ANCIENT STORIES OF ECCENTRIC LANDS: SHAKESPEARE'S CLASSICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE BLACK SEA

Monica Matei-Chesnoiu

Abstract:

The paper examines migratory motifs and allusions to the Black Sea area from the classical texts into three Shakespearean comedies and a history play. The analysis focuses on how Shakespeare used classical myth related to the *Pontus Euxinus* to compare, but mainly to contrast these territories with his contemporaries' assumptions about them. In addition, the paper looks at how Shakespeare made (tragic) drama out of classical historical texts, or the geographical narratives of wonder.

Keywords: *ancient historical and geographical narratives, Shakespeare's sources, the Black Sea*

In examining the accumulation of migratory motifs and references to Eastern European lands from the classical texts into the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre culture, the aim of this paper is to elucidate a process. How did Shakespeare use the classical references and myth related to distant and alien places in the Black Sea area to compare, but mainly to contrast, these territories with his contemporaries' assumptions about them? In addition, it is interesting to look at how Shakespeare made (tragic) drama out of classical historical texts, or from the geographical narratives of wonder abounding in ancient writers when they referred to distant places. Shakespeare used allusions embedded in these Greek and Latin texts, most of which were in English translations, as effective generators of contrasting perspectives, in the process of assimilation and theatrical transformation of the data deriving from classical writers. The geographic and cultural integration of Eastern European spaces as borrowed from the classics in the plays is a digested and a-topical product, in the same way as the appropriations of the Shakespearean canon have become for Eastern European countries in later times. Thus, Shakespeare has been used in modern times exactly in the same way as he used his classical sources.

Shakespeare's command of the classics[1] has been for a long time the subject of intense debate. A primary question was whether his connection to classical texts was direct or oblique. Did Shakespeare read the original stories he appropriated, or did he rely mainly on translations? This question is no longer a problem, and current scholarship has answered it cogently.[2] According to Russ McDonald, "Not only was Shakespeare able to read Latin literature in the original, but he also seems to have liked it and to have decided that theater audiences would too."[3] Robert S. Miola examines how Shakespeare transformed his sources and the traditions they embody. In the last chapter of his *Shakespeare's Reading*, entitled "Shakespeare as Reader", Miola proposes several reading/borrowing habits. Among the points that Miola makes are: Shakespeare reads competitively, seeking to outdo his sources; he reads eclectically, and he emphasizes contrast in locality.[4] This practice of shifting locales sets the foreign spaces he alludes to in permanent contrast to his contemporary Elizabethan and Jacobean England. However, Shakespeare's audiences were reputedly varied, so no one is certain what they inferred from the plays they saw, or what they preferred to see. Similarly, no one is sure about the extent to which the theatrical community intersected with the more conventional literary circles in Shakespeare's time. Therefore, information about Shakespeare's access to certain classical texts published in his lifetime is uncertain. Nevertheless, the plays' text and performance potential pull for different kinds of reaction from the audiences, and most probably secure them.

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[1] For works exploring Shakespeare's use of classical writings see John Artos, "Shakespeare and the Ancient World", *Michigan Quarterly Review* 10 (1971), 149-63; Lydia Baumbach "Shakespeare and the Classics", *Acta Classica* 28 (1985), 77-86; Charles and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: An Introductory Essay* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Robert S. Miola, "Reading the Classics", *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 3 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 72-85; Sarah Annes Brown, "'There is no end but addition:' The Later Reception of Shakespeare's Classicism", *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 277-93

[2] The problem was debated amicably on the SHAKSPER electronic conference, especially the matters regarding whether he could read Italian and French; see for example the posting by Jim Carroll on 3 February 2003, SHK 14.0176. Archived at <http://www.shaksper.net/archives/2003/0175.html> 02/03/03 (Accessed at 26 February 2008). However, I subscribe to the common positing about Shakespeare's classical education.

[3] Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 149.

[4] Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158.

Ancient writers constructed their description of spaces they had not seen according to the classical genre of *periplus*, an elaborate form of writing in which the account can be a visualization of the regions under scrutiny, a graphic and global representation of the world on a small scale. Another method was a composite of ethnography and history, a description of peoples and their history and myths. Claude Nicolet elucidates several facts about the geographical knowledge of the ancient world and considers that each of these two original methods of representing the globe has developed along with the extension of voyages of discovery. Whether they were maritime or exploratory, military or political, such voyages contributed to the construction of "global knowledge",[1] a form of theoretical inquiry that would later emerge into modern geographical science.

