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Greece Reinvented: Shakespeare’s “Greek Plays” as a Subgenre¹

Abstract: This article justifies the addition of “Greek Plays” as a subgenre to classify Shakespeare’s works. The six plays (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Timon of Athens*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, and *Troilus and Cressida*) in this subgenre are defined as adaptations of ancient Greek literature, staged in Greek or closely related settings, and featuring characters from Greek mythology and history. Through a review of the research history of Shakespeare’s Greek plays and an exploration of interactions between Englishmen and Greeks, the authors provide a brief but comprehensive reading of his Greek plays and argue that Shakespeare juxtaposes ancient Greece with its early modern counterpart—a territory of difference and the Other—on the very edge of Europe, penetrated by the alien East and Islamic cultures. Greece is a land of ambiguity, reinvented by Shakespeare as a liminal space, and characterized by a mixture of humanist admiration for the grandeur of ancient Greek civilization, cautious respect for and alertness to its pagan origins, a profound desire for economic benefits in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Christian apprehensions and anxieties in Englishmen’s encounters with the Turks. By introducing “Greek Plays” as a subgenre, this paper not only helps to enrich our understanding of Shakespeare’s portrayal of “a world elsewhere” from multifaceted cultural perspectives but also attempts to expand the existing territory of Shakespearean studies.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Greece, Greek plays, subgenre, the Eastern Mediterranean, Other, cultural studies.

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Introduction

There is a general consensus among Shakespearean scholars about Shakespeare's deep indebtedness to the classical tradition and much scholarly focus has been directed towards the vivid presentation of ancient Rome in several of Shakespeare's plays, thereby establishing a recognized subgenre of "Roman plays." Despite its chronological priority, Greece is not treated as important as Rome (often, both are amalgamated under the overarching term "classical antiquity") in Shakespearean studies.

In fact, throughout Shakespeare's dramatic career, Greek settings serve as frequent backdrops across all genres of his plays. Athens, the capital city of Greece, provides the setting for three plays: *The Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and mythological and historical Greeks such as Theseus, Hippolyta, Timon and Alcibiades assume significant roles. *The Comedy of Errors* is set in Ephesus, a seaport situated between Greece and Asia. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* exhibits extensive geographical mobility as the protagonists embark on a journey that spans six seaports in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. *Troilus and Cressida*, with a backdrop of the Trojan War, is set in Troy, a city symbolizing both a nightmare and a triumph for the Greeks. Additionally, the renowned *Othello* initially unfolds in Venice, but it shifts to Cyprus, a location not geographically Greek but part of the Hellenic world, for the remaining acts. Even in his first narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare draws inspiration from pertinent Greek mythological tales.

In view of Shakespeare's fascination with Greek settings, tradition, and prominent Greeks, it is surprising that, over the years, scant attention has been devoted to collectively recognizing plays set in Greek (or closely related) settings as a distinct genre, though numerous endeavors have been made to explore Shakespeare's Greek literacy, his relationship with the classical tradition, and the presence of ancient Greek mythology and culture in his plays. Based on the existing literature, the authors justify the addition of "Greek Plays" as a subgenre to classify Shakespeare's works and take both the source materials and settings into consideration in redefining Shakespeare's "Greek plays" as plays that are adaptations of ancient Greek literature, with Greek or closely related settings, featuring characters from Greek mythology and history, and reflecting distinctive Greek cultural characteristics. Among the plays with Greek settings mentioned above, six plays of various genres fall within this category: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, and *Troilus and Cressida*.²

² The six Greek plays are abbreviated as *Dream*, *Timon*, *Kinsmen*, *Errors*, *Pericles* and *Troilus* henceforward. It is noteworthy that the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* is presently excluded from the purview of discussion. And *The Two Noble Kinsmen*,

In this essay, the authors seek to conduct a comprehensive survey of the six Greek plays within their historical context and explore the panorama of the Greek world and early modern England as portrayed in these works. The first section examines preliminary investigations into Shakespeare's Greek plays over the past century. Some scholars offer a generalized overview, highlighting relevant areas ripe for further research, while others conduct detailed analyses of each Greek play in their doctoral theses or monographs. The second section explores the ambiguity of Greece through the perspectives of translation, trade and travel. The authors focus not only on the revival of ancient Greek culture in England but also on the interactions between early modern England and the Eastern Mediterranean. After reconstructing the historical context in which Shakespeare wrote his Greek plays, the final section delves into the analysis of specific Greek plays according to their settings. By exploring the features of several Greek or pertinent cities, Greece emerges as a multifaceted entity, a confluence of Eastern and Western influences, classical and contemporary elements, and pagan and Christian aspects—a Greece characterized by its liminality and hybridity.

