

English Drama, African Impulses

A Fresh Look

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Introduction

Early Modern England is clearly separated neither from the cultural and ethnic influence of Africa, nor from the subtle impact of Islam. Africans were present in the country during the Middle Ages, but only in very small numbers, and it was during the 1550s that this began to change. Sir John Hawkins was one of the first English persons who enslaved Black people, deporting them to England and America. The people to whom this happened were ethnically and culturally diverse, yet the tendency was to speak about them with interchangeable synonyms: these include “black(a)_{moor}”, “Aethiopian,” “Blackman,” as well as M[] and N[], while the terms Arab and more commonly Turk were used with similarly loose connotations. The generalizing term M[] would usually designate Muslims, regardless of their ethnic grouping (Barthelemy 1987, 6–8). This composite sector of the population seems to have grown to a notable size, since it grew to be a matter of concern to the royal government.

Dissatisfied with the “great numbers” of the Black population, allegedly causing employment rivalry with the English, Queen Elizabeth I issued executive orders of expulsion in 1596, 1599, and again in 1601 (Ungerer 2008). These orders were a racist proclamation, aiming at proclaiming the superiority of whiteness and the need to prevent it from being “degenerated”. Yet, they were hardly carried out in practice; for enslavers an economic factor of rival accumulation was at stake. As far as they were men, they mostly belonged to the elite class of wealthy merchants. There were English merchants located in Spain in the early 16th century; and some decades later, the beginning of English enslaving voyages between Guinea and the Caribbean, created the infrastructure for the purchase of African slaves by some wealthy English households.

As the archival records show, Africans were employed in skilled menial work but mostly in chattel service. By the mid-16th century, small communities were forming, as well as interethnic unions. Records of Black urban people occur continually from the early 1580s onward, and we can gather that these people formed “a pervasive, repetitive, and accelerating presence in Elizabethan London” as well as a vital contribution to the capital’s economic resources in accumulating profitable items from south of the Mediterranean (Habib 2008, 116). On a smaller scale than in Portugal, but growing, the European enslavement of Africans and the Black population represents “a new world discovered” for Europeans, more than the Columbian conquering, enabling “unimaginable material wealth and human discovery” (Habib 2008, 22). Generally, though, any African living on European soil and elsewhere was in danger of being enslaved, because the laws prohibited this rather than protecting Black people from being enslaved.

Awareness of the presence of African people along with imported goods in early modern London and also a few other English cities, as well as the knowledge of trading voyages to the African shores make it very plausible that imaginative stories of the East and South were highly appealing to theatre audiences and gave playwrights a motivation to depict such events and settings on the stage. In a wider geographical sense, characters who swear by Mohound and Mahound already appeared in medieval drama, as in the case of the York Harrowing.

For the early modern period, however, in this article we will trace a few strikingly inventive depictions of Africans that do not convey stereotypes such as audiences were likely to expect. We will devote attention especially to Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*, George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, and two tragedies by William Shakespeare: *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Eldred Jones from Sierra Leone has described stories about Africans or M[]s as highlighting the “harems of the north African rulers and descriptions of the courts of West African Negro kings” as well as trade (Jones 1965, 87). The actual range of such depictions is rather diverse, and they are not easily summarized. A sequence of early modern English plays that feature African characters, whether speaking roles or not, begins with Marlowe’s two-part tragedy *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587) and reaches to Philip Massinger’s tragicomedy *The Renegado* (1624), as well as later works. Academic discussions of M[]s in the English dramas tend to begin with the Moroccans of Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, though these are not the first African stage characters in the period. We should

not suppose that the literary images of such exotified characters were intervening into racism. On the contrary, the literary presentation of Black people largely fed into racist constructions that projected unattractive characteristics onto these people: they are shown to be aggressive, covetous, cruel, lustful, greedy, and racially inferior. Yet, in a few cases Black characters are presented as more easily approvable in moral terms, showing courage as well as a capacity for hard work and genuine love. On the whole, however, it seems more logical, from a strategy of racist Othering and from economic considerations, in given intersections, to invest dramatic energy in the creation of less appealing African characters, because such renderings offer “an attractive Other and a popular exotic subject,” capable of stimulating the audience’s imagination regarding Black people (Laamiri 2003).

