FICTION AND POETRY IN SHAKESPEARE'S RENAISSANCE GEOGRAPHY[1]

***Abstract**: Shakespeare was not interested in geographical accuracy or in reproducing the lands and peoples of Europe as they could be found in the works of his time He was concerned to employ a poetic geography, a mode of perception that envisaged the world existing in terms of ideas, not areas. Geography is associated with indirections or evasion, for those in search of liberty, as they are obliged to live in a country or a city which, for some reason or other, has become a prison for them. It is also linked with seduction, with desire, and with the specific fascination of foreign language.*

This article aims to analyze the fictional and poetic aspects of Shakespearean geography, and tries to identify its imaginary or real borders.

***Keywords**: Shakespeare, geography, poetry.*

Shakespeare is less concerned with careful geographical accuracy or reproducing the lands and peoples of Europe as they could be found in the works of his time – Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in Latin in 1570, or Gerardus Mercator's *Atlas*, published in 1595, also in Latin. Shakespeare's famous 'slip', whereby Bohemia is given a coastline in *The Winter's Tale* indicates that knowledge was placed in the service of dramatic action. He was concerned to employ a *poetic geography*, a mode of perception that envisaged the world existing in terms of ideas, not areas.

The concept of a *poetic geography* is not new. It was first formulated by Giambattista Vico in his *Principi di Scienza Nuova d'intorno alla Comune Natura delle Nazioni*, often published in English as *New Science*, which may be literally translated as "Principles/Origins of New/Renewed Science About/Surrounding the Common Nature of Nations". The bulk of the *New Science* is the description of Poetic Wisdom. This is the way of mythic thinkers at the origin of society. It is also the manner of thinking that dominated society until the plebeians gained control of society through the class struggle. Vico goes into detail explaining things such as the poetic metaphysics, poetic logic, poetic economics and poetic geography.

The larger geography of the world was often drawn up by Europeans in theological terms during the medieval centuries in which biblical narratives might form the central interest of maps and heathen populations occupied the periphery of the field of vision. Despite the trade routes established into Asia by earlier explorers such as Marco Polo, the accounts passed down about Viking discoveries to the West and the exotic riches to be found on the African continent, the main focus of English life with its international neighbours concentrated upon the area from the German states to the Mediterranean basin in the opening decades of the Renaissance.

The difference between Shakespeare and his contemporaries resides in the use of maps and geography. John Gillies points out the rhetorical relations between theatre, globe and atlas, as prompted by the above mentioned Abraham Ortelius's atlas, *Theatrum orbis terrarium.*

According to Jerry Brotton, "it would be overstating the case to claim that Shakespeare's drama, and in particular his tragedies, are exclusively structured around contemporary apprehensions of geography and mapping." Nevertheless, "the tragedies

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display a growing awareness of the dramatic and rhetorical opportunities afforded by geography in its varied metaphorical possibilities as well as its material manifestation in the shape of maps of the kind that Lear uses to divide his kingdom and launch the tragedy of *King Lear*."

The key to understanding how Elizabethan and Jacobean writers made sense of who they were and how they understood the rest of the world is the religious division within Europe. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* represented its Spanish protagonists trapped within a destructive cycle of revenge that was controlled by pagan gods, showing that the Spanish were pagan rather than Christian, and so were damned. Arguments for colonialism in the Americas by Richard Hakluyt and others made the case that if Protestant England did not start to establish colonies in the New World then the Spanish, who had a significant head start, would become too powerful to resist and so would dominate the world. Propagandists of the 'Black Legend', who sought to highlight Spanish atrocities in the Americas in contrast to the virtuous behaviour of Protestants, often made a close link between Spanish behaviour in the Netherlands (which were trying to resist Spanish rule) and colonial America.

The great European geographer, Gerardus Mercator, who produced the cartographic masterpieces, *The World Map* and *The Map of Europe* recognised the problem in his *Historia Mundi, or, Mercator's Atlas* (translated into English in 1635, but known and used in England much earlier). The frontispiece to the English edition shows all the four known continents – Europe, Asia, Africa and America – represented as female figures.

Europa, the legendary founder of Europe, is shown holding an open *Biblia Sacra*, a cross and a cornucopia (a horn of plenty) full of ripe fruit. Next to her is an ass, a symbol of humble spirituality, and in the background a church. Facing her, Asia wears a substantial oriental crown and brandishes a spear. Behind her are the buildings of a powerful, grand city. Asia's proud expression and trappings of worldly vanity are a pointed contrast to the submissive demeanour of Europe and would seem to mark her out as a type of the whore of Babylon, the evil creature of the Revelation whose appearance signified the beginning of the last days of the world before Christ's return.

However, Mercator's text acknowledges that this clear distinction between the continents is effectively problematic; he chooses to place the boundaries of Europe at the Caspian Sea and the Bosphorus. The map shows Europe as a peninsula, jutting out of Asia: self-contained and distinct in one sense but also a promontory of a larger landmass struggling to retain its identity. Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (*The Theatre of the Whole World*) also defines Europe as a peninsula and acknowledges the problems of fixing its eastern boundaries. Europe borders Barbaria in North Africa and Tartaria, the kingdom of the Tartars, in Asia. The threat to Europe is made even clearer in the map of Turkey, which shows how little Europeans could take for granted.

