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Excerpt

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1 Mapping the Other: Vico, Shakespeare and the geography of difference

Shakespeare's scenes are almost always laid inside what the ancients called the civilized world, the Christians Christendom, and the geographers Europe. Africa is the centre of interest in Greene's *Orlando*, Asia in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, Tunis in Massinger's *Renegado*, the Portuguese Spice and Clove islands of Ternate and Tidore in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Island Princess*; but Europe is Shakespeare's centre, and although things outside intrude now and then, like spectres from another world, his plots, themes, and scenes are almost exclusively European. The only exception is *The Tempest*, which belongs partly to the unsubstantial world of spirits and myths, partly to the New World, but partly, too, to a fragment of Italy transposed onto the New World for a day or two. Although the frontiers of Europe shift from time to time and are not the same in the ancient and modern world, Shakespeare's plants, so to speak, are always rooted in European soil: their environment is invariably European ... Beyond these European limits lay the unknown, or hardly known, wonderland of discovery and romance, where monsters dwelt and miracles were common, and which Shakespeare regarded much as every instinctive geographer regards what lies half within and half without his intellectual horizon ... and as for the east and west Indies – that is to say, nearly all Asia and all America – they were little appendices to his book of life, which book was Europe.¹

Speculation about Shakespearean 'world views' is no longer as respectable as it was in 1916, when the above account from J. D. Rogers's essay, 'Voyages and Exploration: Geography: Maps', appeared in *Shakespeare's England*. Few scholars today would be persuaded by its view of Shakespeare's 'instinctive' geography. Some would want to dispute the claim that Shakespeare's 'plots, themes, and scenes are almost exclusively European'. Others would take issue with the notion that Shakespeare's imagination of geography is somehow medieval in comparison with that of contemporaries apparently more in touch with the new geography of their age. Most, perhaps, would dispute the sheer scope of Rogers's undertaking – the Johnsonian grandeur of his 'extensive view' of Shakespeare's imaginative geography. Is this sort of project admissible in an era

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of more sceptical and reflexive ‘historicisms’, which – presented with a scholarly mental map of a Shakespearean mental map – would want to know whose map and whose mentality is ultimately shown? It is, perhaps, for reasons such as this, that no similarly magisterial survey of Shakespeare’s geographic imagination has appeared since Rogers. Neither has a systematic attempt been made to refute the idea that Shakespeare’s geographic imagination is ‘almost exclusively European’. This is both good and bad: good to the degree that we are weaned away from the habit of shutting texts into ‘contexts’ which are largely of our own invention; bad to the degree that the question of Shakespeare’s geography has tended to urge itself by the back door and to find its answers there. Some years ago I remember hearing the managing director of a prominent Australian mining company cite *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* as evidence that Shakespeare disapproved of racially mixed marriages, and would therefore disapprove of the ‘multicultural’ philosophy of Australia’s immigration policy.

In my own teaching, I have found that the large question of Shakespeare’s global (as distinct from merely European) geographic imagination is often begged by related questions arising in the course of readings of individual plays. Invariably these plays turn out to be those which, if not actually set ‘Beyond these European limits’, powerfully urge the question of what Rogers calls ‘the unknown, or hardly known, wonderland of discovery or romance, where monsters dwelt and miracles were common’. They are plays in which ‘things outside intrude now and then, like spectres from another world’ – *things* (images, characters) *like spectres*, which later critics have been in the habit of referring to generically as ‘other’.²

One important way, then, in which Rogers’s project of a Shakespearean geography might be remounted is in connection with Shakespeare’s others: Who are they? What do they tell us, either about Shakespeare’s construction of ‘Europe’, or about his construction of its exterior? To what extent is the latter construction ‘instinctive’? To what extent is the former properly ‘geographic’? Are ‘Europe’ and its exterior part of the same system of geographic or quasi-geographic ideas? What, if any, are the politics governing the interaction between Europeans and others in Shakespeare? Where would such a politics come from and where does it lead in the context of early modern discourses of race, miscegenation, colonialism and slavery? Is the otherness of Shakespeare’s exotics a fact of nature or convention? What is Shakespeare’s position on ‘miscegenation’?³ What do Shakespeare’s others have in common, and to what discursive heritage – contemporary or traditional, ethnographic or political – do they owe any kinship which they might share? What, if any, is

the connection between his imagination of ancient and Renaissance others, and between ancient exoticism and that revealed by the new geography?