The playwrights who were capable of causing this effect gained their knowledge about African settings and events from several sources. There were historiographical accounts and also travel reports that appeared as books. There were enslavers and colonizers, merchants, traders, privateers, and seamen who carried on trade with northern and western Africa and could talk about their experience. In Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, Barabas tells the audience: “I hope my ships / I sent for Egypt and the bordering Isles / Are gotten up by Nilus’ winding banks: / Mine Argosy from Alexandria, / Loaden with Spice and Silks, now under sail [...]” (1633, ll. 131–135). Then, there were narratives by enslaved traders and seamen who had been captured by Turkish and North African pirates and finally released to return home. Of course, though, this was not even close to the atrocities of the European industrial deportation of Africans that calculated with more than half of the enslaved people dying. The deportation and selling of Africans to Hispanic America was important enough in this period, yet “it was rivaled in potential by the Portuguese trade with Africa”; this continent was “crucial” to English maritime activity in the Atlantic, and African voyages were “truly the nursery” for English mariners (Hall 1995, 16, 19). Some of these people would have contact with those associated with the popular theatres, in urban meeting places and sometimes in court circles where plays would also be performed.

One fruit of these contacts was to bring African characters, events, and settings to the attention of London playgoers. In the pseudo-historical play *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* Robert Greene in the late 1580s introduces Arcastus, King of the M[aj]s, and Claramont, King of B[ar]bar[ia], but hardly gives them speaking roles. In his revenge tragedy *The Jew of Malta*, Christopher Marlowe, being

driven by racist imagery, at the same time shows a slave market featuring M[uslims], Turks, and Jews.

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*

Yet in a very different vein from these works, Marlowe introduces us in *Tamburlaine the Great* (Part 1) to Zenocrate, the daughter of the Soldan of Egypt. After staying with her uncle (Marlowe 1590, 1.224), she is now a part of Tamburlaine's conquest (with an "offensive rape": 1.1055). Although she is betrothed to the Arabian ruler, Tamburlaine—the historical Timur—woos her with promises of material wealth: "Thy Garments shall be made of Medean silke, / Enchast with precious iuelles of mine owne: / More rich and valurous than *Zenocrates*" (1.308-310). Instead of asserting his military privilege, he comes close to giving her a choice: "If you will willingly remaine with me, / You shall haue honors, as your merits be [...]" (1.471-472). The alternative, inevitably, would be slavery. She gradually acknowledges his generous and "princely" treatment of her (1.1089), realizing that a match with him would allow her higher esteem even "[t]han *Iuno* sister to the highest God" (1.1104). Indeed, she relishes the notion that vanquished rulers must "sue to me to be your Aduocates" (1.1352). Hence, she is driven by ambition and a thirst for supreme power, which Tamburlaine is prepared to grant her.

Before long, however, she reconceives her role and begins to plead with him to treat vanquished people, including Egyptians, as well as her father mercifully: "Yet would you haue some pitie for my sake" (1.1666). By this time, Tamburlaine has already acknowledged that she has power to "calme the rage of thundring *Iupiter*" (1.1298)—this explains the etymology of her name, which associates *ruling* or superiority and *Zeus* or *Jupiter*. With the same religious pluralism, and attention to Islam, Zenocrate goes on to lament the cruel treatment of the Turkish emperor and his wife: "Ah myghty *Ioue* and holy *Mahomet*, / Pardon my Loue, oh pardon his contempt [...]" / And pardon me that was not moou'd with ruthe, / To see them liue so long in misery" (1.2282-2283, 2288-2289). She undergoes an inner struggle, not unlike a tragic heroine, as her father in "the Egyptian fields," together with the king to whom she had been betrothed, prepare to battle her lover: "my poore pleasures are deuided thus, / And rackt by dutie from my cursed heart" (1.2301, 2306-2307). Finally, Tamburlaine confesses that she "hath calmd the furie of my sword / Which had ere this bin

bathe in streames of blood [...]” (1.2362-2363), and for her sake “Egyptians, Moores and men of Asia” will be tributaries to her father (1.2443).

As Tamburlaine becomes “Lord of *Affrica*” and “Generall of the world” (1.1381, 2376), the Egyptian princess and her Soldan father share his authority. She has managed to exercise a strong influence on her mighty husband and becomes “diuine” (1.2432). In Part 2, she urges him to abandon military conquest (2.291) and, going even further, not to plant “angry war” in their sons’ minds (2.370). As she eventually enters on her death bed, Tamburlaine again proclaims her divinity:

Apollo, Cynthia, and the ceaslesse lamps / That gently look’d vpon this loathsome earth, / Shine downwards now no more, but deck the heauens / To entertaine diuine Zenocrate” (2.730-733). When she dies, he despairs: “Behold me here diuine *zenocrate*, / Rauing, impatient, desperate and mad, / Breaking my steeled lance [...]”. (2.825-827)

The way she is genuinely revered by her husband and by his followers, together with her virtues and her divinity, suggest analogies to the veneration of Elizabeth I—and beyond this especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary, highly unorthodox in protestant England but a standard rite for Spanish conquerors (see Henry-Offor 2015). In her intimate association with Egypt, Zenocrate’s characterization is not usually examined in connection with staged Blackness, yet it does belong with a consideration of African-based characters and settings in early modern drama.

Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*

African matters play an immense role again in George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (ca. 1591), a play that has survived in a short and apparently abbreviated quarto version. In the 1570s two M[uslim] forces were contending for control of the Moroccan regions of Marrakech and Fez. The legitimate ruler was Abd el-Malek, named Abdelmelec in the play, yet he was challenged by his brother’s son Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh, the play’s Muly Mahamet (with spelling variations and minor historical confusions). This challenger had usurped the ruling position in 1574 but had been ousted two years later. In this struggle, Abd el-Malek gained Turkish support, whereas Mulai Mohammed successfully sought the backing of the Portuguese ruler Don Sebastian—who in turn found

support in Spain, Rome, and in the services of an English mercenary leader named Thomas Stukeley. The decisive battle between these forces took place in the summer of 1578, in a North African town named El-Ksar el-Kebir, and it turned out to be a battle that would “astound Europe and alter the course of history in two continents” (Bovill 1952, 137). In the battle the challenger and his alliance were ultimately defeated; Don Sebastian and the English mercenary were killed, Mulai Mohammed was drowned, while Abd el-Malek himself died of illness, to be succeeded by his brother Ahmed el-Mansur.

Peele devotes considerable attention to Mulai Mohammed, whose role is that of villain (Hyland 1999, 95–96; Mangum 2002, 16–17). His side is cynical about the incentive for military action: “gold is the glue, sinewes, and strength of war, / And we must see our treasure may go safe, / Away” (Peele 1907, sig. B1r). Abd el-Malek and his supporters were on friendly terms with the English government, commercially and politically, and Peele’s dramatic interpretation presents this side more favorably than the challenger’s. As a consequence, Peele’s drama offers an especially early rendering of morally and culturally attractive African people (on the terminology, the M-word being used, see Guinle 2008, 28–29). Peele was able to do this because he recognized individual distinctions between various Africans and the values they represent, without being bound to conventional prejudices regarding the Othering of religion and culture. The play’s presumably European Presenter announces this differentiated understanding of the play’s events:

Honor the spurre that pricks the princely minde,
To followe rule and climbe the stately chaire,
With great desire inflames the Portingall,
An honorable and courageous king,
To vndertake a dangerous dreadfull warre,
And aide with christian armes the barbarous Moore,
The Negro *Muly Hamet* that with-holds
The kingdome from his vnkle *Abdilmelec*,
Whom proud *Abdallas* wrongd,
And in his throne instals his cruell sonne,
That now vsurps vpon this prince,
This braue Barbarian Lord *Muly Molocco*. (1907, sig. A2r)

The “honorable” young Portuguese king with other Europeans is rushing to aid a “cruell” and “barbarous” usurper, while the “Barbarian” M[], allied with

the Turks, is “braue.” This ambivalence of values creates a complex dramatic interpretation of the events. Ambivalence is also introduced when both sides invoke a zest for revenge (as in 1907, sigs. A2v, A4v, N2v), suggesting not only the genre of revenge tragedy but also a potential and residual vindication of the challenger’s cause though not perhaps his character. The English ambassador in 1577 speaks of Abd el-Malek as “one that liveth greatly in the feare of God, being well exercised in the Scriptures, as well in the olde Testament as also in the New, and he beareth a greater affection to our Nation then to others because of our religion, which forbiddeth worship of Idols [...]” (Hakluyt, 1903/4, 6:289). Islam here appears very close to protestant Christianity, against the Catholic Portuguese who support Abd el-Malek’s rival. This proximity was not necessarily something wholly implausible to the public experience of the English, because in their country M[]s and Turks were “everywhere,” in coastal towns and in the streets and the courts (Matar 1999, 39). Many of the English knew such people because “they had worked and lived” with them, by no means always resulting in hatred but rather “accepting or admiring” them (Matar 1999, 6). Abd el-Malek appears in the drama as a pious Muslim who appeals to divine justice in a way that is designed to make an English audience sympathetic to him:

Abdilmelec here
 Throw vp thy trembling hands to heauens throne
 Pay to thy God due thanks, and thanks to him
 That strengthens thee with mightie gracious armes,
 Against the proud vsurper of thy right. (Peele 1907, sig. A3r)

There appears to be a confusion of speakers in the study by Al-Olaqi (2016, 82). In the speech, at any rate, the adjectives are carefully placed to enhance a sense of the speaker’s ethos, and there are further instances of this guidance of sympathy in the play. Rather than appear wrathful toward Don Sebastian, who has become his enemy, Abd el-Malek finds him “lead with deceiuing hope” and “carelesse,” and announces that he himself has “in pittie to the *Portugall* / Sent secret messengers to counsell him,” thus hoping for a chance to resort to diplomacy (Peele 1907, sig. D3r-v).

Don Sebastian might appear to be a European champion in his professed mission to “plant the christian fath in Affrica,” backed by the English mercenary leader who proclaims “Saint George for England” (1907, sig. D1v). Yet their entire enterprise is ill-advised and, while momentarily seeming to be on the verge

of success, ultimately fails—a failure both of Catholicism and of the European alliance. It is too late that the Portuguese ruler realizes he has been deceived by “[a] face so full of fraud and villanie” (1907, sig. F2v), against the righteous Muslim prince. Yet during a phase of the battle when the enemy seems to be gaining the upper hand, Abd el-Malek dies in despair, whereupon his brother laments “Braue Abdelmelec, though thrise noble Lord, / Not such a wound was giuen to Barbary, / Had twenty hoasts of men beene put to swoord / As death, pale death with fatall shaft hath giuen” (1907, sig. F1v-F2r). The quality “braue” is associated with this M[] throughout, since the opening Presenter’s description. Fahd Mohammed Taleb Al-Olaqi (2016, 88) highlights “the Elizabethan playwrights’ cross-cultural understanding and accord” as seen in the depiction of Abd el-Malek; this appears to be a generalization that would need more careful distinction of individual styles and perceptions.

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (with Peele)

As for Peele, he presumably collaborated in *Titus Andronicus* (probably written in the period 1588–1593), a very early tragedy that belongs to the Shakespeare corpus. It is the opposite of *The Battle of Alcazar* in that the action is not historical but fictional, drawing on a range of presumable sources for various parts. The action is rather complex. Titus Andronicus is a Roman general who is returning from a campaign, having captured the queen of the Goths (Tamora) together with her three sons and Aaron the M[], who is her secret lover.

This Black character shows a development from the characterization of Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh, while both are villains in the dramatic scheme. We do not learn how Aaron comes to be among the Goths (perhaps the Visigoths in Spain?), or what his social standing is among them (perhaps a tutor?), so that we are free to speculate on how he is “embedded” in their culture (Bartels 2008, 81). As an act of retribution for his own dead sons, Titus sacrifices Tamora’s eldest son despite her impassioned pleas. Predictably, this act ensures her hatred. As the play then presents a range of further atrocities committed by Roman characters or leaders in the subsequent action, the schemes that will be devised by Tamora and Aaron against the Andronici do not appear to be singularly outrageous or savage. In Rome, at any rate, at the time of Titus’s return, a bitter competition for the imperial throne is raging between the sons of the late emperor (Saturninus and Bassianus). In this situation, Titus is asked to take the throne, but he declines in favor of

Saturninus. The latter offers to marry Titus's daughter, yet she is actually betrothed to Bassianus, who abducts her. Instead, Saturninus appoints Tamora as empress, a move that Emily Bartels finds at least in principle justified as evincing "cross-cultural connections" as against a "confining provincialism" (2008, 75, 78). Nonetheless, it gives Tamora a position that she can now use to take revenge on Titus and his remaining family. She and Aaron urge her two remaining sons to rape Titus's daughter secretly, then to cut her hands and her tongue to conceal their deed. Titus counter-schemes to trap Tamora's sons, so that he can kill them—and bake them in pies.

Throughout the tragedy's first act, which may have been authored especially by Peele, Aaron does not speak, he watches the unfolding action carefully and thus learns much about the unstable and almost chaotic power struggles among the Roman leadership. In an interesting reading, Emily Bartels turns against the notion of a Roman cultural purity and emphasizes that in Rome a crossing of cultures is "not the exception but the rule" (2008, 70). Yet there is a limit to this from the very beginning when Aaron's isolation leaves him very much on the fringe, if not beyond. The power struggles in Rome leave a gap for an outsider, which he is quick to perceive.

