

LINK IT “TO THE SOURCE FROM WHENCE IT CAME” Shakespeare Source Study after the Digital Turn

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Abstract – This paper discusses the digitally inflected changes occurring in Shakespeare source study – a long-standing research field that burst back into prominence over the last few years. The recent publication of volumes such as *Shakespeare, Origins, and Originality* (Holland 2015), *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study* (Britton, Walter 2018) or *Shakespeare’s Resources* (Drakakis 2021) vouches indeed for a steady resurgence of interest in “the circulation, transformation and function of Shakespeare’s sources” (Bigliuzzi 2018, p. 13) – a rising tide heightened, no doubt, by the proliferation of electronic archives, digital critical editions, wiki databases, and corpus-based searching tools designed to bring early modern (inter)textuality into sharper focus. This “flood of digital possibilities” (Lavagnino 2014, p. 21) has greatly impacted on Shakespeare source criticism, modelling new ways to explore and identify the intertextual, subtextual, and contextual forms of influence that shaped the playwright’s production. In this essay, such an ongoing shift of perspectives is examined by sorting through a series of digital methodologies and resources that show promise in improving how we visualise, analyse, and identify Shakespeare’s diverse sources. Laying emphasis on the dovetailing of “‘old source study’ and more contemporary approaches to textual and cultural analysis” (Britton, Walter 2018, p. 1) fostered by the digital medium, the paper illustrates the benefits, limits, and prospects of digital editing and archiving, quantitative analyses, wiki databases, and digital thick mapping for the study of Shakespeare’s creative process and early modern European theatricality *tout court*.

Keywords: Shakespeare source study; digital archiving; quantitative analyses; wiki databases; digital thick mapping.

1. Introduction

“Source study is, as we all know, the elephants’ graveyard of literary history”. These are the often-quoted words used by Stephen Greenblatt (1985, p. 163) to address a suspicion that has long haunted Shakespeareans: after decades of fruitful researches, has source criticism run its due course, morphing into a “tired terrain” (Harris 1994, p. 408), a “faint and overgrown” path (Bilton 2000, online) no longer worth following?

More than fifty years have passed since the publication of the ground-

breaking *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (Bullough 1957-1975), but the recent appearance of volumes such as *Shakespeare, Origins, and Originality* (Holland 2015), *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study* (Britton, Walter 2018), or *Shakespeare's Resources* (Drakakis 2021) vouches for a steady resurgence of interest in the “circulation, transformation and function of Shakespeare’s sources” (Bigliuzzi 2018, p. 13). A rising tide heightened, no doubt, by the digital turn in Humanities – the proliferation of electronic archives, wiki databases, and corpus-based searching tools that prompted a new approach to Shakespearean textuality and, by extension, to Shakespeare source study. Bringing an unprecedented amount of primary texts to scholars’ fingertips and offering new ways to view, collect, and cross-examine data, these technologies pledge to provide “new models for bringing together what might be considered an ‘old source study’”, i.e. the rather static linear investigations championed by Positivism, and the “more contemporary approaches to textual and cultural analysis” (Britton, Walter 2018, p. 1) fostered by New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, thereby complying with the dynamic reconceptualization of the notion of ‘source’ put forward between the 1980s and the 2000s.

Over those decades, scholars like Michail Bakhtin, Cesare Segre, Robert S. Miola, and Alessandro Serpieri started indeed to challenge linear models of intertextual transmission by developing the more inclusive paradigms of ‘dialogism’ (Bakhtin 1979; cited in Holquist 2002), ‘interdiscursivity’ (Segre 1984), ‘indirect influence of traditions’ (Miola 2000), ‘polyphony’ (Serpieri 2002), with the effect of calling attention to the inherent dynamism of early modern transtextual exchanges. This ignited, in turn, a crucial theoretical shift from stasis to motion, from sources understood as single texts or events to sources meant as heterogeneous “*relationship[s]* between that text or event” and the work that originated from it (Levin 1998, p. 226).

