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"Barrens" or "Heavens": African Geography Imagination under Shakespeare's Foreign Land Narratives

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Abstract

In Shakespeare's foreign land narrative plays, Tunisia, Algiers, Morocco, and Mauritania, the four countries in northern and northwestern Africa, are portrayed as remote and barbaric places; Egypt and Ethiopia, two countries located in northeast Africa, are depicted as rich and mysterious countries full of oriental flavors. At the same time, Shakespeare's plays lack depictions of central and southern African countries. Shakespeare's imagination mechanism of African geography was influenced by factors such as traffic conditions, geographical landscapes, as well as mythological stories etc., reflecting the romantic imagination of early modern Europeans on the African continent. Such an African geographical imagination mechanism has promoted Europeans' exploration of the unknown African world, accelerated the Western colonial process towards Africa, and enhanced Europeans' awareness of their own geographical and cultural identity, allowing them to maintain their "Europeanness" while engaging in trade and cultural exchanges with Africans.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Foreign Land Narrative, Africa, Geography Imagination

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), as a representative playwright of the Renaissance, rarely focused on the everyday life of England in his works (Raleigh, 1906: pp. 153-154), Instead, he often set his plays in foreign lands and turned his attention to the geographic, racial, and cultural differences between nations. This approach gave rise to many of his well-known narratives of distant locales, such as *Titus Andronicus* (1588-1593), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1599), and *Othello*

(1603-1604). A close reading of these plays reveals intriguing geographical references to Africa. Through the voices of Europeans and foreign characters of African origin, Shakespeare constructs a contrast between the familiar and the exotic, offering glimpses of how Africa was perceived in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, while also reflecting the broader realities of European-African contact at the time.

Although Shakespearean scholarship is voluminous and extensive, studies specifically addressing the theme of "Africa" have primarily focused on representations of African characters, animal imagery, and racial issues. Research on geographical narratives related to Africa in Shakespeare's plays remains comparatively limited. While scholars have noted references to African locations such as Egypt, Algiers, and Tunis in Shakespeare's works, there has been no systematic exploration of the geographical imagination that shaped these depictions. For instance, Richard Wilson, in his analysis of *The Tempest*, draws on the play's historical context and thematic concerns to argue that the remote island inhabited by the spirit Ariel is situated near Algiers, interpreting the shipwreck narrative as an allegory for the rampant piracy in the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century (335-336). To date, no scholar—either in China or abroad—has conducted a comprehensive and in-depth study of the geographical details related to Africa in Shakespeare's plays.

"Geographical imagination" denotes the cluster of mental pictures through which early modern writers and audiences situated Africa on the map, pictured its landscapes (deserts, river deltas, fertile coasts), speculated on its climate extremes, and linked the region to distinctive diseases such as plague or malaria. Based on this, this article seeks to fill that gap by analyzing six of Shakespeare's plays set abroad—including *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-99), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07), *The Tempest* (1610-11), and three additional works that feature African geographical elements—in order to explore the intersections between Shakespeare's narratives of distant locales and contemporary perceptions of African geography. It aims to answer two key questions: 1) How is the African environment portrayed in Shakespeare's foreign narratives, and what modes of geographical imagination underpin these depictions? 2) What factors influenced the construction of these geographical imaginaries, and how did such imaginative frameworks affect early modern trade and cultural exchange between Europe and Africa?

2. Tunis, Algiers, Morocco, and Mauritania: Remote and Barbaric Regions in North and Northwest Africa

In his foreign-set narrative plays, Shakespeare refers to six African countries: four in North Africa—Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt—and two others representing eastern and western Africa, namely Ethiopia and Mauritania. Geographically, Tunisia and Algeria are situated in the northern part of the continent; while Morocco and Mauritania, though commonly classified as North African, are roughly located in the northwest. Egypt and Ethiopia lie in the northeast. In

Shakespeare's plays, the northern and northwestern African nations—Tunis, Algiers, Morocco, and Mauritania—are frequently portrayed as remote and uncivilized lands.

The Tempest offers the following description of Tunisia's geographic remoteness:

> She that is Queen of Tunis; she that dwells
> Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples
> Can have no note—unless the sun were post—
> The man i'th' moon's too slow—till new-born chins
> Be rough and razorable; she that from whom
> We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again—
> And by that destiny, to perform an act
> Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come
> In yours and my discharge (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4574).