When Tamora becomes empress, Aaron opens the second act with a soliloquy in which he relishes her rise to power and muses about the new opportunity this gives him: "Then, Aaron, arm thy heart, and fit thy thoughts, / To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress. [...] Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!" (1.2.12-13, 18). A soliloquy is a device that allows a character to reveal inner motivations and emotions to the audience, introspectively, without engaging in the social exchange of dialogue that might require a façade to protect the speaker's interiority. It is thus used for the purpose of adding psychological complexity to a characterization, and this is clearly the intention in Aaron's case. From here on, he is remarkably capable of invoking Greco-Roman mythology (Olympus, Prometheus, Lucrece, Philomel ...) in order to subject Romans to a range of received texts, which he inscribes on their lives (Chaudhury 2001), as a strategy of gaining and maintaining an unexpected authority. Thus, in the first part of the tragedy, he appears as a brutal schemer who attains the trust of the Goths and the Romans, even as he uses his superior wit to advance Tamora's revenge, expecting that she will undo the whole colonizing "commonweal" of Saturninus (2.1.24) with its assumed pretence of civilized public responsibility.

His ambition might confirm an audience's expectation of a savage and barbarian M[], yet the fourth act introduces a surprising turn when his and Ta-

mora's son is born. The nurse who enters with the Black baby is fully aware, like Tamora herself, of the political fallout if the court should learn about this birth:

A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue! / Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-fac'd breeders of our clime" (4.2.66-68). Beyond the political warning, her invective is racist in its animal imagery, by implication extending to the father himself. To protect her status, the empress has commanded the baby's death; her sons instantly get ready to obey, yet Aaron rounds on them all: "Zounds, ye whore, is black so base a hue? (4.2.71)

He is using a Christian oath ("God's wounds"), though anachronistic, potentially implying a divine refusal to regard black skin as "base," and a few lines later he hurls contempt on the young men's whiteness: "Ye white-lim'd walls! Ye alehouse painted signs! / Coal-black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue; / For all the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan's black legs to white [...]" (4.2.98-102). He thus calls the young white men hypocrites and implies they are not genuinely human. Their "painted" quality suggests to Anne Mangum that white skin is "thin and transparent" (2002, 25), yet the painted sign image is likely to point to a counterfeit representation that lacks reality. This difference is not a matter of detail, since it affects the larger understanding of ethnicity in the tragedy.

Aaron's pride in offspring now becomes his highest value, because the child is "myself," to be kept safe "maugre all the world" (4.2.107, 110)—a motivation that might seem to link him with Titus himself, were it not that the Roman general has killed his own son Mutius in the first act for a momentary disobedience. To save Tamora's imperial status, Aaron finds a way to replace his son with a Gothic baby while he conveys his own child to the Goths to have him raised in safety. He utters a vision of bringing up his son "[t]o be a warrior and command a camp" (4.2.180), possibly a Gothic camp as the context implies; a playgoer some decades later might think of Aaron's son as growing up to be Othello, albeit with a secretly white imperial mother. At any rate, in the Gothic realm Aaron encounters Titus's exiled son, Lucius, who claims the imperial throne and is leading a Gothic army to invade the capital city. When Lucius, at the head of the Gothic forces, meets Aaron (carrying his baby), he calls him "the incarnate devil" and "ravenous tiger" (5.1.40, 5.3.5), yet the M[] turns his self-righteousness around by exclaiming "If there be devils, would I were a devil, / To live and burn in everlasting fire, / So I might have your company in hell [...]" (5.1.147-149). Lucius did indeed dismember Tamora's son in the opening scene,

and is not morally superior to Aaron—while he is now leading a ‘b_{arbarian}’ army against Rome in his thirst for power.

Though Lucius is resolved to kill Aaron, he is persuaded to spare his baby in exchange for vital information from him about what has been happening in Rome, which he needs in order to advance his claim. What is remarkable about the depiction of the range of actions is the enhanced complexity of the Black villain figure, a new development as against Mulai Mohammed. Aaron himself cannot be reduced to a formula, and the characterization is quite likely a process of continuing exploration of identity frames (see also Anderson 2020). He remains obstinately and even excessively spiteful against Roman leaders, uttering rants that make a mockery of their professed moral virtues, and now empowering an army of Tamora’s own people to conquer the city—and showing his willingness to sacrifice his own life in order to allow his son to live. Considering the Roman lip-service to civilized conduct, Aaron can be found to possess more “moderation and self-discipline” than they in practice (Royster 2000, 447).