A second way in which Shakespeare's extra-European geography might be mapped is through the agency of a Shakespearean figure who is often related to the other. Like the other, this figure is a creature of extremity, a creature of horizons, an explorer of *terra incognita* – of Hamlet's 'undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns' (3.1.81–2)⁴. Unlike the other, who is generically familiar to us both within and outside Shakespeare studies, there is no generic name for this figure. Hence, I will call him (and her) the 'voyager'. Voyagers may be opposed to others in the way that Prospero is opposed to Caliban, but they may also be allied, as Antony is to Cleopatra. Moreover, just as their alliance contains oppositions, so too do oppositions between voyagers and others contain enigmatic suggestions of a deeper alliance. Thus Prospero is obliged to acknowledge his other ('this thing of darkness') as 'mine' (5.1.278, 279); thus Antonio – so sharply opposed to Shylock at the level of action – is allied with him at a deep and obscure level of symbolic design. Each is a kind of merchant, each is a creature of hubris, each is a rival of Portia, and each is emphatically excluded from the play's community of marriage. Although, therefore, voyagers and others may sometimes oppose each other, their very 'extremity' (their geographic mystery) tends to bring them together in unexpected ways. Thus it is not surprising to find that two of Shakespeare's others are also voyagers: Morocco, who voyages from the ends of the earth for Portia; and Othello, the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere' (1.1.138–9). The word 'extravagant' has a special value in this context. More than simply a spendthrift, it suggests a 'wanderer beyond bounds' by association with the medieval verb *extravagari*. Nor should such errancy be taken in too literal a sense. Desdemona is also a voyager to the degree that her taste for the discourse of voyaging – for what Othello calls his 'traveller's history' (1.3.138) – conjures Othello into imaginative existence.

What is the nature of the geographic imagination mediated by others and voyagers? The mysterious commerce between these two kinds of figure suggests that something rather more than a conventional notion of geography is involved. The geography of these plays is much more than a literal quantity and much more than a backdrop. It is a complex and dynamic imaginative quantity, with a characterological and symbolic agenda. To the extent, for example, that both voyagers and others tend to be creatures of hubris in the original Greek sense of 'overflowing' their bounds, then the exotic geographies that define them will tend to function as a paradigm of their transgressiveness. This will already suggest the

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poverty of Rogers's procedure of treating Shakespeare's geography independently of the rich nexus of symbolic values which it vehiculates. What we require is a more poetically responsive idea of geography, not just to cope with the poetic vitality which Shakespeare gives it but, more importantly, to elucidate how it actively lends itself to particular kinds of symbolic investment. In what follows, I will suggest that the *imaginative* or poetic dimension of Shakespeare's geographic imagination is not to be understood *sui generis*. Shakespeare is not to be thought of as pressing an inventory of proto-scientific, value-free, morally and mythologically inert geographic ideas into an imaginative existence which is somehow alien to their nature. Just the opposite is true. Shakespeare's geographic imagination is informed by a rich geographic tradition which is already moralised, already inherently 'poetic' in the sense of being alive with human and dramaturgical meaning: specifically, with the meaning of human difference. However, before we begin to look at the geography mediated by the other and the voyager, we need to formulate a more phenomenologically, poetically and historically adequate notion of geography.