Although geographically small, Tunisia was widely regarded as one of the most historically significant countries in North Africa and even across the African continent. In *The Tempest*, Tunisia is described by Antonio of Milan as a distant and barbarous land, far removed from the civilized world. Its remoteness from Naples is so extreme that Antonio exaggerates, "a space whose every cubit/Seems to cry out 'How shall that Claribel Measure us back to Naples? Keep in Tunis, /And let Sebastian wake'" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4574). Even Sebastian, the loyal brother of the King of Naples, criticizes the decision to marry off Claribel to the King of Tunis, calling it a "great loss" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4569), and lamenting that she should have been kept to "bless our Europe" rather than be "loosed to an African" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4569). King Alonso, Claribel's father, agrees, believing he has lost his daughter forever. In sorrow, he reflects, "So far from Italy removed I ne'er again shall see her" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4568). Tunisia, located in North Africa, is thus constructed in the eyes of Milanese and Neapolitan characters—and by extension, early modern Europeans—as a remote, uncivilized, and inaccessible land. Furthermore, it is a place marked by danger and instability. In Shakespeare's portrayal, Tunisia borders a perilous sea and is exposed to the threat of being "sea-swallowed" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4574). Another North African country, Algeria, is portrayed through the character of Sycorax, the infamous witch born in Algiers. Sycorax is described as "with age and envy" and "grown into a hoop," (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4555) a grotesque figure of corruption and malice. Her crimes are said to be so grave—"mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible/To enter human hearing"—that she was banished from Algiers and exiled to a remote island (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4555). Some scholars suggest that the island inhabited by Prospero is likely situated near the African coast, possibly in the region of Algeria or Tunisia (Wilson, 1997: pp. 333-357; Fuchs, 1997: pp. 54-61; Hulme, 1981: pp. 55-58). Professor Andrew Hadfield similarly notes that in the Elizabethan cultural imagination, Algiers, the birthplace of Sycorax, was conceived in terms remarkably similar like to those associated with Tunis (Hadfield, 2007: p.

244). Although *The Tempest* does not provide detailed geographical description of Algiers, the exhaustion and disheveled appearance of Sycorax when she is transported to the island—her "blue-eyed" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4555) face indicating fatigue—hints at the arduousness of the journey from Algiers to Prospero's island.

In addition to the previously mentioned regions, Mauritania and Morocco—both located in northwestern Africa—also occupy a notable place in Shakespeare's dramatic geography. In *Othello*, the Moorish general, misled by the deceitful Iago, becomes convinced that his wife Desdemona is having an affair with his lieutenant Cassio. At one point, Iago, speaking to the envious Roderigo, remarks that the enraged and jealous Othello "goes into Mauritania, and takes away with him the fair Desdemona" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3297). Although the play does not provide a detailed description of Mauritania's geography, the very fact that Othello intends to flee there with Desdemona suggests that, in the eyes of Othello, Iago, and perhaps early modern Europeans more broadly, Mauritania was imagined as a remote, uncivilized, and isolated region—one where Othello could claim Desdemona for himself, free from social scrutiny or interference. Similarly, the journey from Morocco to Europe is portrayed as arduous in The Merchant of Venice. Before arriving in Venice, the Prince of Morocco must send word of his visit well in advance. His journey, as described in the play, requires traversing "the Hyrcanian deserts and the vasty wilds of wide Arabia" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 1783). To demonstrate the sincerity of his long voyage to court Portia, the Prince characterizes his homeland as a "burnish' d" land, in contrast to Venice, "where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 1765). Clearly, the geographic and climatic differences between the two regions, along with the implied physical distance, underscore Morocco's position on the margins of Shakespeare's imagined world.

The above analysis reveals that the North and Northwest African countries are consistently portrayed in Shakespeare's narratives as remote and uncivilized lands. But was this truly the case in historical reality?

