see: <https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/>.