Preliminary Studies on a New and Neglected Subgenre

Among modern scholars, German scholar Elisabeth Wolffhardt is a pioneer in recognizing Shakespeare's portrayal of Greece as a subject deserving of comprehensive investigation. In her doctoral dissertation *Shakespeare und das Griechentum* (1919), she delves into the limited knowledge of early modern Englishmen about Greek tradition and their consistently unfavorable attitudes toward Greeks, spanning from ancient times to the Renaissance. Wolffhardt avoids explicitly using the term "Shakespeare's Greek plays" and provides a brief analysis of the Greek elements in his several plays. Although Wolffhardt's exploration of Greek plays is preliminary and fails to be full-scale,

a collaboration with John Fletcher, is "a Jacobean dramatization of a medieval English tale based on an Italian romance version of a Latin epic about one of the oldest and most tragic Greek legends" (Shakespeare, *Kinsmen*, Introduction 1). It has only relatively recently achieved recognition as a legitimate part of the Shakespeare canon, and scholars have long debated the extent of Shakespeare's contribution. Although classified as a "Greek play" by the authors, a detailed analysis of it is not provided in this article. Moreover, considering the sources, characters and settings of *Othello*, it cannot be strictly categorized as a Greek play (it is often classified as one of Shakespeare's "Italian plays"). Nonetheless, the unique geographical, political and cultural characteristics of Cyprus might prompt interpretations of *Othello* that move beyond the traditional focus on Italy (or Venice).

her work sheds light on the neglected Greek aspect in Shakespeare's plays, which had long been overshadowed by the Roman legacy.

In his monograph, *The State in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman Plays* (1940), James Emerson Phillips explores Shakespeare's concept of the state in his five plays based on Greek and Roman history. He analyzes *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens* in one chapter and argues that Greek social corruption results from the neglected vocation "in the upper degrees of the hierarchical structure" (112-113). While Phillips is one of the early scholars to use the term "Greek plays" (225, 228), it's important to note that he only adopts it twice in the index, and does not provide a precise definition or scope for this category. Instead, he generally refers to them as "Greek and Roman plays," recognizing their thematic connection to Greek culture while still grouping them together with the Roman plays.

T. J. B. Spencer has long demonstrated a strong interest in exploring the connections between English literature and the classical tradition. In *Fair Greece! Sad Relic: Literary Philhellenism from Shakespeare to Byron* (1954), he investigates the changing attitudes toward Greece from the fall of Constantinople to Byron's era as seen through the eyes of English poets, essayists, and travellers. Spencer observes that the conception of Greece was predominantly negative during Shakespeare's time, and began to take a favourable turn in the mid-18th century. Later, in another article, Spencer narrows the scope of discussion concerning "literary Philhellenism" and directs his focus toward the portrayal of Greece in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida* ("Greeks" 223-233). He concludes that early modern Englishmen held a rather disdainful attitude toward Greek national character and way of life, which was primarily rooted in the prevailing denigration of Greece in Latin literature and Christian texts.

It was not until the 1960s that Clifford Leech first articulated a categorization known as "Greek plays." In his essay "Shakespeare's Greeks," he deliberates upon the rationale behind this classification and defines "Greek plays" as those "that prominently make use of a Greek or Hellenistic setting," (4) which include *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*. The categorization usefully broadens the scope compared with the prior studies of Wolffhardt, Phillips, and Spencer. Regrettably, however, due to the constraints of a relatively brief article, Leech still primarily concentrates on *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*, with only scant attention paid to other Greek plays he mentions. Still, he acknowledges that Shakespeare's portrayal of Greece is far from a mere replication of earlier negative assessments; rather, Greece emerges as a multifaceted and intricate representation in his plays.

A quite detailed discussion is provided by Sara Hanna in her doctoral dissertation "Shakespeare's Greek Plays" (1985). After studying Shakespeare's

knowledge of Greek culture, Hanna investigates the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, which "reveal a fascinating conception of Greek culture," while *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, "could not be classified as Greek plays, since they do not attempt any sustained representation of Greek culture" (1). She concludes that Shakespeare's Greek plays "all present variations on the Merry-greek quest for sensual beauty and pleasure" (296), revealing the "Greek levity" in contrast to the "Roman gravity" found in his Roman plays. More than a decade later, in her article "Shakespeare's Greek World: The Temptations of the Sea," Hanna continues her exploration of Shakespeare's relationship with Greece and highlights the significance of the "sea" for the Greeks in terms of geography and culture.

Greek scholar Vassiliki Markidou's doctoral dissertation "Shakespeare's Greek Plays" (1998) is the most ambitious work written on this subject. Markidou offers quite a comprehensive survey of Shakespeare's seven Greek plays, and her outstanding contribution lies in her proposition of the significance of early modern Greece. "Shakespeare's contemporary Greece was equally, if not in some ways more important, than classical Greece as a moving force in the creation of the Shakespearean Greek plays" (ii). Decades later, she collaborated with Alison Findlay to co-edit and publish *Shakespeare and Greece* (2017). The editors claim in the Introduction that "To early modern England, Greece was an enigma. It was the origin and idealized pinnacle of Western philosophy, tragedy, democracy, heroic human endeavour and, at the same time, an example of decadence: a fallen state, currently under Ottoman control, and therefore an exotic, dangerous 'other' in the most disturbing sense of the word" (1). It is a comprehensive work with insightful interpretations of Shakespeare's significant Greek plays. As a collection, the diverse perspectives of the eight contributing authors demonstrate a broad scope but lack systematic cohesion. Markidou's perspective has inspired the authors to take both classical and early modern Greece into consideration when researching Shakespeare's Greek plays.