In fact, Shakespeare's portrayal of North and Northwest African countries as remote lands was not entirely unfounded; rather, it reflected a reasonable geographical imagination shaped by the transportation conditions and landscape perceptions of his time. In the sixteenth century, European travel was far from convenient—indeed, it could be described as arduous. According to Geoffrey, the journey from London to Venice took approximately twenty-seven days; and from Venice, it required at least twenty-two additional days to reach Palermo, a city facing Tunisia across the sea (Geoffrey, 1978: p. 145). The voyage across the Mediterranean to reach North and Northwest African regions such as Algeria and Mauritania—two-thirds of which are desert today—would have taken even longer. Thus, Shakespeare's depiction of these African territories as distant and isolated is understandable considering the period's limited transportation infrastructure. Moreover, the Mediterranean between 1550 and 1600 possessed a dual character. It encompassed not only the surrounding peninsulas—Italy, the Balkans, Asia Mi-

nor, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula—and the Mediterranean Sea itself, but also an expansive desert landscape. In the southern Mediterranean, the boundary between sea and desert was often indistinct: from southern Tunisia to southern Syria, the desert stretched all the way to the coastline. The geographical contrast between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean was therefore stark. The vast and desolate desert vistas of the southern coast only heightened the perception of North and Northwest African countries as remote and barren—making Shakespeare's characterization of them as distant lands seem entirely reasonable.

However, the North and Northwest African nations were far from the savage and evil territories depicted in Shakespeare's plays. In fact, during the mid to late 16th century, Algeria and Tunisia—both located in North Africa—became provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Under Ottoman influence, these regions flourished in economic production and cultural creativity. During the Elizabethan era, Tunis was a major center of trade and commerce in the Mediterranean, regularly visited by European merchants. By the early 17th century, the pirate city of Algiers had become one of the wealthiest cities in the Mediterranean and a dazzling, luxurious capital of the arts (Braudel, 2013: pp. 54-55). As for Morocco and Mauritania, 16th-century Morocco may have been at the height of its intellectual renown. It was home to renowned libraries, and its northern city of Fez was not only a prosperous urban center but also a hub of Arabic learning, attracting Muslim scholars from across the Islamic world (Brown, 2010: pp. xiv-xv). In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Morocco reached its zenith under the Arab ruler al-Mansur (1549-1603), who enriched the kingdom through large-scale plundering campaigns and enjoyed widespread popular support—ushering in the golden age of the Saadian dynasty (Cambon, 1975: pp. 63-54). In the latter half of the 16th century, European interest in Mauritania began to grow, with merchants frequently procuring Arabic gum from its southern regions (Handloff, 1990: p. xx). The Arabic gum mentioned in *Othello* was very likely sourced from Mauritania. Thus, although the development of this North-West African country was limited by geographical constraints, it can by no means be considered savage or barren.

"Eurocentrism", also referred to as "Eurocentricity" or "Western-centrism", is defined in the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* as a perspective that "puts Europe at the center of the universe", implying that it "interprets the world through Western values" (McNeill, 2011: p. 964). Although manifestations of Eurocentrism become more prominent in the 19th century, scholars such as Ilia Xypolia and Rajani Kannepalli Kanth trace its origins back to the Renaissance period of the 16th century (Xypolia, 2016: p. 1; Kanth, 2009: pp. 221-222; Amin, 2009: p. 239). During this period, Europeans gradually recognize their status as a superior people, leading to the belief that civilizational conquest of the world is an achievable goal, even if other nations have not yet fully succumbed to European dominance. As noted by Samir Amin, Eurocentrism is rooted in a teleological view that "the entire history of Europe necessarily led to the blossoming of capitalism",

while Christianity, as a European religion, is perceived as "more favorable than other religions to the flourishing of the individual and the exercise of his or her capacity to dominate nature" (Amin, 2009: p. 162). As Princess Innogen states in Shakespeare's Cymbeline (1608-1610), "I 'th' world's volume/Our Britain seems as of it but not in't/In a great pool a swan's nest. Prithee, think/There's livers out of Britain" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4463). In this way, Shakespeare's negative portrayal of the geographical conditions of North and Northwest African countries, alongside his elevation of Britain's geographical status, not only showcases the superiority of European nations' geography but also reinforces European self-identity. It allowed Europeans, while engaging in trade and cultural exchange with Africa, to maintain their "European-ness," preserving their unique geographical and cultural attributes from external influence and invasion.