Relating this “infinite” conceptual “expansion” to Shakespearean source study, Stephen Lynch went on to remark that

Shakespeare certainly [...] chose (or accepted) particular texts to rewrite and refashion for the stage. Yet virtually all of Shakespeare’s revisionary strategies were shaped and influenced by multiple forces beyond authorial control – not only the historical, political, and religious contexts of early modern England, but also the more particular forces that would bear upon a professional playwright, such as contemporary stage practices, generic decorum, audience expectations, the number and qualities of available actors, state censorship, and even the geographical locus and marginal cultural status of the theater itself. (1998, p. 2)

The digital realm seems particularly suited to thematise this broadened view of source relations, as the platforms and tools there harboured can illuminate not only lexical and narrative borrowings but also the less visible, subtextual

modes of intercultural and environmental influence that contributed to shaping Shakespeare’s plays. In this sense, one of the main advantages of source study “in the Google Age” is precisely that it needs “no longer deal in the categorization of correspondences into linear structural relationships, but in mapping complex webs of connotation and resonance” (Greatley-Hirsch, Johnson 2018, p. 254) that transcend verbal congruences to include “sources for which there is no evidence of textual transmission” (Britton, Walter 2018, p. 6) and even non-verbal, immaterial forms of contextual agency.

In what follows, this ongoing shift of perspectives will be examined by sorting through a series of digital resources that show promise in improving how we visualise, analyse, and identify Shakespeare’s diverse sources. First, attention will be paid to the traditional research paradigm of linear transmission, arguing for the affordances of open-access multilingual archives for more comprehensive, multivariate research into the textuality of long-known Shakespearean sources. Then, light will be shed on the impact of string-matching algorithms, crowdsourced scholarly databases, and digital thick mapping on the identification of previously unnoticed connections – both textual and non-textual in nature –, discussing these tools’ strengths and prospects without glossing over their potential weaknesses.

2. Tradition revisited: exploring Shakespeare’s long-known sources in digital environments

Let us start by considering the ways in which digital technologies can affect the most traditional mode of investigation in the genealogy of Shakespeare’s plays – linear transmission. In this respect, it will not come as a surprise that the majority of the playwright’s direct sources have long been pinpointed and examined, mainly through the lens of stemmatics:¹ Geoffrey Bullough’s extensive, though not necessarily accurate, survey is a testament to the positivistic faith in “linear certainty” (Houlahan 2013, p. 158), i.e. in the possibility of identifying “the single prior source of any given story [...] with surety in the progression of one story to the next” (Houlahan 2013, p. 158). This belief was rooted in an assumed capacity to single out specific works that could have been within Shakespeare’s reach at a given time, therefore leaving unmistakable lexical traces on his production.

While there certainly are cases in which this method proves rewarding – one can think, for instance, of the parallels between North’s translation of

¹ This methodology, originally employed in classical and medieval editing, allows to describe intertextual relationships in hierarchical terms, distinguishing between hypothetical archetypal texts and their subsequent variations and corruptions.

Plutarch's *Lives* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* – such a narrow view of Shakespeare's compositional *iter* showed all its limitations in the long run. Not coincidentally, Bullough himself appeared increasingly dissatisfied with the unevenness of his classification: “his adoption of the category of ‘analogue’ indicates unease with the more straightforward linear derivations that inform the categories of ‘probable source’, ‘source’, and ‘possible source’”, John Drakakis points out (2018, p. 58), thus signposting the more blurred, at times unintentional intertextual transactions that permeate Shakespearean textuality.

If Bullough never came to question the playwright's authorial intentionality, projecting his proclivity “to incorporate allusions, attitudes, and ideas which he might otherwise have omitted” onto his “immediate literary milieu” (Bullough 1975, p. 345), Kenneth Muir opened up to the possibility that Shakespeare “relied on his unconscious mind” (1977, p. 253) for some of the contaminations at the basis of his works. “We cannot hope to track down more than a small fraction of the passages which Shakespeare made use of”, he admits, “for there is no reason to doubt that he was influenced by conversation as well as by the written word, and often he must have composed lines which resemble those of earlier poets to whom he was not even indirectly indebted” (1977, p. 15).

Taking the argument one step further, Lynch suggested that

though traditional source studies have tended to see sources as static building blocks that Shakespeare picked over, rearranged, and artfully improved, the sources themselves can be reexamined as products of intertextuality – endlessly complex, multilayered fields of interpretation that Shakespeare refashioned and reconfigured into alternative fields of interpretation. We can reconsider the source texts not merely as raw material for plot and character, but as dynamic and often inconsistent texts involving layers of implicit and subtextual suggestions. (1998, p. 1)

Such a widened consideration of source relations does not undermine one-to-one verbal parallels in favour of more evanescent, slippery modes of “subtextual” (Lynch 1998, p. 1) interaction. On the contrary, it allows to reconcile these interconnected instances by laying emphasis on the dynamic processes of intentional *and* unintentional transformation that underlie linear transmission, paving the way towards a more mindful application of this research paradigm.

Silvia Bigliuzzi and the members of the *Skenè* Research Centre (University of Verona) are currently reaping the fruits of this change of views and, what is more, they are exploring its implications by relying upon digital technologies, specifically on digital editing and archiving.