The ways of communication in the ancient world, the rivers and seas, were the landmarks of all geographical representations because they were the grand routes of commerce and provided access to remote areas of the earth. Since the accessibility of these naval routes was only relative, classical writers seldom based their accounts on direct information of the far-away Eastern European regions. Herodotus, for example, quotes his sources in a general way, making a distinction between the travellers' reports and the legends about distant regions, and justifying the scarcity of facts through the remoteness and inaccessibility of the inland territories. Most ancient writers had to rely on other people's reports about these lands, which restricted their first-hand knowledge to the Mediterranean basin. This fact gives the ancient historical and geographic narratives a questionable note of extravagance and makes them subject to certain exaggerations. In these texts, readers can make no clear distinction between the informative accounts, based on visits, and the fantastic stories about the regions north of the Danube and the Black Sea.

The Roman Empire provides an illustrious model of geographer-narrator, who assimilated fact and fiction, and created a concoction of stories very much like a palimpsest, in which stories from varied sources were rearranged and refurbished, to produce an eccentric historical-geographical narrative. Caius Julius Solinus, surnamed Polyhistor, or "Teller of Varied Tales" provided the standard source of geographic myth for over a thousand years in the Western world. Solinus can have no claim at originality, since nine-tenths of his *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (Gallery of Wonderful Things), first published about AD 230-240 came straight out of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, though Solinus does not even mention his name. The rest comes from a variety of sources, none of which is of outstanding quality. The emphasis throughout the book is on the marvellous, the unusual, and the unbelievable. In

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[1] Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 58.

Solinus's teratological compendium, human monstrosities existed mostly in remote parts of the world.

Despite the fictionalization of reality and the obvious exaggerations, Solinus's word was taken as unchallenged truth by great minds for over a thousand years. The book was still of enough interest to warrant reprinting both in the original Latin and in translations into the languages spoken in sixteenth-century Europe. Arthur Golding[1] made the only English translation of Solinus's *Collectanea*,[2] along with the more famous *Commentaries* of Caesar, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and an English version of the works of Pomponius Mela. George Kish, the author of the modern *Introduction* to the facsimile reproduction of the 1587 edition of Solinus certifies the popularity of this weaver of fabulous tales among the Elizabethans. According to Kish, "Golding translated *Collectanea*, though thirteen hundred years old, because the book most likely was still in use in some schoolrooms of Elizabethan England, to be learned by rote as it had been for centuries before."[3] It is possible to infer, therefore, the large availability of certain classical texts for larger reading groups, since these texts, such as Solinus, were extant not only in the private libraries of the time, but at the hands of the public in Elizabethan schools.

From the marginal notes of Solinus's account of Greece we learn about "The storie of Arion the Musician, that was brought thether through the Sea upon a Dolphin's backe" (sig. J.i). Arion was the traditional inventor of dithyrambic poetry and master on the cithara employed by Periander, King of Corinth. While returning from Sicily to Corinth he was in danger of being murdered by the sailors for the sake of the valuable prizes he had won, but being permitted to play once more upon his cithara he attracted dolphins round the ship, and flinging himself into the sea was rescued on the back of one of them. Arion's adventure story would be familiar to an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience as a classical commonplace. Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* is described as floating on a mast, "like Arion on a dolphin's back" (1.2.14), barely able to "hold acquaintance with the waves" (1.2.15). The musical resonance of the sea-

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[1] Gordon Braden includes a discussion of the influence of Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry: Three Case Studies*, Yale Studies in English 187 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

[2] I have used the facsimile edition of the 1587 version, *The Excellent and Pleasant Worke Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium of Caius Julius Solinus.* Translated from Latin (1587) by Arthur Golding (Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles Reprints, 1955). There are three other English versions issued in the same year: STC 22896 and STC 22896.5.

[3] George Kish, introduction to *The Excellent & Pleasante Worke Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium of Caius Julius Solinus. Translated from Latin (1587) by Arthur Golding* (Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles Reprints, 1955), 3.

floating metaphor is attuned to the mythological reference and to the location where the shipwreck takes place, the coast of Illyria, which is supposed to be an idyllic land of classical harmony. Shakespeare's Illyria, however, is a place where vague expectations of Hellenistic poetic harmony and music are blended with the jarring noises of the real world, of carnival, and personality shifts.