Lucius sentences Aaron to be set “breast-deep in earth [...] fast’ned in the earth” (5.3.179, 183) and famished. Emily Bartels emphasizes that this means he will be denied due burial (2008, 65), yet the visual connotation goes beyond this to identify him with mere earth, below the level of humans and animals. This is perhaps designed to recall Diodorus Siculus’s information that the Ethiopians were “the first to be generated by the earth” (1935, Book 3.2, 2:91), hence picturing an African’s regression to this appropriately pristine state. Leo Africanus describes some people of Congo who in their native religion throw themselves “groueling” on the earth and cover their faces with dust, thus, as he indicates, lowering their minds as far as possible (Al-Wazzān 1600, 378). Perhaps more to the point, “[i]n African cosmology there is mutuality between humans and the earth: the earth has the omnipotent power to punish transgressors” (Tafira 2015). Yet the Lucian punishment in the tragedy is a singular degradation, answering the way Titus’s sons are trapped into a “gaping hollow of the earth” (2.3.249). These Roman aristocrats have accordingly been termed “autochthonous offspring of the earth” (D’Amico 1991, 144), almost as if they were Ethiopians, so that their trap denies any *pax Romana* heritage.

A reason for Aaron’s degradation may be that, even though Saturninus earlier described Lucius as enjoying the people’s support, Lucius seems to fear that his power base is somewhat shaky. After Aaron’s scheming against the Roman leadership, it takes the strongest possible deterrent of capital punishment to keep the people Lucius wishes to govern from relieving or siding Aaron]: “If any

one relieves or pities him, / For the offense he dies" (5.3.181-182). The Black baby apparently survives, its further destiny being no part of the dramatic design that shapes this tragedy. Because of the boy's escape from destruction, Aaron has been analyzed as embodying "a human capacity for survival and renewal," able to become "the next patron of *virtù*" contrasting with Titus (D'Amico 1991, 145). Yet that is not established in the play, it seems to rest on Aaron's fantasy about his child's future.

In these ways, Elizabethan dramatists made advances in exploring the considerable potential of creating complex and ambivalent African stage characters and events. The experience gained in depicting the opposed Moroccans in Peele's play as well as Aaron enabled strong further developments as in the Prince of Morocco (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 2) and "Othello, the M[] of Venice", the first character to qualify as a tragic protagonist. It has been discovered that *Othello* forms a transtextual network with a West African folktale (see Arndt 2018), a prominent case of African narrative integration. Investigations also reveal an impact of *Alf Layla Wa Layla* on *Othello*, as well as a presumable influence of Antarah Ibn Shaddad (Elhanafy 2024, Chapters 3.2, 3.3). In *Othello* and, even more so, *The Tempest*, as Arndt argues, Shakespeare is aware of the violence that is caused by racism and colonialism and narrates it in a very critical way. This is definitely a different tone as compared to other white writers of his time and to his earlier work, including *Antony and Cleopatra* (Arndt 2023). Shakespeare is not only "a sensitive critic of the pitfalls of power," but also of "the pitfalls of racism," scrutinizing early modern "colonialist rhetoric" and thus by extension its enduring legacy into our time (Arndt 2018, 394–395).

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

Egypt and its feminine aura come to life again. In a greatly enhanced way, this happens in Shakespeare's mature tragic writing: a classic of world literature, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–1607) features an Egyptian queen in its title, the temporal setting now being not the medieval era but antiquity. Jack D'Amico (1991) includes this tragedy among his extensive analyses of "The M. in English Renaissance Drama": this implies an identity for Cleopatra that is somewhat anachronistic. At any rate, if Zenocrate was a fictional character within historical action, Cleopatra VII (Thea Philopator) is authentically historical. Like Zenocrate, Cleopatra is partnered with a conquering hero and associated with divine status, yet the parallel does not go much further. For the context, we

need to recall that she finds a way to form a bond with Mark Antony, as member of the Roman imperial ruling team or triumvirate together with Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. Antony spends time with her in Egypt, as a lover, until a rebellion in Italy threatens Octavius's rule, and in this situation he returns to Rome for the sake of a triumviral reunion. As a consequence of the political negotiations there Antony approves the idea of marrying Octavius's sister Octavia, whereupon he moves with her to Athens for some years. But eventually the latent rivalry between him and Octavius flares up, causing him to leave his wife and return to Egypt and its queen. There Antony elevates Cleopatra to supreme status, promising her and her children the co-sovereignty over the greater part of the eastern Mediterranean. This enables Octavius to declare war against her, challenging her and Antony to a sea battle at Actium. Their forces are ultimately defeated, and subsequently in Egypt Antony erupts in fury against the queen, who then sends him a report that she had killed herself. Antony botches his own suicide. Learning too late that the report was false, he commands to be carried to Cleopatra in her monument, where he dies in her arms. Octavius succeeds in capturing the queen, yet with some deceit she takes her own life with the bite of an asp.