Peter Whitfield has also recently highlighted the importance of settings in Shakespeare's entire oeuvre. In his fully illustrated book *Mapping Shakespeare's World* (2015), which includes numerous maps, paintings, and geographical texts, he examines the associations and meanings the locations carried in Shakespeare's time and how Shakespeare and his contemporaries regarded the places. The book is organized geographically according to the settings of the plays, with the first chapter titled "Greece, Rome & the Mediterranean." It investigates the diverse settings in "The Greek plays," "The Roman plays," and "The Mediterranean plays," including a brief analysis of locations such as Troy, Ephesus, and Athens.

In summary, the Western scholarly understanding of and research on Shakespeare's Greek plays have continuously deepened: from initially denying

Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek, to recognizing the nourishment his plays received from the Greek literary tradition, and more recently, scholars tend to acknowledge that his Greek plays could constitute a distinct subgenre. The multifaceted and intricate Greece in Shakespeare is increasingly attracting scholars' attention to this topic.

The Ambiguity of Greece: Translation, Trade and Travel

Shakespeare's Greek plays were written against a background of intense English interest in the classical tradition and "a world elsewhere."³ This interest manifested itself in teaching and learning the Greek language, translating and being influenced by Greek literature, and trade and travel in the Eastern Mediterranean. For early modern Englishmen, Greece was a familiar but also exotic place, a land of ambiguity: on the one hand, it was once the cradle of a brilliant civilization; on the other, it was then under the control of the Ottoman Empire, a territory inhabited by Turkish others.

In early modern England, people had various ways of approaching ancient Greek culture. Lazarus (433-458) systematically examines the educational system and finds that during the Elizabethan era, the study of Greek was no longer limited to a small group of specialists and elites. By the 1540s, Greek had already become widely taught in English universities, and by 1560, it had expanded from university education to grammar schools, becoming a compulsory subject for students. For those with Greek literacy, several Greek texts were available to them. According to Milne, during the Elizabethan era, at least 32 Greek texts were published, mostly in the 1580s and 1590s. These works included writings by ancient Greek authors such as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Herodotus, and Plutarch. Milne advocates that "The study of these books should encourage a reassessment of Greek as a live idiom among Elizabethan political and cultural elite, a language freighted with religious and political significance" (683).

However, proficiency in Greek was not a prerequisite for their understanding of Greek culture. Apart from learning Greek language textbooks and reading limited published Greek works, early modern readers had two more convenient ways to explore the philosophy, history, and literature of ancient Greece: one was by reading Latin translations, or vernacular translations in English, French, Italian, and other languages; another was imitations of and references to ancient Greek works by contemporary authors. Recent studies (Cummings and Gillespie 1-42) show that significant English translations include: Thucydides's *History of Peloponnesian War* translated by Thomas

³ Quotations from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (3.3.134).

Nicholls in 1550, Xenophon's *Cyropedia I-VI* by William Barker in 1552, Diodorus's *Bibliotheca Historica* by Thomas Stocker in 1569; Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (abbreviated as *Lives* henceforward) by Thomas North in 1579, selections of Homer's *Iliad* by George Chapman in 1598, and the complete translation was published in 1611. In addition to complete translations or selections from these works, there were also compilations that gathered aphorisms or excerpts from the major works of classical authors.

The publications and translations of ancient Greek works helped early modern Englishmen gain insights into the outstanding achievements of Greek civilization: they could delve into the grandeur of the Trojan War and exploits of heroes through Homer, explore the philosophical ideas of Aristotle, learn about the illustrious lives of Athenian politicians and military leaders through Plutarch, and also witness the rise and fall of Greek city-states through Thucydides. Edith Hamilton, in summarizing the Greek spirit, particularly emphasizes the vibrant vitality of ancient Greeks and their pursuit of reason and freedom: "Love of reason and of life, delight in the use of the mind and the body, distinguished the Greek way... The extraordinary flowering of the human spirit which resulted in Greek art shows the spiritual power there was in Greece" (31). This distinct tradition, different from the Hebrew one, became one of the spiritual sources for England and, indeed, the entire Western civilization.

Yet, sublimity and immortality constitute only a partial representation of Greece. The expansion of international trade, coupled with advancements in navigation and mapping technologies, provided the Englishmen with opportunities for interactions with Greece in reality. Whereas the English understanding of classical Greece primarily relied on translations, their knowledge of early modern Greece was predominantly molded by firsthand experiences in the Eastern Mediterranean. This was notably influenced by their trade with the Turks and travels on the Greek land.