In a section about the Sea of Constantinople (the Hellespont), witnessing on the wonderful nature of dolphins, Solinus writes about "Another childe named *Hirmias*, likewise riding on a Dolphin's back in the Sea" (sig. N.ii.), who was taken to the shore. Apart from a possible inspiration for Hermia's name, this passage brings us to Oberon's vision, recounted to Puck, about the origin of the "western flower", which the king of fairies saw emerging from Cupid's arrow while he "sat upon a promontory/ And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back" (2.1.149-50).[1] The classical allusion has more to it than the mere word-choice similarity because it refers to the mysterious power of art and music, which Oberon could hear, while Puck could not, although he said that he remembered the moment. Actually, all Puck could remember was seeing Oberon sit on a promontory. Like Arion the Musician in the classical myth, who was saved by a dolphin drawn by his music, Oberon could hear a mermaid singing on a dolphin's back, and the power of music had redemptory properties.

This is a typical example showing how Shakespeare fused classical tradition, names, and places in a way of his own; he displaced them from their points of origin, collated several such stories in a single powerful visual metaphor, and brought it into a new space, the stage, where such scenes could not be shown directly. However, the conceit told more about the myth of origin and the places it summoned to the imagination than volumes of exotic writings, such as Solinus's narrative. As Russell West observes when discussing Thomas Platter's comments on Elizabethan theatre and travel, "theatre is a way of creating, within the settled stability of the source culture, similar modes of perception to those gained in travel. In Platter's words, it is a way of 'experiencing foreign things at home.'"[2] Like Puck watching Oberon sit on a promontory, we are the audiences watching Shakespearean characters expand indefinite imaginary spaces and geographies on stage, which are a blend of reality and fiction, but just as volatile as Oberon's visions, and we have only his word to verify the veracity of these images.

The Eastern European territory occupied by nowadays Romania contains the Carpathians, the farther end of the Danube, and the Western coast

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[1] All my references to the Shakespeare text are keyed to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997).

[2] Russell West, *Spatial Representations and the Jacobean Stage: From Shakespeare to Webster* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 173.

of the Black Sea. In ancient times, this was a part of the Greek concept of *oikumene*, the inhabited world. Though within the known world, the Greek and later Roman colonies, and in general that part of Dacia[1] were just at the limits of the domesticated realm of the ancients. As Mary B. Campbell points out, "The limit of geographical knowledge, wherever located, was a point commonly charged with moral significance and, even in pre-Christian times, with divine dangerousness."[2] Marginal places outside the usual ancient routes of commerce had an extraneous and often exotic connotation for the writers of old. They formed the licentious fringe of a geography where extreme things could happen, where excessive winters impeded further exploration, and the inland area was mostly left unexplored because of hard frosts and inaccessible country. Such a territory was the ancient land of modern-day Romania, a country where but few foreigners ventured. When the Greeks extended their commerce there, in the sixth century BC, with the Milesian merchants, they did not hazard to settle further than the western coast of the Black Sea.

The legend of the Argonauts' initiatory voyage is at the root of the name of the ancient city of Tomis, now the city of Constan<a on the Black Sea coast. In Ovid (*Tristia* 3.9),[3] when Medea and Jason fled from Colchis on their way home to Greece with the Golden Fleece, Medea took her brother Absyrtus as a hostage. When pursued by her father, she slew Absyrtus and scattered his body into pieces on the way, to delay her father Aëtes. The body parts were thrown into the *Pontos Euxinos* (the Black Sea), near what was to become the Greek colony of Tomis. It is said that Medea's father buried the pieces of his son's body on the shore in the city of Tomis. This revengeful and barbaric act gave the ancient city its name because τομος means "cut to pieces" in Greek. Ovid used the legend in his poem to emphasize the fact that he had been banished to a foreign and inhospitable land, and thus to appeal to Emperor Augustus for clemency. Many classical writers took over the Latin poet's laments as undeniable facts, describing the lands on the western coast of the Black Sea as

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[1] Dacia is the ancient name of the European region corresponding roughly to modern Romania (including Transylvania). Before the Christian era, the Greeks called its inhabitants Getae, while the Romans called them Daci. Trajan invaded Dacia in AD 102 and again in 105 and thus it became a Roman province. In the third century AD, the Goths invaded the region, and Aurelian was obliged to concede Dacia.

[2] Mary B. Campbell, *The Witneses and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 53.