Nevertheless, Mercator's *Atlas* is Eurocentric in content, devoting 813 of its 930 pages to European countries and regions:

> [Europe] not only farre excels the other parts of the World in the wonderfull temperattenesse of the climate, temper, pleasantnesse, and great company of the inhabitants; but also in the abundance of Fruits, Trees, and Plants, all kinde of living Creatures, Mettals; and in the plentie of all other thinges which are necessarie to sustaine mans life.

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In addition, the cities of Europe are said to rival – if not excel – those built in other parts of the world. And both works claim that more than twenty-eight European countries officially adhere to the Christian faith.

Mercator's *Atlas* performs another function that many early modern English books provided for their readers: a handy list of the characteristics of peoples for ease of reference, but which could often lapse into easy prejudice masquerading as knowledge. Mercator concludes his account with the following description, typical of so much early travel writing:

> It would be too much to reckon up the vertues of the Inhabitants, but as for the vices (as who is without some?) they are noted in some short sayings, which I will here adde: The people of *Franconia* are foolish, rude, and vehement. The *Bavarians* are prodigal, gluttons, and railers. The *Grisons* are light, talkative, and braggers. The *Turingi* are distrustfull and contentious. The *Saxons* dissemblers, craftie, selfe-willed. The *Low-countrey men* are horsemen, delicate, and tender. The *Italians* proud, desirous of revenge, and wittie. The *Spaniards* hautie, wise, covetous. The *French* eloquent, intemperate, and rash. The people of *Denmarke* and *Holsteine*, are great of stature, seditious, and dreadfull. The *Sarmatians* great eaters, proud, and stealers. The *Bohemians* inhumane, new-fangled, and robbers. The *Illyrians unconstant, envious, seditious.* The *Pannonians* cruell, and superstitious. The *Greeks* miserable. And there is another saying less pleasant. A bridge in *Poland*, a Monke in *Bohemia*, a Knight of the *South*, a Nunne of *Servia*, the Devotion of *Italie*, the Religion of *Prutenicks*, the Fasts of *Germans*, and the Constancie of *Frenchmen* are worth nothing.

Thus, we have references to peoples of present-day Germany: the Franconians, the Thuringii, and the Bavarians of modern-day Germany, the Grisons of modern-day Switzerland, the Italians and the Spaniards, but also the people of the Low Countries, then the Sarmatians and the Illyrians, the Bohemians (to whom Shakespeare generously offered a non-existing coastline); the Poles are mentioned, as well as the Servians – inhabitants of Servia, a province of Greece – and the people of Pannonia. Though there is no mention to Wallachia or Moldavia, we have a good picture of Europe as it was known at the time, and for which we have all reasons to believe that it was well-known to Shakespeare himself.

Such lists supplied convenient means of characterizing the peoples and nations of Europe for those who did not have the time to explore the areas in greater depth, whether as a traveller (a privilege granted to a very few) or as a reader. Books full of maxims, *sententiae*, and proverbial wisdom were ubiquitous in the Renaissance and probably formed the key ingredient of many readers' reading experiences. Books were produced which tabulated vital pieces of information and summarized complex arguments and dense passages of discursive prose for those who were too busy to spend time in scholarly activity. Individuals noted down key sentences and phrases in their own commonplace books for future reference. It is hardly a matter of surprise that out of such an intellectual culture handy brief descriptions of foreigners and foreign lands should develop and define how English men and women encountered other regions.

The 1606 edition of Ortelius' atlas is also interesting because it presents aspects of contemporary and ancient geography, the "Peregrinations of St. Paul", maps of the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean, with the Greek islands (Cyprus, Rhodos, Lesbos) in detailed framed presentations. 'History' is blended with 'Geography' in the graphic presentation of "The Voyage of Alexander the Great" and finally visual and

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literary discourses coalesce in "The Voyage and Navigation of Aeneas, especially gathered out of the renowned poet Virgil: with some other matters pertaining to that historie collected out of others" and "The Peregrinations of Ulysses". Moreover, a monumental perspective picture of "Daphne, or the pleasant Suburbs of Antiochia in Syria" is offered to the curious eye. The poetry of travelling and the spatial geographic dimension of poetry are absorbed in a disconcerting collusion of texts and images.

In conclusion, the "real" or realistic geography is the geographical representation that tries to reproduce the outer space most accurately. It depends on a mimetic principle. Its main criterion is positive observation and empirical verification. Of course, it still has to make use of icons and symbols in order to represent on a sheet of paper the complexity of the real space out there, but it is assumed that one can safely use a map in order to orientate her or himself in the real geographical world. The upper limit to which "realist" geographical representation could aspire is to become an accurate "perception" of the world. In order to validate the geographical truth and to obtain scholar credibility, "enchanted" geography utilized a set of criteria that have meanwhile been discarded by modern geography, such as: non-mitigated respect towards authoritative sources; subordination to a revealed, supposedly divine, model; geometrical and esthetical harmony; apprehension of the world through a system of qualitative categories; utilization of a language based mainly on symbols and analogies; *horror vacui*, and so on and so forth. This refined cognitive device created, throughout human history, a series of maps and *mappae mundi* where holy geography, as described by the classical myths, the Bible and patristic writing, overruled empirical geography and obliged factual data to fit into the greater theological model of the world.

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