In dramatizing this action, Shakespeare follows fairly closely the account in Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*. For the moralizing historian, Cleopatra is motivated mainly by political ambition, showing negative characteristics for the greater part of the action; his account can be read as implying that she takes her life mainly for fear of humiliation rather than for any consistently romantic attachment. A major question in understanding the tragedy is how far Shakespeare's presentation of Cleopatra is guided by Roman authors: since Octavius's ultimate victory, which enables him to turn into the emperor Augustus, Roman commentators tend to disparage Cleopatra along with Antony. Unlike Zenocrate, Cleopatra does not exist only within the tragedy, so that the historical utterances are an element of the reception situation. Indeed, the drama should be "reread in its given embeddedness in wide realms of inter- and textuality" (Arndt 2018, 399).

Thus Propertius, after 23 BCE, denounces her as a harlot queen seeking to enslave the walls of Rome to her tyranny (3.11; 1929, pp. 215, 217). Horace speaks of her dizzy brain made mad, while he praises her fearless suicide (Horace, Odes 1.37; trans. 1872, 38–39). Plutarch calls Cleopatra's allure a "pestilent plague and mischief" (Spevack et al. 1990, 420). In the early 3rd century, Cassius Dio describes her as enslaving and bewitching Antony and his followers, and hoping to rule over the Romans (50.5; 1917, 5:445, 447). In the 4th century,

Aurelius Victor accuses her of having had such insatiable lust that she prostituted herself (sec. 86; 1577, sig. G4v). Later, in the mid-14th century, Giovanni Boccaccio emphasizes that she committed a number of crimes and gave herself to her pleasures, as the prostitute of kings (1963, 192–197).

Such attitudes are suited to extolling the superiority and benign rule of Augustus, which in the English Stuart context would be prudent seeing that the new King James I is heralded as a new Augustus. Shakespeare would take such requirements seriously, and indeed his Cleopatra is termed, in a sexist racism's erotic exotification, a lustful “gipsy” (1.1.10), while the play's Antony himself in a moment of rage calls her “Triple-turn'd whore” and rails against “this false soul of Egypt” (4.12.13, 25)—who has bewitched and then betrayed him. She herself speaks of being a “morsel for a monarch” (1.5.31), rather like the Corinthian harlot *Lais* (see Erasmus 1542, fol. 342r). It is not surprising that literary critics find Shakespeare emulating the indictments inherited from “Octavian's propagandists,” so that his dramatic design “tallies” with the classical sources (Jaworska-Biskup and Jonca 2024, 104, 106).

Is Cleopatra, then, the dramatic African villain at the dawn of the Roman imperial era, as Aaron is near that era's end? Yet there is more to the story, and these Anglo-European perceptions hardly do justice to the tragedy as a whole. The image of Cleopatra herself is quite different, and far more favorable, in medieval Arabic writings, the authors of which stress her learning and creative skills as in the case of al-Mas'ūdī. (see El Daly 2005, 133–135)

If Zenocrate was raised by her husband to the level of the divine, Shakespeare's Cleopatra identifies herself with the goddess Isis (3.6.16–19), almost all of the invocations of that deity in the play being by female speakers. Yet by contrast with Zenocrate Cleopatra, like Antony, ultimately fails on the action level in her grand ambition, first at the battle of Actium and then when she is captured by Octavius. How can she then possibly become an object of enduring fascination? One answer can be found in the famous lines in which the Roman officer Enobarbus declares early in the play that no custom can “stale / Her infinite variety” so that “vildest things / Become themselves in her” (2.2.234–235, 237–238). It is by means of tragic poetry, and especially in the action's final part, that Cleopatra can justifiably be perceived to rise to the status of “the strongest of all Shakespeare's personalities” as she “dies upward into a sublime beyond as Hamlet did” (Bloom 2017, 62). Yet this becomes possible not so much from

an adaptation of the usually recognized European source materials but from the play's creative use of African impulses, which have rarely been noted.