3. Egypt and Ethiopia: Prosperous and Mysterious Lands in the Orientalized Northeast

Egypt and Ethiopia are the two northeastern African countries that appear in Shakespeare's plays. Although geographically part of Africa, a close reading of the texts reveals that these nations are portrayed not only as wealthy and mysterious, but also as possessing a distinctly Oriental character.

In Shakespeare's works, Egypt is constructed as a mysterious and exotically Oriental land, particularly through visual and olfactory imagery. Most notably, Shakespeare visualizes Egypt as part of the "East." His plays frequently reference emblematic Eastern structures such as pyramids, rivers like the Nile, and symbolic animals including the asp, phoenix, toad, and crocodile. These distinctive visual markers of geography serve to accentuate Egypt's Oriental aura. The pyramids of Egypt appear repeatedly in *Henry VI, Part II* (1589-1592), *Macbeth* (1606-1607), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607). They are invoked as standards for "tak[ing] the flow o'th' Nile," (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3705) as symbols of "treasure," (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3610) and as mythic forms that never "slope" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3610) Architecturally unlike any Western structure, the pyramids evoke an aura of Eastern mystery. Their inverted conical form, monumental scale, engineering complexity, and aesthetic grandeur surpass those of any other pyramidal structures of the ancient world (Lv, 2015: p. 87). The frequent invocation of the pyramids in Shakespeare's references to Egypt vividly underscores the country's Oriental "essence." Additionally, the Nile—flowing through northeastern Africa—serves as another powerful geographical and cultural symbol of the East. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus (c. 480-425 BCE) described Egypt as the land sustained and defined by the reach and irrigation of the Nile, asserting that Egyptians were fundamentally nourished by the river (Herodotus, 2018: p. 124). In Shakespeare's representations of landscapes beyond Britain, the Nile is the most frequently mentioned river and serves as a prominent visual symbol of Egypt. In Antony and Cleopatra, Antony, returning from Egypt, describes its wondrous fertility: "The higher Nilus swells/The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman/

Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,/And shortly comes to harvest" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3705). Cleopatra's attendant Charmian likewise asserts that "the o'erflowing Nilus presageth famine" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3658). Upon learning of Antony's marriage to another woman, Cleopatra exclaims in despair, "Melt Egypt into Nile, and kindly creatures/Turn all to serpents!". These references suggest that the Nile, infused with an exotic Oriental aura, accentuates the mysterious and singular character of Egypt.

In the case of Ethiopia, another country located in northeastern Africa, Shakespeare evokes the legend of Prester John—a figure well known in medieval European lore—to construct an atmosphere of Oriental mystique around the African continent. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the young nobleman Benedick of Padua says to Don Pedro of Aragon:

I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on. I will fetch you a tooth-picker now from the furthest inch of Asia, bring you the length of Prester John's foot, fetch you a hair off the Great Cham's beard, do you any embassage to the pigmies, rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 2163).

The above passage refers to the long-standing medieval legend of "Prester John," also known as "John the Presbyter," "Priest-King John," or even "King David." The earliest recorded account of this legend appears in the writings of Otto of Freising (c. 1114-1158), a German cleric and chronicler, who noted that "a certain John, a king and priest who dwells beyond Persia and Armenia in the uttermost East, and with all his people, is a Christian... It is said that he is a lineal descendant of the Magi, of whom mention is made in the Gospel" (Otto, 1928: pp. 443-444). A few years later, a mysterious letter, purportedly written by the Christian ruler Prester John, began circulating in Europe, claiming that his vast empire extended far beyond the Muslim realms of the Near East (Slessarev, 1959: p. 4). According to the letter, his kingdom encompassed three regions: "Greater India"—the southern part of the Indian subcontinent and its maritime extensions; "Middle India"—the region near the Nile in East Africa; and "Lesser India"—the northern part of the subcontinent stretching into Central Asia (Rogers, 1961: p. 150). By the later Middle Ages, Prester John's kingdom came to be associated with Ethiopia (Silverberg, 1972: p. 163). Even in the late sixteenth century, many Europeans continued to believe that a Christian patriarch ruled this distant eastern land. Prominent cartographers of the period, including Gerardus Mercator (1512-1594) and Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598), incorporated imagined portraits of Prester John into their maps of Ethiopia.