From the early and middle 1570s, with the decline of the port of Antwerp, the Dutch war for independence, and Venice's war with Turkey, favorable circumstances emerged for English participation in the Mediterranean trade with the Ottoman Empire (Brenner 16). Although Elizabethan England actively engaged with the Turks, such involvement did not signify an embrace of religious and cultural differences between Christians and Muslims. Instead, suspicion, misunderstanding, and hostility often characterized their interactions. In the English apprehension of the other, early modern Greece functioned as a warning for England concerning faith and identity. Throughout antiquity, the medieval period, and into modern times, Greece had consistently stood as the easternmost outpost of European civilization, enduring and resisting the impact of Eastern civilizations. However, upon falling under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire, Greeks were initially forced to become subjects of the Turks,

and later, many willingly forsook their original beliefs. This transformation prompted Europe to confront the unsettling reality that its eastern defense line had been breached, necessitating constant vigilance against potential invasions from the eastern other. The apprehensions regarding the territorial expansion of the Turks into Western Europe, along with the anxiety of “turning Turks” also spread among the Englishmen.

As the Englishmen had more interactions with the early modern Greeks and Ottoman Turks in the Mediterranean, Greece was increasingly marginalized in Western eyes. Culturally and religiously linked to the East, it stood in stark contrast to classical Greece revered as a spiritual wellspring of Western civilization. The travels of Englishmen across Greek territories further reinforced this evolving impression.

With the expansion of English international trade, an increasing number of Englishmen ventured beyond “this sceptred isle,”⁴ embarking on extensive explorations of the world. Many of them documented their travel experiences, driven by diverse motivations such as seeking sponsorship for future voyages, providing practical maritime information, or simply for personal enjoyment. For most readers, travelogues not only offered thrilling tales of distant lands but also spared them the risks they might encounter in travel, particularly avoiding potential dangers like captivity, imprisonment, and religious persecution. During this period, a lot of travelogues were published, many of which documented the travels in Greece and Englishmen’s encounters with the Greeks.

For example, in “In *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589), Richard Hakluyt cited all the English ships which traded in the Aegean, dating the first English factor at Chios in 1533” (Mitsi, “Painful Pilgrimage” 19). Regrettably, Hakluyt’s narrative lacks a detailed portrayal of Greek customs and landscapes. In a similar vein, Fynes Moryson, motivated primarily by curiosity, embarked on his Mediterranean journey in 1596, arriving in Crete and subsequently traversing various Greek islands, including Chios, Naxos, Lesbos, among others. In his travelogue *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell* (1617), Moryson demonstrates limited interest in the Greek monuments, merely mentioning places in connection with Greek myths like the labyrinth of Crete (II: 80). Nevertheless, the deception, fraud, and discrimination he suffers during the travels leave Moryson with a distinctly negative impression of the Greeks, lamenting their miserable condition under Turkish rule, a plight he deems even worse than that of slaves.

⁴ From *Richard II*, 2.1.40-50. Gaunt sings the praises of his country before he dies: “This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, / This other Eden, demi-paradise, / This fortress built by Nature for herself... this England.”

In his travelogue, William Biddulph, a priest appointed by the Levant Company, records his experiences in Athens, lamenting "This City was the mother and nurse of all liberall Arts and Sciences: but now there is nothing but Atheism and Barbarisme there: for it is gouerned by Turkes, and inhabited by ignorant Greekes" (10). His remarks on the character of the Greeks are notably unfavorable, portraying them as "superstitious, subtle and deceitful people" (79). What exacerbates his apprehension is that even good Christians are susceptible to corruption: as they "dwell long in wicked countries, and converse with wicked men, [they] are somewhat tainted with their sins" (81).

In 1615, George Sandys published his travelogue, recounting his extensive journey in 1610 through Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Jerusalem, and the Mediterranean islands. Renowned as a poet and translator endowed with profound classical knowledge, Sandys skillfully integrates classical references into his portrayal of Greece, purposefully accentuating the stark contrast between the splendor of ancient Greece and its contemporary condition. In the dedication to the Prince, Sandys mourns the widespread devastation that has befallen the Eastern Mediterranean:

Which countries once so glorious, and famous for their happie estate, are now through vice and ingratitude, become the most deplored spectacle of extreme miserie: the wild beasts of mankind having broken in upon them, and rooted out all civilitie... to that lamentable distresse and servitude, under which (to the astonishment of the understanding beholders) it now faints and groneth. (sig. A2r)

Scottish traveller William Lithgow travelled through the Eastern Mediterranean from 1609 to 1612 and visited Corfu, Zante, Crete, Athens, the Corinthian Strait, the Peloponnesian Peninsula, and other Greek islands and cities. In keeping with the tradition of his predecessors, Lithgow continues to draw comparisons between past and present. While he expresses a modest appreciation for the hospitality extended by the residents of Athens, his overall assessment of the Greeks is marked by a pervasive sense of disdain and disappointment:

In all this country of Greece I could finde nothing, to answer the famous relations, given by auncient Authors, of the excellency of that land, but the name onely; the barbarousness of Turkes and Time, having defaced all the Monuments of Antiquity... So deformed is the state of that once worthy Realme, and so miserable is the state of that once worthy people. (65)

This nuanced perspective encapsulates the complex interplay between the romanticized ideals of antiquity and the harsh realities encountered by travellers in their exploration of Greece. As Mitsi concludes: "The early travelers viewed

Greece as a paradox or even an irony, placing early Modern Greece in the Ottoman East rather than Europe” (*Greece* 139).

