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Heather James

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## Introduction: Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra

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This study investigates Shakespeare's use of the political and literary tradition derived from imperial Rome to legitimate the cultural place of the theater in late Elizabethan and early Stuart London. It began in efforts to understand why a playwright unpretentious about his learning should introduce explicit textuality and even books at moments of crisis in plays that seek to shape English cultural identity in relation to imperial Rome. Although the citational force of the following scenes remains to be seen, I refer to the entrance of Lavinia, previously a Vergilian figure, "her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished" according to Ovidian and Petrarchan conventions; Achilles' crisis of exemplarity, in which he is reduced to his constituent histories or redactions; Antony's manful attempt to resist Vergil's derisive portrait of his choices; Imogen's disturbing laments over what she takes to be Posthumus' headless body, an image that crosses the *pietà* with the fallen body of Priam in *Aeneid 2*; and finally, Prospero's use of the incantations of Ovid's *Medea* to renounce his rough and Vergilian magic and to drown his book.

The strikingly visual or emblematic character of these scenes is tied to a complex textuality unusual for the popular theater. Disentangling such knots led to an investigation of the generic character and historical occasions of a group of Shakespeare's plays I call "translations of empire," after the literary-political tradition dedicated to the transfer of authority from Troy to imperial Rome to London (Troynovant) and, although this aspect of its traffic is less often noted, from one social sphere to another within London.<sup>1</sup> The plays differ from the group dubbed "Roman plays" in that they share not the locale and political themes of republican and imperial Rome, but an innovative and politically veiled practice of confounding the interests of rival authorities within the Troy legend. Shakespeare's method of "contaminating" sources simply refers to the introduction of multiple texts in the creation of a new one, but in the early modern period often involves the unseemly joining of unlike texts.<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare's Achilles, to elaborate an example from chapter 3, is subjected to a crisis of identity that traces textual and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Shakespeare's Troy

historical ambivalences in his figure from Homer to Chapman's Homer. The impetus for his crisis comes when Ulysses, head of the Greek secret service, confronts the great warrior with his inconsistent but equally traditional reasons for withdrawing from the Trojan war: Homeric honor, the medieval love of Polyxena, and homosexual love of Patroclus. First outed or "known" (3.3.193, 195) as a creature of Lydgate and Caxton in Homeric armor, then lovingly counseled by Patroclus to "rouse" himself and shake off, "like a dew-drop from a lion's mane" (3.3.222), the homosexual torpor of the "closet" tradition of critical commentary, Achilles faces his conflicting identities and confesses that his "mind is like a fountain stirr'd" and he cannot "see the bottom on't," i.e., he does not know to what source (*fons*) he owes his identity. By scraping the palimpsest-like identities from Achilles, Shakespeare disables Western civilization's greatest warrior as a character in the play and a usable exemplar in late Elizabethan England.

Along with the multiple genres of Achilles come questions of their associations with different social classes: Chapman's Homeric Achilles is dedicated to the Earl of Essex and an aristocratic code of honor discredited by the time of Shakespeare's play; Polyxena's lover, never greatly appreciated by courtly writers, befits the satirical ballads and broadsides that girls will sing about the hero gone astray, according to the taunting Ulysses; Patroclus' lover affirms the scholarly and homo-social interests of humanists who exchange ideas in critical margins and in scholarly Latin unavailable to popular audiences. The present study foregrounds the vested interests of classical, medieval, and early modern versions of the highly privileged tradition of the Troy legend and investigates the divergent uses to which Shakespeare and his contemporaries put competing versions as they sought to chart and influence shifts in the power and legitimacy of different cultural and political spheres in England, from the court to the Inns-of-Court, the universities, the city, and its underground as described by such men as Thomas Nashe, acerbic commentator on "Madame Troynovant" or London.<sup>3</sup>