We should hence look briefly at one or two instances where these inform the textual surface. After his physical death, the captive Cleopatra unfolds a polyvalent dream vision of Antony, which manifests not so much his past life but rather the power of her imagination: "I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony. / [...] His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck / A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted / The little O, th' earth [...]" (5.2.76, 79–81). Sober Roman voices, despising Antony, and those who follow them in the critical history will answer Cleopatra's question whether there might be such a figure with a more or less courteous and conclusive "No" (as at 5.2.94). Still, the dream merits a bit of attention. The lines just quoted are almost an echo of *Tamburlaine the Great*, 2.730–731 (as rendered above). It has hardly been observed, also, that the sun and moon, appearing together, are significant in alchemic transformation, an art that was known to have Egyptian origins. In a dialogue of sun and moon offered in *Clangor Bvccinae*, for instance, these bodies form a "commixtio [or communio] luminarium" when they come together so they can enter the house of love, "domum amoris" (*Artis* 1593, 1:465). With such images Cleopatra discovers, or perhaps strengthens, a transcendental love for Antony that did not always appear clearly during their earlier times together. Together, too, the sun and moon "in the same direct line" form the eye and light of Horus (Plutarch 1603, 1308) while the earth, which is mythologically identified with Isis (Comes 1567, Explicatio fol. 336r), becomes irradiated. Antony's dimension is not that of the little O, yet the performative enunciation creates its own semiotic space, one in which an Isiac Cleopatra gains the brilliance of *commixtio luminarium*.

In the process of discovering a transcendental union, beyond the earlier ambitions of military success, Cleopatra poetically gains a healing and regenerating authority. With great difficulty, Cleopatra and her maids draw the dying Antony up to her high level in her monument, during which action she rather breathlessly wishes that "[t]he strong-wing'd Mercury should fetch thee up [...] Die when thou hast liv'd, / Quickened with kissing" (4.15.35, 39). The god Mercury / Hermes is joined in symbiosis with the Egyptian Thoth, who is reputed to have written works of alchemy (see for instance Britannica, "Hermes Trismegistus"; Veseli 2024, 259–269). At the same time M/mercury plays a significant role in alchemy, so that Sir Edward Kelly (1555–1597/98) acknowledges Avicenna's description of "a living spirit of unexampled potency," quicksilver; the element is actually "the wanton serpent that conceives of its own seed, and

brings forth on the same day” though in some cases it can also wreak harm (published posthumously 1676; 1893, 23–24). Cleopatra’s purpose is to “quicken” Antony, through and beyond physical death, and the dream vision becomes one method to reveal this power—if not to the Roman imperial leadership then certainly to the early modern readership and a theatre audience. An allied method is the service of the “wanton serpent”: it becomes intimately associated with the “serpent of old Nile,” Antony’s name for Cleopatra (1.5.25), and with the “serpent” that she has commanded to be brought to her because “his biting is immortal” (5.2.246–247). It is Isis, the goddess with whom Cleopatra identifies, who delights in healing human beings and is capable of granting immortality (as in Diodorus, Book 1.25.2–6, 1935, 2:81). But the association between the serpent and the river becomes pertinent when we recall the mythical Q̣ṣun, whose movements are like a snake or serpent, and who heals by a river’s water as “the perpetually renewing source of life” (Murphy and Sanford 2001, 2). Beyond the sources already cited, communication with members of the African proto-community in early modern London makes a circulation of some elements of heritage at least conceivable (e.g., Arndt 2023, 30). In these ways, and more, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra imaginatively attains a status beyond captivity and physical destruction.

Conclusion

The Renaissance used to be thought of as an age when ancient European knowledge was recovered. Yet such knowledge was actually fused with “in-streams of Africans” in early modern Europe, and this enabled the age to become “a world of possibility and experimentation” (Vinson 2012, 116). We can consider the resulting cultural transformations as reshaping the popular theatre together with dramatic literature as well as cross-cultural awareness. In a generalising and not always carefully developed argumentative context it has been maintained, moreover, that we should regard the Renaissance as “a re-birth because of the primacy of Egypt” rather than of classical Europe, and that during this epoch the Europeans, initially the Italians, “adopted Egyptian knowledge as the basis of their own” (Asante 2015, 150). Extending northward across the Alps, this may indeed become a viable reading of history. Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka has declared that the poetic utterances of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra can be absorbed only by an Egyptian or one steeped in that civilization’s religious cults—“and allied religions, including Islam,” with dis-

tinct echoes in the Islamic Book of the Dead (Soyinka 1983, 6–7), as associated with Imam 'Abd ar-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi. Yet we should not lose sight of the preceding dramas, each of which has brought forth subtly differentiated African characters and thus its own distinct “world of possibility.”

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