Through a succinct exploration of the translations and dissemination of ancient Greek works, the trade between England and the Ottoman Turks, and the cultural representations of the Greek world in travelogues, it becomes apparent that in Elizabethan England, Greece was perceived as a space of liminality, of “a transitional or indeterminate state.”⁵ The groundwork for defining liminality is laid by Arnold van Gennep, and then Victor Turner extends the concept of liminality to describe individuals in transitional stages, who find themselves “neither here nor there... betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonials” (95). In a similar vein, Greece is caught in the dilemma of “betwixt and between.” Geographically, it serves as a “threshold” connecting the European West and the Asian East, and in terms of culture, it is both a heritage site and a fallen land, a colonized Other.

Greece stands as a region fraught with ambiguities, offering significant spiritual sources and economic benefits, yet simultaneously marked by conversion and devastation. The contradictory perspective of the English on Greece can perhaps be encapsulated by a quote from *Dream*, spoken by Hermia: “Methinks I see these things with parted eye / when everything seems double” (4.2.187-188). This duality is also echoed in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Greece. The ensuing study will delve into his plays set in Greece, aiming to unravel both his and early modern Englishmen’s nuanced understanding and reinvention of this enigmatic land.

Greek Settings: Athens, Ephesus, Pentapolis, and Troy

As previously underscored, Leech is credited as the first to define Shakespeare’s “Greek plays” as those “that prominently make use of a Greek or Hellenistic setting” (4), a definition deemed concise yet insufficient. Recognizing the influence of Greek texts and the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean in early modern England, the authors have redefined the Greek plays and claimed that the six plays (*Dream*, *Timon*, *Kinsmen*, *Errors*, *Pericles*, and *Troilus*) in this subgenre are those adaptations of ancient Greek literature, staged in Greek or closely related settings, and featuring characters from Greek mythology and history. They unfold in diverse settings such as Athens, Ephesus, Pentapolis (and other Mediterranean seaports), and Troy.

⁵ “Liminality, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8491381982>. Accessed 26 January 2024.

Athens in Athenian Plays

As is evident from the travelogues, early modern English travellers lament over the decline and devastation of Athens, the once cultural and political center of Greece. This sentiment finds resonance in Shakespeare's *Dream* and *Timon*, which both unfold in Athens and a forest nearby, portraying the city as corrupted and the Greeks as miserable.

It is widely acknowledged that Plutarch's *Lives* served as a rich source of inspiration for Shakespeare, with the accounts of noble Romans providing primary materials for his Roman plays. Notably, Shakespeare's two Athenian plays also share a close relationship with this classical masterpiece. As Bullough argues, "Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* probably helped Shakespeare, since it gives stability and poise to its portrait of Theseus by historical verisimilitude and archaeological details. Moreover, its ethical material coloured Shakespeare's attitude" (368). Consequently, the myth of Theseus must be considered in the interpretation of the *Dream*.

Pearson systematically traces the evolution of the Theseus image from Ovid's era to the Renaissance (276-298). With the abundant emergence of Latin texts of classical works and translations into vernacular languages, along with the widespread classical references in the literary works of Shakespeare's era, Renaissance readers gained a more comprehensive understanding of the Greek hero: a noble founding father of Athens with many heroic exploits, but also an unfaithful and unkind lover. In the *Dream*, Shakespeare skillfully employs various textual details to demonstrate or imply Theseus's "unkindness," contributing to the complex perceptions of him. For instance, when Oberon accuses Titania of having an affair with Theseus, he enumerates a series of women abandoned by him (2.1.77-80). Moreover, the play begins with an anticipation of Theseus-Hippolyta's wedding and concludes with the presentation of the wedding ceremony, making the theme of marriage more significant than in Shakespeare's other comedies. In the final act, Oberon blesses the three Athenian couples, saying: "And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate. / So shall all the couples three / Ever true in loving be" (5.1.395-398). However, when placed in the context of the Theseus myth, this blessing becomes highly ironic, as audiences familiar with classical texts know that the son of Theseus and Hippolyta, Hippolytus, eventually meets a tragic fate.

In contrast to Plutarch's depiction of Athens as a city of democracy and equality, Athens in the play is now a city of patriarchy. Egeus,⁶ based on

⁶ In mythological tradition, Theseus's father is indeed named "Aegeus" (who gives his name to the Aegean Sea). It is noteworthy that in the *Errors*, the old father wandering through the Aegean Sea in search of his twin sons is "Egeon." In Shakespeare's Greek plays, "Egeus/Egeon" seems to bear a symbolic significance, consistently appearing as

“the ancient privilege of Athens” (1.1.40), makes demands regarding his daughter’s marriage. Theseus, who historically enacted democratic reforms in Athens, is now portrayed as a representative of patriarchal authority, telling Hermia: “To fit your fancies to your father’s will; / Or else, the law of Athens yields you up (which by no means we may extenuate) / To death, or to a vow of single life” (1.1.119-121). Titania’s infatuation with the transformed Bottom, who becomes an ass, also draws a connection to the mythological monster Minotaur in the Theseus myth.