1

The idea that geography has a moral or symbolic dimension is hardly new. Rogers himself implies as much about the geographies of medieval Europe and classical China, which is what he is thinking of when he calls Shakespeare an 'instinctive geographer'. Certainly, one has only to read *Mandeville's Travels*, gaze at a medieval world map, or indeed at any *imago mundi* ('world image') formed by a 'traditional' or 'pre-scientific' culture to realise their overwhelmingly human, even sacred, character.⁵ Less clear, but no less true, is that European geography, from the sixteenth century to the present (that geographic discourse which we are accustomed to think of as 'scientific') can also be submitted to 'poetic' or phenomenological analysis. Edward Said, for example, has described the Eurocentric discourse of 'Orientalism' from Aeschylus to T. E. Lawrence (and after), while Robert Harbison has spoken of how even modern maps 'sedulously reinforce and protect our sense of where we are' and operate in a 'semi-religious' capacity as 'our main means of aligning ourselves with something bigger than us'.⁶ Non-geographic spaces have also been read as poetic constructions: from a cosmic aspect by Michel Foucault and from a domestic aspect by Gaston Bachelard.⁷ There is, then, no shortage of phenomenologically sophisticated ways by which to approach the geographic traditions behind Shakespeare's geographic imagination.

Of all such phenomenologies, however, the notion of 'poetic geog-

raphy' formulated by the eighteenth-century philosopher, Giambattista Vico, seems most suggestive to our purposes. Briefly, Vico supposes that the archaic image of the Greek *oikumene* – a word which suggestively combines the senses of 'world' and 'house' – predates and prescribes the earliest known formulation of its geography in Herodotus. In other words, the imaginative form of the *oikumene* controls its factual geographic content. Instead, therefore, of supposing that the Greeks formed the image of their world – a world which, in Herodotus, stretches from 'Scythia' in the north to Ethiopia in the south, and from 'Asia' in the east to Gibraltar in the west – from their commerce with that world, Vico supposes that the essential *oikumene* began in Greece itself.⁸ In the beginning, then, the Greek image of the 'world' was literally bound by their geographic 'home'. Then, as further geographic knowledge became available, the symbolic architecture of the *oikumene* was simply exported or extrapolated to accommodate it. 'Poetic geography' is accordingly defined as 'the property of human nature that "in describing unknown or distant things, in respect of which they . . . have not had the true idea themselves . . . men make use of the semblances of things known or near at hand"' (p. 285). What is interesting for our purposes is less Vico's methods – an unashamed mythology of origins supported by an elaborate skein of inferences drawn from fanciful etymologies – than his vision: boldly deconstructing the Enlightenment assumption that the Greeks invented 'geography' essentially in order to understand their world rather than to project it in their own parochial image. Vico, then, is exemplary for our project to the degree that a relatively unproblematised discourse like geography tends to be 'taken for granted' which means being taken in Enlightenment terms.

Vico is exemplary for another reason: his vision of how directly and powerfully the 'poetic' dimension of ancient geography mediates key ideological structures, particularly those which articulate identity and difference. Thus, supposes Vico in a related origin myth, the archaic image of the Latin 'home-world' is itself formed at the most primal stage of social formation: the stage at which a casual grouping of individuals marks itself off from 'the infamous promiscuity of people and things in the bestial state', and so constitutes itself as a society proper. In one sense, this primal geographic and societal drama is to be regarded as belonging to the 'poetic' (which is to say prehistoric) past of ancient societies, but in another sense, that primal drama is always with them, fossilised in the etymology of key geographic terms. The Latin term *terra* (or 'earth') is glossed as follows:

The earth was associated by the theological poets with the guarding of the boundaries, and hence it was called *terra*. This heroic origin the Latins preserved

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in the word *territorium*, which signifies the district within which the *imperium* is exercised . . . the word originated in the fact that the boundaries of those cultivated fields, within which the civil powers later arose, were guarded by Vesta with bloody rites. (p. 274)