Although differing agendas inform the uses of the Troy legend in Davies, Peele, Heywood, and Nashe, Shakespeare's overarching concern – and therefore mine – is the legitimacy of his developing national theater. Whether written under Elizabeth or James, his "translations of empire" take place in the interrogative mood,<sup>4</sup> or at less encomiastic and more restive moments in his relations with his two princes and their greatly differing styles of rule. Collectively the plays meditate what might constitute an English national politics rather than a narrow courtly politics; individually, they vary according to the historical stimuli that prompt Shakespeare to renew negotiations with court or city and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra

3

produce a given “translation of empire.” Historical occasions include contemporary preoccupations with female sovereignty and the depleted cult of the Virgin Queen in *Titus Andronicus*; in *Troilus and Cressida*, the fall of Essex and simultaneous collapse of the aristocratic culture of honor; the relationship of political and theatrical display in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the first Jacobean translation of empire; in *Cymbeline*, the growing separation of a strongly articulated royal absolutism and less heralded changes in English cultural identity, characterized by the beginnings of constitutional and legal struggles between James I and his parliaments; and in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's valedictory meditation on the theater's relationship to stubborn differences between political theory and practice at a time when early Stuart England cast one eye on its increasingly equivocal status as a nation and another on its transatlantic expansion. This study aims to trace and historicize the repeated turns of Shakespeare's political thought as he renewed his experiments in undoing and regluing the idea of England in terms of authoritative books on England's cultural market. Recognizable as a social and political phenomenon since the rise of the Tudors, the tradition could be appropriated to promote the variously converging and conflicting interests of the market and the theater as well as its long-term benefactors, the court and the city.

We gain a sublime prospect on Shakespeare's quibbling authorities from the vantage point of Samuel Johnson's famous account of Shakespeare's wordplay as the “fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.” When Johnson dramatizes a Herculean Shakespeare at the crossroads, he entertains the philosophical and political implications of choosing the licentious quibble over stable authority, whether linguistic or textual.<sup>5</sup>

A quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchaining it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.

The quibble is a tragic weakness in Shakespeare, who abandons duty and authoritative language to chase after the impertinent attractions of a

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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Shakespeare's Troy

pun. The pleasures of doubt, for Johnson, lead to an artistic and ethical lapse reminiscent of the greatest political failure in the Western tradition: on 2 September 31 BC, Marc Antony, distracted by Cleopatra, followed her from the field at Actium and lost to Octavius Caesar both his claim to empire and his right to author his own reputation. When Johnson casts the scene of Shakespeare abdicating his poetic responsibilities as Antony at the fateful battle of Actium, he chooses an image of unusual potency: the Herculean Roman who unmans himself and assumes the woman's role of following. The heroic Antony himself becomes a tragic quibble, for as *Troilus and Cressida* states the paradox, he "is, and is not" Antony. Antony proves to be an apt, if tragic, exemplar of the way Shakespeare treats authority in all his translations of empire: as a victim of proliferating meanings.

When Johnson implicitly connects quibbling rhetoric, epistemology, gender, and politics, he performs an act of literary criticism felicitous to this study of Shakespeare's contaminated authorities. The passage invites readers to pause in the act of condemning quibbles in order to understand their doubtful charms, hauntingly revived through allusions to Eve's temptation in *Paradise Lost*. Cleopatra's retrospective prototype,<sup>6</sup> Milton's Eve is compared to an "amazed night-wanderer" when she encounters Satan's linguistic duplicity:<sup>7</sup>

He leading swiftly rolled  
In tangles, and made intricate seem straight,  
To mischief swift. Hope elevates, and joy  
Brightens his crest, as when a wandering fire,  
Compact of unctuous vapour, which the night  
Condenses, and the cold environs round,  
Kindled through agitation to a flame,  
Which oft, they say, some evil spirit attends  
Hovering and blazing with delusive light,  
Misleads the amazed night-wanderer from his way  
To bogs and mires, and oft through pond or pool,  
There swallowed up and lost, from succour far. (9.631–42)