As Holland noted: “The mere presence of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* makes the whole of the Theseus myth available... Theseus leaves his shadow over the play” (151). Undoubtedly, the appropriation of the Theseus myth plays a pivotal role in infusing the *Dream* with a distinct Greek characteristic. By establishing this connection, one can unveil numerous unsettling and tragic elements beneath the surface of this seemingly light-hearted comedy.

In the case of the *Timon*, the story of this Athenian nobleman emerges as a digression in Plutarch’s accounts of Mark Antony, who abandoned the city and his friends, and “as a man that banished himself from all men’s company, saying that he would lead Timon’s life because he had the like wrong offered him that was before offered unto Timon” (Spencer, *Shakespeare’s Plutarch* 263). Plutarch dedicates several pages to introducing Timon’s life, his close relationship with Alcibiades, his companionship with Apemantus, his cynical attitude towards the Athenians, and the epitaph, among other details. “The almost exact repetition of Timon’s epitaph shows that Shakespeare had his copy of North’s Plutarch open beside him as he wrote” (Spencer *Shakespeare’s Plutarch* 16). Furthermore, the play features six minor roles whose names are directly borrowed from Plutarch, such as Lucius, Hortensius, Ventidius, Flavius, Lucilius, and Philotus. Antony’s gullibility and generosity may have also contributed to shaping Timon’s early character and lifestyle in the play. Another crucial figure Alcibiades, who imparts a political dimension to this play centered on themes of money, friendship, and betrayal, bears the mark of Plutarch’s *Life of Alcibiades*.

Just as Venice is irreplaceable in *The Merchant of Venice*, Athens in the *Timon* also deserves special attention. Robert Miola provides an explicit and detailed analysis of the connection between Athens and the theme of the play. He argues that Shakespeare criticizes the disorder and chaos caused by Athenian democracy by portraying the Athenians as vain, ungrateful, and insatiable. The drawbacks of Athenian democracy are not only evident in scenes of extravagant banquets but also in the banishment of Alcibiades and Timon from Athens.

the embodiment of fatherhood and playing a crucial role in introducing the vital theme of parent-child relationships in the plays.

"Shakespeare deliberately links Timon's self-imposed exile with Alcibiades's banishment and associates it with the notorious Athenian practice" (28), namely, ostracism—the annual expulsion of the city's best and most powerful men to prevent the possible rise of demagogues. Apart from its political system, the downfall of Athens also manifests itself in intellectual pursuits. The Athenians, once known for their pursuit of art and wisdom, are now obsessed with money and commodify works of art with flattery and utilitarianism. Philosophers, represented by Apemantus, become cynics rather than engaging in intellectual exploration.

From the perspective of source study, Plutarch's *Lives* has provided significant nourishment to both the *Dream* and *Timon*. Geographically, the two Athenian plays share a similar setting: Athens—forest—Athens. Although Shakespeare's Athens is vague in terms of physical geography, his contemplation of Athenian democracy and the Athenian way of life can be discerned. In the former, Athens is portrayed as being under the sway of despotic laws and sexual coercion, while in the latter, it is filled with flattery, utilitarianism, cynicism, and unjust political treatment. The enchanted world of the forest, characterized by disorder, magic, and madness, serves as a refuge for Athenian youth fleeing patriarchal oppression and a place for Timon's escape from the selfish and dark side of human nature, creating a stark contrast to the established rules of Athens.

Ephesus and Pentapolis

Shakespeare's early comedy *Errors* and his late romance *Pericles* exhibit significant narrative parallels, most evident in the theme of familial separation followed by eventual recognition and reunion. The similarities are not coincidental but primarily stem from their shared source material: the Greek romance *Apollonius of Tyre*. Therefore, it is unsurprising that both plays are situated in the Greek cities of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Errors unfolds with a vast geographical scope, spanning cities such as Syracuse, Epidamnus, Corinth, Epidaurus, and Ephesus. Among them, Ephesus plays the most significant role, as all mistaken identities, chaos, and reunions occur in a single day within this city. Ephesus held exceptional renown in ancient times, serving as a melting pot of diverse nations, cultures, and religions due to its unique locality. The Ephesians worshipped Artemis, a goddess "incorporating aspects of Greek mythology as well as characteristics of ancient Near Eastern mother goddesses... Ephesian Artemis was associated also with magic, since her name is invoked in spells" (Brinks 779). Due to the dense religious atmosphere of Ephesus, in *Errors*, it is also suffused with a mist of Eastern pagan witchcraft. Upon arriving in Ephesus, Antipholus of Syracuse

finds himself ensnared in a comic yet terrifying situation, and he attributes all the confusion caused by the twins to the perennial notoriety of Ephesus, “they say this town is full of cozenage / As, nimble jugglers that deceive the eye, / Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind, / Soul-killing witches that deform the body, / Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks / And many such” (1.2.97-102). As the plot develops, the Syracusans even find themselves bewildered and transformed in the enchanting mist of sorcery.