Just as the geographic term *terra* is etymologically racked to disclose its roots in the primal terrorism of civilisation, so too geographic myth and symbolism is systematically collapsed into the mythology of the primal city. *Vesta*, for example, the Roman goddess of the sacred hearth-flame, is derived from the Greek *Cybele* (or Earth-mother) ‘who wears a crown of towers’, from which ‘the so-called *orbis terrarum* began to take form, signifying the world of nations, later amplified by cosmographers and called *orbis mundanus* or, in a word, *mundus*, the world of nature’ (p. 274). *Orbis* or the bounded ‘world’ directly recapitulates the sacred drama of the bounded city:

the walls were traced by the founders of the cities with the plough, the moldboard of which, by the origins of language . . . must have been called *urbs*, whence the ancient *urbum*, curved. Perhaps *orbis* is from the same origin, so that at first *orbis terrae* must have meant any fence made in this way, so low that Remus jumped over it to be killed by Romulus and thus, as Latin historians narrate, to consecrate with his blood the first walls of Rome. (p. 194)

Thus Vico insistently derives the archaic origins of the ‘world’ from that of the city. The walls of the city and the borders of its territory are both telescoped into the edges of the ancient map; the personified female body of the city (*Vesta*) is co-extensive with that of the earth (*Cybele*). Inhabited earth and city constantly divide themselves from their opposites. Their thresholds – altars, walls, boundaries, frontiers – threaten transgressors with the sacred violence of sacrifice, law or warfare. The order of city and world is constituted by their violent differentiation from ‘the infamous promiscuity of people and things in the bestial state’.

Vico is exemplary not just for devising a ‘poetics’ of the ancient *imago mundi* but for thinking ‘poetic geography’ through to the point of requiring a politics or an ethnography or a drama. If the trunk of ‘poetic geography’ consists in the ability of an archaic world-image to accommodate ever more sophisticated and diverse geographic information, then its root consists in the ceaselessly renewed activity of differentiation. The need to constitute an identity by excluding the other is not just primal, but perennial. With the growth of geographic information and the outward push of imperial borders, come ever more others, renewing the need to differentiate, and perpetuating the need for a symbolic border and ever new rites of exclusion. Notwithstanding the inadmissibility of Vico’s accounts of discursive origins, I want to suggest that ‘poetic geography’ be taken as paradigmatic for any geography which differentiates between

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an 'us' and a 'them': whether the geographic entities so divided are thought of in terms of the ancient dualism of the 'inhabited earth' versus what Horace calls *terras domibus negata* ('uninhabitable lands'), the Renaissance dualism of the known world versus that class of geographic entity bearing the label '*terra incognita*', or other dualisms such as 'Europe' versus 'the Orient' or 'Christendom' versus 'Paganism'.⁹

2

Vico's importance is in systematically thinking through the *meaning* of geography as an articulation of human perspective, and for suggesting how the most strikingly perspective-affirming conventions of ancient geography – those pertaining to privileged centres and enclosing edges – might be understood in precise 'poetic' or dramaturgical terms. However, to admit his importance as an exemplar is not to accept his mythological fantasies and his etymological methods. The present task, therefore, is to furnish another order of 'proof' of the differential activity of centres and borders in the European geographic tradition, beginning with the historical origins of this tradition in the Hellenic *oikumene*.

Ironically, in view of the prodigality of Vico's myth-making, the extant mythology of the *oikumene* already exemplifies a necessary (and highly Viconian) dialectic of centre and border. One form of this spatial dialectic can be seen in a second-century oration by Aelius Aristides in praise of Athens: 'From every extremity as to a device in the centre of a shield, the signs of Hellas point to this region . . . the nation's common hearth'.¹⁰ Another version of the dialectic is revealed by J. P. Vernant's study of the meaning of the mythological relationship between Hestia (goddess of the hearth) and Hermes (god of travellers, the marketplace and boundaries).¹¹ For Vernant, Hestia 'represents not only the centre of the domestic sphere . . . the circular hearth' but also 'the node and starting point of the orientation and arrangement of human space' (p. 128). Hermes, too, is 'associated with man's habitat' and also 'with the terrestrial sphere' (p. 128). But, 'if with Hestia, he inhabits the dwellings of mortals' it is 'in the form of the messenger . . . as a traveller from afar . . . who is already preparing to depart' (p. 129). Where Hestia represents fixity, Hermes represents 'movement and flow, mutation and transition, contact between foreign elements' (p. 129). Hence is he the god of gateways, boundaries and crossroads. The two gods are, then, complementary:

forever immobile, at the centre of the domestic sphere, Hestia implies, as her complement and her contrast, the swift-footed god who rules the realms of the traveller. To Hestia belongs the world of the interior, the enclosed, the stable, the retreat of the human group within itself; to Hermes, the outside world,