Due to its geographic location and diplomatic isolation, Ethiopia remained largely inaccessible to Europeans prior to the early sixteenth century. Its limited connections with the Mediterranean world contributed to the scarcity of reliable knowledge about the region. In ancient Greek and early medieval European geographical imagination, the Nile was believed to divide Asia from the African continent, and Ethiopia—thought to be connected to India by land—was often con-

sidered part of the latter (de Rachewiltz, 1972: p. 2). Although a Portuguese mission reached Ethiopia in 1520, the country's geographical position remained uncertain on early modern European world maps (Campbell, 2009: p. 21). The legend of Prester John reflects the West's romanticized imagination of Ethiopia—a land perceived as wondrous and mysterious—emerging from a historical context marked by hazy and imprecise knowledge of the East. As Edward Brooke-Hitching notes, such fanciful inventions and mythical constructs played a crucial role in stimulating early human exploration (Hitching, 2018: p. 291), accelerating Western engagement with the unknown African world.

Moreover, Egypt and Ethiopia—two countries located in northeastern Africa—are portrayed in Shakespeare's works as lands of great wealth. In the case of Egypt, Mark Antony, a Roman leader well acquainted with the grandeur of Rome, describes Cleopatra's realm as "opulent" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 2674). In this land, Roman visitors can enjoy "the juice of Egypt's grape"(Shakespeare, 2005: p. 2674) and are said to be "stayed well by' t in Egypt" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3805). At the same time, Pompey's officer Maecenas refers to Cleopatra as "a most triumphant lady" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3687), and Antony's lieutenant Enobarbus offers an extravagant description of her luxurious barge as "a burnished throne/Burned on the water" (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3687). The barge, with its stern of gold, silver oars, and canopies of exquisite silk (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 3687), becomes a vivid emblem of the queen's wealth and opulence. These details, both direct and symbolic, underscore the prosperity of Egypt under Cleopatra's rule. As for Ethiopia, though it appears less frequently in Shakespeare's works, the legend of Prester John imbues it with an aura of mystery and grandeur. In Shakespeare's imagination, shaped by this popular medieval tale, Ethiopia emerges as a land of allure and abundance—so powerful and rich that it could be compared to the mighty Mongol Empire of its time.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Northeast Africa drew European attention due to its considerable political, military, and cultural power (Ogot, 2013: p. 619). Countries such as Egypt and Ethiopia, located in this region, were geographically distant from Christian Europe and closely intertwined with the Near East. As a result, they were regarded as part of the "East"—as cultural "Others" distinct from the Western world. In the early modern imagination, the Orient—like medieval Asia, as American scholar Mary Baine Campbell observes—was both sufficiently "known" and sufficiently "unknown," thus providing fertile ground for the ongoing interplay between literature and fact (Ogot, 2013: p. 3).

4. The Rarely Mentioned Regions of Central and Southern Africa

Although Shakespeare's foreign land narrative plays portray countries in North, West, and East Africa, they make no mention of any Central or Southern African nations. What accounts for this absence in Shakespeare's representation of Africa? And what does this omission reveal about the diplomatic relations and sociohis-

torical realities between early modern Europe and the African continent?

It is worth noting that medieval and Renaissance fictional travel narratives, such as Sir John Mandeville's *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), and *Thomas More's New Atlantis* (c. 1623), contain no depictions of the geographical environments of Sub-Saharan or Central Africa. Furthermore, the firsthand African travel accounts available to Shakespeare during the Renaissance—such as Joannes Leo Africanus's *Della Descrittione dell'Africa* (1526) and Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations*, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation (1589)—focus primarily on African countries along the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean coasts, offering little information about the interior regions of Central and Southern Africa.

Drawing on the historical context, it becomes evident that although Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries explored much of the African coastline, they largely refrained from venturing into the vast interior due to challenging terrain, harsh climate, and the prevalence of disease. As a result, early modern travelers and writers had limited knowledge of Central and Southern Africa, which contributed to the absence of these regions in the literary representations of the period.