However, the goddess Artemis, who presides over sorcery, never makes an appearance throughout the play. Her temple undergoes a transformation at the end of the play, turning into a priory, and the priestess becomes the abbess. Apart from its close association with magic and sorcery, the play is replete with rich Christian allusions. For those in Shakespeare’s time, Ephesus was known from the Bible. *Acts* 19 provides detailed accounts of Paul’s challenging missionary journey to Ephesus, and another biblical text closely associated is *Ephesians*, the epistles written by Paul to the Ephesian church. Many parallels can be found between *Errors* and Pauline Christianity. For example, Paul persuades Christians to lead a pure new life and outlines the responsibilities of husbands and wives (*Ephesians* 5.22-23), children and parents (6.1-4), as well as masters and servants (6.5-9), and the three types of relationship are also addressed in the play. In Shakespeare’s portrayal, although Ephesus is shrouded in the mist of Eastern sorcery, all of it is mere delusion, the flourishing Christianity will eventually dispel all pagan beliefs.

In addition to its significance as a religious site, Ephesus’s strategic geographical location establishes it as a flourishing commercial hub in the Mediterranean. Shakespeare intricately portrays Ephesus’ bustling commercial ambiance, featuring a myriad of merchants, diverse commodities, and various commercial undertakings in the play. The trade with “Persia” (4.1.4), and the luxury goods such as “the oil, the balsamum and aqua-vitae” (4.1.89), “Turkish tapestry” (4.1.104), “silk” (4.3.8) are reminiscent of early modern English trade with the Eastern Mediterranean. Considering the historical context of Shakespeare’s era, when numerous Greek and Anatolian city-states, Ephesus included, were under Ottoman rule, early modern Englishmen might have perceived Ephesus as a harbinger of their potential fate as they pursued the commercial interests of the Mediterranean. They had to be vigilant to shield themselves from various contamination, striving to avert the risk of “turning Turks.”

Rather than being confined to Ephesus, *Pericles* exhibits rich geographical mobility as the protagonists embark on a journey that spans six seaport cities in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. Regarding the geography in the play, Lisa Hopkins comments that “What we find in *Pericles* is not so much a Greece of the atlas as a Greece of the mind,” and that the play is characterized by “an indifference to the particularities of location and atmosphere” (228). However, upon careful examination of the geographical

details of the six cities, it is apparent that they are not homogeneous but possess distinctive cultural characteristics.

In Christian history, the cities of Antioch, Tyre, Tarsus, Mytilene, and Ephesus, where Pericles roams, easily evoke associations with the cities mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles*, particularly with the missionary travels of Paul and other disciples in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Shakespeare deliberately avoids linking them to Christianity and instead emphasizes their Eastern and pagan characteristics: despotism and incest in Antioch, political disorder in Tyre, famine and betrayal in Tarsus, indulgence in sensuality in Mytilene, and worship of pagan deities and mysterious magic in Ephesus. Pentapolis, with its precise geographical location being vague but explicitly representing "our Greece" (2.1.63), stands in contrast to the Asian cities. It serves as a mirror image to the dark Antioch; it possesses a more stable political order than Tyre; there is no famine, betrayal, murder, or corruption on its land as seen in Tarsus and Mytilene; it is filled with Christian references, with more sanctity than the pagan-believing Ephesus. Pentapolis appears more like a utopian portrayal of Greece, where every scene (2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 2.5) is imbued with goodwill, joy, and harmony.

While Shakespeare's Athens lacks specific physical details, the cities in *Errors* and *Pericles* are depicted in a more vibrant manner, demonstrating their distinct geographical and cultural features. This vivid representation serves to highlight the liminality of Greece, capturing its transitional and in-between nature. In *Errors*, the wonders that unfold in Ephesus reveal its exotic attributes and religious collision, along with British identity anxiety in the Mediterranean. In the liminal Ephesus, the binary oppositions and entanglements between comedy and tragedy, past and present, foreign and domestic, strangeness and familiarity, paganism and Christianity, Turks and Christians are all amply manifested. In *Pericles*, Shakespeare contrasts the fallen Asian cities with Pentapolis, portraying the latter as a pious and harmonious Christianized Greek city. It emerges as an idealized place in the eyes of Westerners, reflecting the strong inclination of early modern Europeans to completely Europeanize and Westernize the classical Greek world. And the five Asian cities serve as the "Other," destined either for destruction or redemption. By presenting the protagonists' geographical mobility, the romance delineates a panorama of both Asia and Greece and also reveals the underlying ideologies of Eurocentrism and Orientalism.

Troy and Trinovantum

Troilus and Cressida primarily unfolds the tragic tale of two lovers with the backdrop of the Trojan War, vividly portraying the Greeks and Trojans known to us from history and mythology, and terms like "Greeks" and "merry Greeks" are

repeatedly used, making it arguably Shakespeare's most deserving "Greek play." However, it is crucial to note that the main characters include not merely the well-known figures, but also the city of Troy itself.