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opportunity, movement, interchange with others. It could be said that, by virtue of their polarity, the Hermes-Hestia couple represents the tension which is so marked in the archaic conception of space: space requires a centre, a nodal point, with a special value, from which all directions, all different qualitatively, may be channelled and defined; yet at the same time space appears as the medium of movement implying the possibility of transition and passage from any point to another. (p. 130)

While Hermes ‘mobilises’ space, in contrast to Hestia who ‘centres’ it, he nevertheless approaches the fixity of Hestia the nearer he approaches the boundary, at which point his movement ceases and he becomes frozen into the *Herm*: the Greek term for a geographical boundary marker.¹² The *Herm* therefore represents the limits of the dynamic Hermetic organisation of space, the point at which movement becomes stasis and randomness of geographic line approaches the geometry of the orbic boundary: what the Ionians referred to as ‘the parallelogram of Ephorus’ and what William Arthur Heidel generically describes as ‘the frame of the ancient Greek maps’.¹³

While the relationship between Hestia and Hermes is fruitfully symbiotic, that between the *oikumene* as a whole and the lands at or beyond its frame is one of utter divorce and difference. Herodotus, who is the first to leave a systematic description of such extreme areas and their peoples, refers to them generically as *eschatia*: end-zones and wastelands.¹⁴ The ‘poetry’ of the frame controls the discourse of such extremities in two important ways. First, by the logic of exclusion, extreme lands will be constructed as polar opposites of the *oikumene* proper. Second, by the logic of symmetry, all *eschatia* will – in spite of local variations or even glaring antitheses – tend to replicate each other.

The logic of exclusion leads to a generic description of all *eschatia* as the home of *thoma* or ‘wonders’, a term which fuses the monstrous (in the sense of the physically grotesque) with the marvellous (in the sense of remarkable and precious products such as balm, incense, spices, gold, jewels and drugs). By contrast, *Hellas*, while lacking in *thoma* of either variety, will be plainly superior to the end-zones (particularly those of the frigid north or the torrid south) in its fruitfulness and temperateness. Thus, Herodotus informs us, ‘the fairest blessings have been granted to the most distant nations . . . whereas in Hellas the seasons have by much the kindest temperature’ (3.106).¹⁵ Just as the natural qualities of the *eschatia* differ absolutely from those of *Hellas*, so too the peoples of these regions will represent an extreme (savage, demonic or carnivalesque) inversion of Greek society. Hence, François Hartog finds Herodotean ethnography to be dominated by a rhetoric of ‘inversion’.¹⁶ And hence, Edith Hall describes how fifth-century Athenian political mythology and

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tragedy ‘invented’ an all-purpose label for non-Hellenes which would simultaneously collapse all their ethnic variety into a single category and assert the absolute ‘natural’ inferiority of all non-Hellenic peoples to Hellenes.¹⁷ Thus was born the seminal figure of the ‘barbarian’, an other who would become systematically appropriated by the ethnographic and imperial discourses of Rome and Renaissance Europe. In Athenian tragedy, the formative discursive milieu of the barbarian, the poetry of the *oikumene* becomes both political, in the sense of its intimate relationship to the political mythology of Athens, and truly dramaturgical.¹⁸ For the Athenians, the extreme otherness of barbarians led to their imagery being collapsed into that of mythological Athenian others such as Centaurs and Amazons – who (on account of their femaleness, long hair and flowing robes) came to be elided with the ‘Oriental’ (and hence effeminate) Persians.¹⁹ Hence the depiction of centaumachies and amazonomachies on the walls of the Parthenon – at the sacred centre of the *Polis* – celebrated in an almost Viconian fashion the violent assertion of Athenian identity over these Athenian versions ‘the infamous promiscuity of people and things in the bestial state’.²⁰ To Aristides, Athens seems the focus of Hellenic culture because, situated ‘in the middle of all Hellas . . . it is she alone who purely represents the Hellenes and to the barbarians remains most alien’.²¹ The mythology, poetry and drama of the barbarian should not be thought of as coming after the fact of the Hellenic border, but as a vital means of constituting it. Hall observes a similar phenomenon in ancient Egypt and China.²² World borders tend to be defined as empires form and others are identified.