[3] Churchyard translated three books of Ovid's *Tristia* (1572) and began a translation of Pliny, which he destroyed. For an account of translations of Ovid see Lee T. Pearcy, *The Mediated Muse: English Translations of Ovid 1560-1700* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984), xviii.

barbarous. Pliny writes about the "territorie of the Istrians[1] … and those which the Greeks name Absyrtides, of *Medeas* brother *Absyrtis* there slaine."[2] The general opinion was formed, and everybody agreed that such dismemberment could only take place off the coast of Scythia, a territory where ancient writers thought there were monsters, and local populations were reported to practice cannibalism and other savage activities. This was the image that classical texts created about the regions north and west of the Black Sea, which was available to Shakespeare's audiences; places enshrouded in terror, bloody deeds, and evisceration.

Shakespeare was almost certainly aware of the Argonauts' myth and Medea's anatomization story from his beloved Ovid. We cannot be certain of what Shakespeare read but, judging from the frequency of the Ovidian influences, we can at least document, as Russ McDonald puts it, "the kind of stories Shakespeare liked".[3] In *2 Henry VI*, Young Clifford, at St. Albans, finds his father slain and vows to have no pity for the house of York. The sanguinary image of his father's dead body recalls the equally barbaric action of Medea and it becomes an emblem of cruelty and a call for vengeance:

> Meet I an infant of the house of York,
> Into as many gobbets will I cut it
> As wild Medea young Absyrtus did.
> In cruelty will I seek out my fame. (5.3.57-60)

We see how an appalling image of horror triggered by legendary events having happened in ancient times off the coast of Tomis is used to intensify the consternation provoked by the dead body on stage.

An essentially different image evoking the myth of the Argonauts (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, vii, 255ff.) has a theatrical tangible representation in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio presents his intended suit of Portia[4] to Antonio as a grand legendary enterprise of important momentum. Classical

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[1] Ister was the ancient name of the lower Danube, which forms most of the southern border between modern-day Bulgaria and Romania.

[2] Pliny, *The Historie of the World. Commonly called, The Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus.* Translated into English by Philemon Holland, Doctor in Physic (London: Adam Islip, 1601), Moesia: 3. 26., p. 71. STC (2nd ed.) / 20029.

[3] Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, 146.

[4] Heather James, in "Shakespeare's Learned Heroines in Ovid's Schoolroom", *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor, 66-85 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), argues that Shakespeare's learned heroines of the comedies – Hermia, Portia, Rosalind, and Viola – quote and adapt the works by Ovid in order to attain for themselves the expressive liberties Ovid takes with social conventions.

analogies are of great consequence in the young man's attempt to persuade Antonio to finance him. Portia's hair becomes the "golden fleece" in this mythological and geographical analogy of the body, "her seat of Belmont Colchis's strand, / And many Jasons come in quest for her" (1.1.170-72). The reference to this country of Asia, south of Caucasus, region of the wild nomad Scythians according to ancient reports, becomes the promised land of wealth for the young would-be winners from Venice and elsewhere. The juxtaposition of Belmont and Colchis anticipates the contradictory peculiarity of Portia's personality. Part of this character-related ambivalent topography is illustrated with Portia's body on stage and the allusions to distant places drawing on Shakespeare's and the audience's favourite readings.

The parallel between Medea and Portia yields rather disturbing connotations, especially when related to the particular relevance of the allusion to Medea's native place (Colchis), as opposed to Portia's Belmont. Isabella Wheater identifies one of the "sea-stories"[1] lying behind *The Merchant of Venice* in the narrative of Jason and the Golden Fleece which Ovid tells in *Metamorphoses* vii. From this "synthesis" of Aristotle, Christian parables, Ovidian myth, and Horatian lyric emerged, as Wheater argues, a particular "conceptual framework."[2] I would add that a particular geography also emerges from this synthesis, one that is rooted in classical myth and philosophy, but which always keeps the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates that include the British Isles in the equation. Moreover, this assumption of marginality of foreign distant spaces belongs to traditions, modes, and conventions dispersed among many books, and not traceable to specific texts. We see how Shakespeare interprets the classical writers and the floating knowledge derived from them retentively and evocatively, reclaiming classical allusions in a positive synthetizing exercise.

Bassanio presents Jason's quest as a story of success and emphasizes the legendary symbol of material wealth that the Golden Fleece has come to represent along the ages. No obvious association with barbarity, dismemberment, loss, and deceit (as suggested by the Medea story) can be permitted here to disturb the expectations of happiness. However, the collocation of Colchis, Medea's home land, right next to the idyllic Belmont in the text may raise some doubts as to the utter contentment Portia's place can bring. According to Alessandro Serpieri, Venice was a "transposed image" (*immagine trasposta*) of mercantile London, a special place for representing

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[1]   Isabella Wheater, "Aristotelian Wealth and the Sea of Love: Shakespeare's Synthesis of Greek Philosophy and Roman Poetry in *The Merchant of Venice*", *The Review of English Studies* 43 (1992): 467-487; *The Review of English Studies* 44 (1993): 16-36, esp. 16.
[2]   Ibid. 36.