One major reason lies in the geography of Africa. In the fifteenth century, European navigation was constrained by the unknown nature of the seas and landforms, and remained largely confined to the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic Seas (Geoffrey, 1978: p. 159). While some contact was made with coastal West African regions, no ships had reached the southern coast of the continent. Even by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the inland territories of Central and Southern Africa remained largely unexplored. A map of Africa provided by the German-British geographer and cartographer Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1834-1913) for Joannes Leo Africanus's *Della Descrittione dell'Africa* reveals that, to sixteenth-century Europeans, the continent appeared rugged and impenetrable. Reaching Central Africa from the coasts was considered nearly impossible, due to the formidable barriers posed by plateaus, mountains, lakes, and deserts. Consequently, Africa's international trade during this period was concentrated in coastal regions, such as Mozambique in the southeast, Kenya in the east, and Ghana in the west. It was not until the nineteenth century that British explorers such as David Livingstone (1813-1873), Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), and John Hanning Speke (1827-1864) overcame immense difficulties to explore Central and Southern Africa, gradually filling in the cartographic gaps left for centuries (Chisholm, 1911: pp. 333-334). Only then did literary depictions of Central and Southern African nations begin to appear in English literature. Therefore, the absence of geographical detail about these regions in Shakespeare's plays of foreign lands is understandable, and the lack of attention paid by Shakespeare and his contemporaries to Central and Southern African countries comes as no surprise.

In addition, the climatic conditions of the Age of Discovery significantly hin-

dered mutual exploration between European and African nations, becoming one of the major reasons for the absence of depictions of Central and Southern African countries in Shakespeare's plays set in foreign lands. During Shakespeare's lifetime, Europe was undergoing the "Little Ice Age," a period of cooler temperatures lasting roughly from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, with its peak occurring between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to British archaeologist Brian Fagan, the climate in Europe during this period became increasingly unpredictable under the influence of the Little Ice Age, marked by colder temperatures, frequent storms, and extreme weather events (Fagan, 2013: pp. 7-8). Such harsh conditions posed serious obstacles for European explorers. First, snow, ice, and violent storms jeopardized sea voyages, placing ships at constant risk. Second, the cold and unstable climate created logistical challenges, especially in securing food supplies. The growing season for crops shortened, agricultural productivity declined, and Europe frequently suffered from food shortages and famines (Chiari, 2019: pp. 4-5; Degroot, 2018: p. 1; Collet & Schuh, 2018: p. 108). Limited resources made it difficult to sustain exploration. As Chinese scholar Zhang Jun has noted, Shakespeare's depictions of storms, cold, and famine in his plays are not fictional inventions but are grounded in the ecological realities of contemporary England (Zhang, 2014: p. 109). It can thus be argued that the climatic conditions of the Little Ice Age, along with their ecological consequences, significantly curtailed Western efforts to explore the interior regions of Central and Southern Africa. Accordingly, the absence of geographical depictions of these regions in Shakespeare's plays set in foreign locales is historically justified and understandable.

Finally, disease was a significant factor. Unlike their persistent efforts to conquer the Americas, Europeans after the sixteenth century refrained from pressing into Central and Southern Africa largely because they encountered deadly illnesses along the African coasts. These included malaria/ague, yellow fever, phthisis, and dropsy, all of which posed serious threats to survival and hindered further inland exploration (Braudel, 1992: p. 43). Historical records reveal that in 1553, while sailing in the Gulf of Guinea, a British vessel lost 100 of its 140 crew members to malaria. Even more alarming, a single case of yellow fever aboard could doom the entire crew within a short span of time (Hamada, 2006: p. 34). Moreover, from the fifteenth century onward, the Central African interior—plagued by malaria, yellow fever, and other tropical diseases—repelled European imperial powers to such a degree that it came to be known as "the White Man's Grave" (Arrow et al., 2004: p. 127). Besides, the frequent and difficult-to-treat outbreaks of scurvy during the Age of Discovery further constrained long-distance sea voyages. These harsh medical realities illustrate just how formidable a challenge it was to cross the seas and approach the African continent—let alone penetrate its inland territories. Notably, references to African diseases are not absent from Shakespeare's works; in The Tempest, for instance, the word ague—a term for malaria—is mentioned three times.