Like Eve, Johnson's Shakespeare is a traveller distracted by "luminous vapours . . . sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire"; he, too, will "turn aside from his career" for the golden apple of a quibble and lose an Eden. Johnson compacts his linguistic will-o-the-wisp from Milton's account of Satan as a "wandering fire, / Compact of unctuous vapour" (9.634–5), who "Misleads the amazed night-wanderer from his way / To bogs and mires" where he is "swallowed up and lost" (lines 640–2) as surely as Johnson's Shakespeare is "engulf[ed] in the mire." Fascinating and "irresistible," the quibble exercises "malig-

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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra

5

nant power" over Shakespeare, who recalls "Adventurous Eve" (9.921) in succumbing to verbal temptation and follows the brilliant but vaporous pun "to all adventures." By implicit comparison to Satanic rhetoric, which "casts between / Ambiguous words and jealousies to sound or taint integritie" (5.699–701), Johnson powerfully indicts Shakespeare's puns. Shakespeare's seduction from "reason, propriety and truth" represents no trivial failure of judgment: like Eve, he is distracted into pursuing a line of reasoning that alienates him from proprieties he once knew to be authoritative.

The pun lures Shakespeare into the indefinite meanings of language that takes issue with itself. Linguistically and socially subversive, the quibble will not commit to singular reference or allow any meaning to stand unchallenged by other meanings wishing to usurp the same sign. For Johnson, it epitomizes Shakespeare's general lack of "moral purpose" (p. 21) and his tendency to produce "stubborn" rhetorical and cognitive "entanglements" (p. 23). A quibble insists on differing with itself, and because it problematizes the grounds for knowledge, its philosophical terrain is epistemology. Although Johnson calls the quibble "poor and barren," it is far from meaningless: irresponsibly recreative, quibbling language generates more significances than it can contain and authorize and thus earns its name as Shakespeare's infinitely various, fertile, and fatally distracting Cleopatra.

Johnson's assessment of the Shakespearean quibble gains brilliance from his deep understanding of the linguistic charms he condemns: he reproduces in epitome Shakespeare's visceral attraction to quibbles and their co-ordinates in epistemology, gender, and politics. The political dimensions of quibbles, flagged by the erring figure of Antony, can be illuminated by the puns of Shakespeare's all-licensed fools, who include Falstaff, Hamlet, Lear's Fool, and the self-deposing antic in Richard II's head. The antic riddles and puns to disrupt comfort in social order. With the aid of quibbles, Falstaff turns himself into an unscrupulous and romantic authority opposed to "old father Antic, the law." Hamlet routs Claudius' court through the methodical madness of puns; the Fool uses song, riddles, and puns to force Lear's insight into the political and familial consequences of separating the name of king from its material basis in land; and in the ceremonial transfer of royal power to Henry IV, Richard II exploits the rivalrous, usurping resources of quibbles to discredit Bolingbroke's authority. Puns, like contaminations, create meanings that rival each other for primacy. Because the various meanings of a word or versions of a story are equally legitimate, they ultimately level notions of priority and hierarchy. The antic takes up the impudent pun as a form of language that opposes stable order, hierarchy,

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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Shakespeare's Troy

and the absolutist language of kingship. The pun is the antic's chief resource in upsetting assumptions of singular and hierarchical meaning – the sorts of assumptions that encourage editors to prioritize or disavow significances. Puns and contamination alike are indiscriminate: they mingle and mangle metaphors that ought to be kept discrete if they are to transport authority from one sphere to another.<sup>8</sup>

The present study adapts the epistemological and political model proposed by the recreative Shakespearean quibble and extends it to the playwright's use of imperial Roman authorities, primarily Vergil and Ovid, called to further political reckonings in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. These literary-political authorities had flourishing afterlives in Shakespeare's London, where their significances multiplied by the adaptability of the classics to elite and popular genres and to the sociopolitical interests of divergent audiences, illiterate and university-trained, courtly and civic. Both the classical texts themselves and their early modern coinages prompt Shakespeare's thinking about the shape and possibilities of his emergent theater and English national identity, which he routinely presents as a jeopardized possibility rather than a *fait accompli*. Reviving the excitement of classical authorities for Shakespeare's audiences, who generally if not uniformly understood the social and political valences at stake, is perhaps the greatest challenge to this study, undertaken at a time when we no longer look to classical allusions for witty topicality. Miranda is not the only pupil to find herself lulled to sleep after her father's quasi-Vergilian history of his calamities, but she is the only one compelled to do so. This study cheerfully appropriates methods from cultural studies and source studies, strange bedfellows that they are, arguing for the need to interpret the texts of the *translatio imperii studii* as political metaphors rather than dead ones.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1 Shakespeare and the Troy legend