While the logic of exclusion led to all extreme lands being represented as inversions of *Hellas* (and hence of the Athenian *Polis* which invented the very idea of a Hellenic nation), the same logic led to extreme lands being constructed as mirror images of each other. Thus, according to François Hartog, Herodotus was able to invent an entire ethnography for Scythia (an extreme northerly region of which he knew very little) by systematically inverting everything which he knew about Egypt (an extreme southerly region).²³ Hence where the Egyptians are the most ancient and learned of men, the Scythians are the ‘youngest’, the most ignorant and the most savage. Where nature in Egypt is dominated by heat, that in Scythia is controlled by cold. Finally, in a purely Viconian geographic extrapolation, the course of the Nile in the south is predicted on the assumption that it will be symmetrical with that of the Ister (or the Danube) in the north.²⁴ A similar reverence for symmetry leads Herodotus to rank the marvels of India, in extremest Asia, alongside those of Arabia, in extremest Libya (3.104–15).

A version of the ‘poetic’ tension which we have observed between the

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centre and the periphery of the *oikumene* is to be found in the Roman *orbis terrarum* or *orbis terrae* (literally, 'the circle of lands'). While the Romans seem to have lacked any mythological equivalent of the subtle spatial dialectic between Hestia and Hermes, they adopted the more aggressive and Viconian Athenian mythologies of geographic difference with a vengeance. Hence, the symbolism of the orbic frame, the essentially *Polis*-centred Athenian mythology of geographic difference, the idea of the barbarian and the Herodotean ethnographic tradition are all writ large in Roman poetic geographic discourse. Unlike the edges of the *oikumene* or of *Hellas*, which (because they were essentially symbolic) are often telescoped together in the mythology of the *oikumene*, the edges of the Roman 'world' have a powerful physical presence. Hence, Gibbon speaks of Augustus's desire to confine the empire 'within those limits which Nature seemed to have placed on its permanent bulwarks and boundaries: the Atlantic Ocean on the west; the Rhine and Danube on the north; the Euphrates on the east; and toward the south, the sandy deserts of Arabia and Africa'.²⁵ Yet the very self-evidence of these 'permanent bulwarks and boundaries' testifies to a prior need to project a human world (Vico's *orbis terrarum* or 'world of nations') in natural terms (Vico's *orbis mundanus* or 'world of nature'). Ovid relates a Roman proverb: *Gentibus est aliis tellus data limite certo, Romanae spacium est urbis et orbis idem* ('The land of other nations has a fixed boundary: the circuit of Rome is the circuit of the world').²⁶ What this and similar proverbs suggest is that the Roman *imago mundi* was as much a construction of 'poetry' and rhetoric as of factual geography.²⁷ In his study of the *orbis terrarum*, J. Oliver Thomson remarks how the Romans actually suppressed their knowledge of extra-imperial regions such as China, in order to preserve the proverbial equivalence of the Empire with the world.²⁸

For all their monumental physicality, then, the edges of the Roman world are as mysterious and poetic as those of the *oikumene*. Plutarch observes their fascination for Roman map-makers: 'geographers . . . crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but the sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea'.²⁹ The 'instinct' which led Plutarch's geographers to take poetic licence with precisely those 'parts of the earth which elude their knowledge' also informs the Roman terms for 'boundary': *terminus* and *finis*. *Terminus* could have the sense of 'a concrete object', which insofar as it served to mark a boundary 'was of great importance in law and religion; the man who removed landmarks was accused'.³⁰ In this sense it was personified as 'the god of boundaries'.³¹ While this