"contemporary tensions" (*tensioni contemporanee*), a sign of the city's "actuality" (*attualità*).[1] In my view, Venice is one point of assumed and comparative civility in the geographic triangulation that includes unreal idyllic Belmont and the distant Colchis of classical myth. All three locations form a constellation of places in which people are expected to act in accordance with the laws of courtesy and honest commerce, but where things are not always so. Potential atrocity seeps through the cracks of civil understanding, and the classical allusion to a Black Sea distant place, famous for cruelty, always rings warning bells.

From a land of milk and honey, as the inexperienced young men Bassanio and Graziano perceived it earlier in the play, Colchis becomes in Shakespeare's theatrical and mythological new geography a region where tragedy is likely to happen and offensive actions are the order of the day. The implied mythological analogy creates a contrast with the remote land of Colchis, north of the Black Sea, where fierce Scythians[2] abide by savage laws. Such a country was seen as being very far from the domesticated and civilized free city of Venice. Even the heavenly Belmont, with its diffuse connotations of eternal wealth and bliss, loses its gilded appearance by association with the distant and savage Colchis of the Scythians.

Through dramatic complementariness, Shakespeare uses the classical reference to an ancient myth happening in a distant land to foreshadow a situation of potential tragedy and dismemberment about to happen in a civilized Western European city, where a member of its community, who is viewed as an outsider by some, threatens with the application of an ancient law. The allusion to Colchis and the Scythians is used to create a contrast between the civilized Renaissance Venice and the foreign lands where such barbaric acts are conceivable to happen. It is likely that the mythological reference to the Argonauts' legend elicited disparaging images of horror and destruction, but also cheating and betrayal, in the audiences, apart from the common suggestion of quest and triumph, and Shakespeare used the insinuation to the classical myth with specific dramatic purposes.

Shakespeare took over such polarity techniques and indicated his audiences that the real place they knew, their England, was no better, no worse, than the classical fictionalized accounts about other distant spaces. This pragmatic relation to the reality of performance, clearly connected to early

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[1] Alessandro Serpieri, "Contratti d'amore e di morte in *The Merchant of Venice*", The Merchant of Venice *dal testo alla scena*, ed. Mariangela Tempera, 9-21 (Bologna: Editrice CLUEB, 1994), 10.

[2] "Scythian" is a vague term for the Iranian-origin peoples who ranged across the Eurasian steppes during the first millennium BCE. We do not know the specific names of the tribes involved, but it is a scholarly convention to refer to them collectively and loosely as "Scythian".

modern England, is one way of Shakespeare's drawing his audience's attention to the fictional status of his stories about distant places, which must be perceived *as if* they were part of the surrounding reality. The only connection between distant Colchis, or the sea Pontus, and the English audiences is formed by the actors' bodies on the stage, which configure an immediate theatrical geography more convincingly than the collections of classical texts can ever do. Shakespeare uses geographic and classical allusions as powerful emotional triggers, eliciting various expressive responses from his audiences and later theatre interpreters. It is reasonable to believe that classical names of Eastern European areas and peoples, such as *Pontus* and *Scythian*, were more familiar to Elizabethans and Jacobeans than the modern geographical names of the sea and the principalities existing at the time, such as the Black Sea and Wallachia or Moldova, the historic regions of modern Romania in early modern times.

In mapping out the theatrical conditions which paved the way for certain Shakespearean classical allusion suggesting Eastern European spaces, I have made an incomplete inventory of the references to ancient myth and places of the Black Sea area described by classical writers that found their way into the plays. The relation of strange ancient locations from the area of the Black Sea, the Carpathians, and the Danube to modern Romania is rather vague. However, the general inferences Shakespeare's audiences could make in relation to these places were connected with the idea of marginality and barbarity. Shakespeare's contemporaries had only the reports of others about these places, because very few had ventured to see these locations themselves. However, the plays have a direct and corporeal way of sending subliminal theatrical messages that are used either to reinforce or to subvert these assumptions. In other instances, these stereotypes about alien ferocity are used as effective detonators of emotions, with great suggestive force. These uncanny dramatic juxtapositions allow us to explore the inter-implication of various forms of geographic marginalization and displacement in early modernity.