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### **“Ingenium par imperio”: the “Swan of Auon” and triumph of Britain**

At least since the appearance of the *First Folio*, when Ben Jonson paid tribute to Shakespeare as the “Soule of the Age” and a poet “not of an age, but for all time,” it has seemed incumbent upon critics to champion Shakespeare for his ability either to represent history or to rise above it.<sup>1</sup> Jonson, however, would be dismayed that his paradox about Shakespeare’s art has come to underscore stubborn inconsistencies between Romantic transcendence and historical embeddedness, and disturbed at the notion that transcendent poetic skills detach the artist from history and politics. For a poet of Jonson’s literary and social ambition, Shakespeare would most fully be the “Soule of the Age” when defying limitation in his own artistry and in England’s political, geographical, and cultural borders. When Shakespeare bests the great dramatists of Greece and Rome, not to mention Elizabethan England, his credit wondrously affects England as an emergent nation. At the thematic and numerical center of his poem, Jonson dramatically shifts his address from Shakespeare to England itself. He moves – abruptly or seamlessly, depending on how prepared one is for confluences of art and politics – from Shakespeare’s excellence in the theater to a political scene in which Britain personified triumphs over European rivals for cultural prestige:

Leaue thee alone, for the comparison  
Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome  
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.  
Triumph, my Britaine, thou hast one to showe,  
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.  
He was not of an age, but for all time!

(lines 38–43)

Ageless art does not detach Shakespeare from contemporary England, but anchors him to the social and material conditions of his age that it makes visible to future generations: through the hybrid medium of published plays, Shakespeare makes the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras

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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Shakespeare's Troy

compelling enough to count historically. Defeating both “insolent Greece” and “haughtie Rome,” he enters England triumphantly into the *translatio imperii studiique*, the myth by which cultural authority migrates from Troy to imperial Rome to England and rival European states.

On behalf of Shakespeare and England, Jonson revives the claims of Augustan poets to an immortality linked carefully to imperial expansion. He fulfills the promise at the close of his tribute, when he steps firmly into the vatic mode and shifts from remembrance to prophecy:

Sweet Swan of Auon! what a sight it were  
 To see thee in our waters yet appeare,  
 And make those flights upon the bankes of Thames,  
 That so did take Eliza, and our Iames!  
 But stay, I see thee in the Hemisphere  
 Aduanc'd, and made a Constellation there!  
 Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets, and with rage,  
 Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage;  
 Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourn'd like night,  
 And despaire day, but for thy Volumes light. (lines 71–80)

As the “Starre of Poets” and the “Swan of Auon” admired by royal spectators, Shakespeare merges with privileged signs of poetic and nationalistic ambition. Stellification, claimed in England by Sir Philip Sidney, the Astrophil mourned by a nation, derives most famously from the *Aeneid*, where it is the compensatory destiny that Jupiter awards Julius Caesar in the prophecy (*Aeneid* 1.261–96) whose centerpiece is Rome’s claim to *imperium sine fine* (1.279). At the end of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid first parodies Vergil’s hint in an obsequious account of Julius Caesar’s stellar apotheosis and then uses the triumph of imperial Rome as the basis of his poetic immortality. Hitching his own fame to Julius Caesar’s, Ovid asserts that he, too, will be “borne beyond the stars” by means of his “indelible name.” As a poet made immortal through Roman expansion, he will be quoted “wherever Roman power spreads over conquered lands”: *perennis / astra ferar, nomenque erit indelebile nostrum / quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris, / ore legar populi* (15.875–8).<sup>2</sup>