> This is some monster of the isle with four legs, who hath got, as I take it, an ague. Where the devil should he learn our language? I will give him some relief, if it be but for that. If I can recover him and keep him tame and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather. (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4580)

Malaria was prevalent in Shakespeare's time, commonly referred to as "ague" or "marsh fever." It was one of the most widespread illnesses in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England and a major cause of mortality in several regions of the country (Reite 1). Those infected with malaria typically suffered from intermittent fevers, chills, headaches, bodily pain, and spleen enlargement. In The Tempest, Stefano, the drunken butler from Naples, mockingly describes the monstrous Caliban as appearing "like he hath got an ague" upon first encountering him on the island (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4580). Shakespeare attributes the disease to vapors drawn by the sun from "bogs, fens, flats," (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 4580) which are said to fall on Prospero—a view we now know to be incorrect. Some scholars argue that the malaria found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was not tropical in origin but rather a disease spread by native Anopheles mosquitoes breeding in the marshlands of southern England (Dobson, 1992: "Contours of death", pp. 81-83; Reiter, 2000: p. 3; Dobson, 1989: "History of malaria in England", p. 6). However, considering the context of England's interactions with Africa during Shakespeare's lifetime, it is plausible that the intensifying trade relations and influx of African populations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may have introduced new sources of infection. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, England established extensive trade networks and colonial enterprises in Africa, especially West Africa. These exchanges could have facilitated the transmission of malaria into England via infected individuals or mosquitoes traveling along trade routes or aboard ships from malaria-endemic African regions. Once introduced, the parasites may have found suitable breeding grounds in England's marshlands, leading to localized outbreaks. Therefore, given the historical ties between England and Africa, the possibility that malaria was imported into England from Africa is entirely plausible.

Moreover, American scholar Arno Chanoch Karlen (1937-2010) hypothesizes that malaria likely reached Rome as early as the first century CE. According to his account, the disease originally spread from the African rainforests along the Nile to the Mediterranean, where it became widespread in Greece. Greek merchants and colonizers subsequently carried it to Italy, and eventually, infected Roman soldiers and traders introduced it to northern regions such as England and Denmark (Karlen, 1996: p. 70). This trajectory highlights the extensive and pervasive transmission of African malaria and its considerable impact on European societies. Due to its virulence and reach, malaria came to be seen as a powerful defensive pathogen—one of the primary barriers to the colonization of Africa (Arrow et al., 2004: p. 127). Likewise, in Shakespeare's works, malaria is portrayed as a

disease that weakens the body, ushers in crisis, and even leads to death (Shakespeare, 2005: p. 2372, 2818, 3640). These depictions underscore the fear the disease instilled in Europeans and reflect the underlying realities of Afro-European encounters. Without doubt, disease was a major factor limiting interaction between Europe and the inland regions of Central and Southern Africa, and thus constitutes one of the key reasons for the absence of these areas in Shakespeare's representations of Africa.

In sum, Africa's terrain, climate, and disease environment significantly shaped its historical trajectory and development. The scarce representation of Central and Southern African nations in Shakespeare's foreign land narrative dramas reflects not only a selective omission but also the substantive nature of early modern Euro-African contact—namely, that European geographical exploration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was largely confined to coastal regions, leaving much of the interior, including Central and Southern Africa, beyond the scope of their knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare's foreign-set plays are of great significance, as they transcend geographical and cultural boundaries to offer readers a richly exotic imaginative experience. At the same time, they provide a valuable lens through which to examine the evolving relationship between Europe and Africa in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. During Shakespeare's lifetime, Africa was increasingly perceived as a land of potential and allure—one that drew Europeans to its shores in pursuit of trade, colonial expansion, and the promise of a better life (Du Bois, 2014: p. 35). The geographical imagination of Africa in Shakespeare's foreign narratives not only encouraged European curiosity and exploration of the unknown continent but also contributed to the acceleration of Western colonial ambitions. Simultaneously, this imaginative engagement reinforced European cultural and geographical self-identity, enabling Europeans to maintain a sense of "Europeanness" even as they engaged in trade and cultural exchange with Africa.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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