In the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his historical work *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1139), recounted that Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan prince Aeneas, arrived at the banks of the Thames under the guidance of Diana and founded a new city named Trinovantum (New Troy), later known as London. Consequently, many Englishmen fervently believed themselves to be descendants of the Trojans, fueling a heightened interest in the Trojan legend among them. Besides, among various Greek cities visited by early modern Englishmen, Troy particularly stirred their enthusiasm for antiquity. This can be explained by the widespread popularity of the Trojan legend, the myth of London's foundation, and also the geographical advantage of the Troy ruins, as it was located on the travellers' way to Constantinople. Troy became the most popular secular pilgrimage destination, and many travellers documented their experiences there. However, "the site of ancient Troy, near ancient Abydos, was also the site of an Ottoman military garrison: both places were coextensive and equally present for early modern readers and travelers" (Jacobson 6). The travelers were pricked by the harsh reality that Troy had been under the control of the Turks, similar to the fate of other Mediterranean cities.

Therefore, Troy and the Trojans appeared particularly complex to English eyes. As London was referred to as "New Troy," the fate of Troy in ancient and early modern times served as a crucial mirror for Englishmen. On the one hand, it was linked to their ancestors and the founding myth of London, while on the other, it was closely associated with the Turks, the Other. The once steadfast pro-Troy stance, coupled with a disdain for the Greeks, was gradually wavering, and the distinction between "bad Greeks" and "good Trojans" became blurred. This attitude could also be discerned in Shakespeare's portrayal of Greeks, Trojans, and Troy in *Troilus*.

Contrary to the heroic figures full of valor and honour as depicted in Homer's narrative, in Shakespeare, it is "a demystification of the heroes of ancient Greece," "a sceptical deflation of Trojan honour and chivalry" (Shakespeare, *Troilus*, Introduction 19, 30). All male characters are portrayed as ludicrous fools, and all females as lascivious harlots, with no distinction between the Greeks and Trojans: Agamemnon and Priam, as leaders of the two parties, lack any virtue of leadership; Achilles, once a valiant warrior, now spends his days indulging in pleasure within his tent; Odysseus employs his intelligence solely to sow discord among his comrades. Even Hector, though initially depicted as brave, meets a ludicrous death at the end, making it challenging for the audience to sympathize with this heroic figure; Helen and Cressida are represented as frivolous and promiscuous. The blurry boundary between the

Greeks and Trojans is embodied in the character of Ajax, who is both Greek and Trojan: "Were thy commixion Greek and Trojan so / That thou couldst say, 'This hand is Grecian all, / and This is Trojan; the sinews of this leg / All Greek, and this all Troy'" (4.5.125-128). Therefore, the Trojans find it impossible to escape the base characteristics attributed to the Greeks, and in doing so, Shakespeare does not grant much favor to Englishmen's legendary ancestors.

Troy in Shakespeare's portrayal also differs from its representation in literary tradition. Unlike the traditional narrative of a city attacked and defiled by the Greeks, Shakespeare paints a picture of Troy that already harbors the seeds of corruption. This is evident in the abundant use of commercial metaphors and the language of commerce employed by the characters, featuring terms such as "price," "worth," "value," and "estimation."⁷ Additionally, the play is saturated with images related to food and disease. If Troy were to meet its downfall, London as the new Troy would share a similar fate. Shakespeare integrates the anxiety of the Elizabethan era into his depiction of the Trojan War.

By subverting the literary traditions of the Trojan legend narrated by Homer and Chaucer, Shakespeare demonstrates his iconoclasm and turns his play into powerful tools of social critique. In the liminal Troy, Grecians and Trojans, myth and reality, history and present, nobility and decadence, self and other—the once clear binary oppositions have all dissolved, much like the mixed lineage of Ajax. Perhaps this is why some scholars label *Troilus* as a "problem play," where values and answers remain undetermined, leaving everything in suspense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shakespeare's Greek plays exemplify his profound understanding of Greece and the Mediterranean world. Acting as both the cradle of a past civilization and the contemporary "Other," Greece undoubtedly conveys lessons for more than characters in a play—English audiences and successive readers are also meant to be instructed. Greece is a land of ambiguity in Shakespeare's Greek plays. By the portrayal of several cities, Shakespeare reinvents Greece as a liminal space and characterizes it by a mixture of humanistic admiration for the grandeur of ancient Greek civilization, cautious respect for and alertness to its pagan origins, a profound desire for commercial benefits in the Eastern Mediterranean, and apprehensions and anxieties in Englishmen's encounters with the Turks.

⁷ For detailed discussion on the language of commerce and parallels between Troy and London, see Bruster (1992: 97-117).

Though some scholars have conducted preliminary investigations into Shakespeare's Greek plays, this subgenre has not gained widespread recognition. In terms of acceptance and research activity, studies of Shakespeare's Greek plays are overshadowed by more acknowledged categories such as "History plays," "Roman plays," and even "Italian plays." These subgenres are also brought up by scholars based on the source materials and settings, as is the case with the Greek plays. Through the analyses presented in this article, the authors contend that in "Greek plays," the Greek elements are integral, and the Greek settings are irreplaceable, and intricately connected to the themes. Considering "Greek Plays" as a subgenre not only enhances our understanding of Shakespeare's depiction of "a world elsewhere" from diverse cultural perspectives but also broadens the existing scope of Shakespearean studies.

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