The swan’s elegant and other-worldly flights, it turns out, are no more indifferent to conquest than the twinkling of the stars. The *locus classicus* for the image of the poet as swan (fig. 1) is Horace’s Ode 2.20, a poem Jonson generously echoes throughout his commemoration of Shakespeare, from his emphasis on envy in the first passage to his celebration of the book as a source of immortality and a replacement for the tomb. Jonson reworks the Horatian demand to “give up the pointless tribute of a tomb” (*sepulcri / mitte supervacuos honores*, lines 23–4)<sup>3</sup> into a tribute,



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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Shakespeare and the Troy legend

9



Figure 1. "Insignia Poetarum." Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1577)

"Thou art a Moniment, without a tombe, / And art aliue still, while thy Booke doth liue" (lines 22–3), and exhortation to "Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets" (line 77) through "thy Volumes light" (line 80). Given his proprietary feelings about Horace and ambivalence about Shakespeare's fecund imagination, Jonson's choice of Horace's ode is key to understanding how he evaluated Shakespeare's art in retrospect: Jonson expected his rival's 1623 *Folio* not only to establish Shakespeare as a cultural icon but to witness and facilitate the cultural transformation of Britain itself.<sup>4</sup>

In 2.20, Horace establishes a model of poetic transcendence circumscribed by imperial expansion. In the first strophe, he declares that envy can no longer detain him from poetic flight as a *biformis vates* or

Cambridge University Press

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Heather James

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Shakespeare's Troy

“prophetic poet of double-form”: man and bird, mortal writer of immortal verse, commoner accepted in the court. Galvanized by the tensions between his humble birth and summons to court by Maecenas, Rome’s great aristocratic patron, Horace is launched towards his destiny: “not I, child of poor parents, not I, whom you call, beloved Maecenas, shall die” (*non ego pauperum / sanguis parentum, non ego, quem vocas, / dilecte Maecenas, obibo*, lines 5–7). Flight from civic discontents carries Horace, paradoxically, not to the heavens or to nature but to the further reaches of Rome’s sprawling empire, where he surveys lands colonized by Rome and those still resisting assimilation. Horace names these lands and peoples in an elegiac travelogue, and like Ovid, who contemplates a readership among the conquered, Horace allows the possibility that the colonized peoples will read him to gain joint instruction in Roman norms and the means to endure their lost cultural autonomy. Horatian decorum invites both pleasure in, and anxiety over, Roman acquisition: lamenting Bosphorus may groan over more than its famously resounding ocean; the stoical Dacians only pretend not to fear Rome’s toughest cohorts; the Hyperboreans, who dwell at the back of the North Wind, lack their customary representation as idyllic; the Geloni are only distant if Rome is the center of the world; and the Spaniards need no instruction from Rome to love reading and learning. Horace’s elegiac adjectives for the colonized tactfully question the glory of cultural transformation, and his own example of metamorphosis into a swan suggests it is grotesque: “Now, even now the rough skin is settling on my shins, and I am changing into a snowy swan above, and light feathers are springing from my fingers and shoulders” (*iam iam residunt cruribus asperae / pelles, et album mutor in alitem / superne, nascunturque leves / per digitos umerosque plumae*, lines 9–12).<sup>5</sup>

Jonson omits the awkwardness of Horace’s metamorphosis, preferring a miraculous vision of the “Sweet Swan of Auon” on the Thames. Nonetheless, he incorporates Horace’s social motive for the problematic transformation from provincial origins to his destiny as an imperial Roman poet. When Jonson describes the Stratford playwright’s commanding performances on the Thames, he adapts the socially liminal position from which Horace accepts and claims poetic authority. Shakespeare’s identification with the Avon river, no mere bucolic tribute to his royal spectators, “Eliza, and our Iames,”<sup>6</sup> stresses his difference and autonomy from the center of English national identity in the royal court at London. For Jonson, the Thames serves as a geographical and semi-permeable boundary between royal and theatrical authority. Steven Mullaney’s conception of the physical and ideological place of the theaters helps illuminate the view in Jonson’s poem:<sup>7</sup>