The research prospects of these instruments are well-known to early modernists. Ever since the 1990s, digital scholarship practitioners in the field

have put to test their affordances by launching various websites – *Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE)*, *Digital Renaissance Editions (DRE)*, *Queen’s Men Editions (QME)* to name but a few – envisaged to host authoritative digital-born editions of early modern plays and related high-standard critical apparatuses,² thus capitalising upon the preservation and dissemination granted by unrestricted online publications. At the time of writing, said resources are being brought together on a brand-new platform, *Linked Early Modern Drama Online (LEMDO)*, a “TEI encoding, editing and anthology-building” database (*LEMDO*, online) designed to facilitate connections among the texts and tools nested in each sibling project and conjure up a multivocal, not exclusively Shakespearean reflection of early modern theatricality.

Against such a lively backdrop, what is truly new and alluring about *Skenè*’s project is the set-up of two digital archives devoted to Shakespeare’s classical (*SCS*) and European narrative sources (*SENS*), meant to enable simultaneous multilingual and multimodal search into their early modern editions. The stated aim of these corpora *in fieri* is to illuminate what “Shakespeare and his contemporaries actually read” (*SENS*, online) by foregrounding the culturally and linguistically inflected phenomena of dissemination, translation, and adaptation that impinged on his sources throughout the Renaissance. “While we tend to take for granted the textual stability of sources”, *SENS*’s homepage points out, “a closer exploration of the actual editions that may have been available at the time shows relevant textual differences bearing upon their reception” (online). It is desirable, therefore, to recover these works’ textuality and restore them to the cultural milieu from which they stemmed, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the translative and/or adaptive alterations that may have affected Shakespeare’s reinterpretation of them.

Grouping the playwright’s classical and European narrative sources under one digital roof and favouring visualisations and comparisons “based on advanced” textual “segmentation and intermodal criteria of analysis” (*SENS*, online), *Skenè* holds the promise of creating the first open-access, easily searchable archive entirely focused on Shakespeare’s source texts. Such a scholarly resource could fill in the gaps of Shakespeare source study by promoting intercultural reading into his plays’ genealogy, giving new prominence to the web of intertextual, interdiscursive, mythopoetic practices that informed his – but virtually any of his contemporaries’ – creative process.

In line with this model, I am also testing myself the advantages (and possible drawbacks) of this digitally inflected approach to early modern intertextuality while working on my PhD project, namely on the creation of an HTML-encoded corpus of meaningful scenes taken from sixteenth-century

² For a recent critical overview of some of these resources, see Massai 2021.

English and French translations of Ariosto's *Suppositi* – a play that famously filtered in *The Taming of the Shrew* via Gascoigne's *Supposes*.

In the light of Bigliuzzi's call for more extensive investigations into the genetic makeup of early modern European drama (2018, p. 39), I am preparing a sample of critically edited, interlinked, and hypertextual extracts of the playtexts covered by my research, selected on the basis of the philological, stylistic, thematic, and performative insights they offer with regards to their own textuality and the wider dynamics of transnational circulation and transformation that shaped them. To thematise such aspects, these digitized scripts are to be implemented with hyperlinks that will allow not only to toggle between the items in the corpus, thereby favouring internal crosschecks, but also to reach external scholarly resources that could make their "discursive environment" (Siemon 2009, p. 28) more intelligible. In line with this rationale, tricky lexemes will be unravelled thanks to cross-references to *Lexicons of Early Modern English (LEME)*, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (GDLI)*, and *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé (TLFi)*, which will also help to retrace these words' diachronic evolution and clarify "how contemporaries of Shakespeare understood" them (Lancashire, Tersigni 2017, p. 29). Hotlinks to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, *Enciclopedia Treccani*, or *British History Online (BHO)* will then provide a valuable historical framing for the personalities and events alluded to by the playwrights, just like tags to the *Internet Archive*, the *British Library*, and *Gallica* will enable the visualisation of digital facsimiles of relevant primary sources both internal and external to the corpus.

An archive thus structured is of course not intended as a self-contained experiment, but rather as a testbed for further expansions aimed to improve the shareability and usability of its dataset. The ultimate goal is to promote awareness on how and why certain scripts were appropriated and refashioned in the early modern period, in an effort to throw their European circulation into relief without isolating them from their contextual frame of reference. In this sense, to quote Catherine Belsey,

Writing, any writing, is unthinkable outside the existence of shared conventions of storytelling or staging, genre and decorum, not to mention the language itself in which they are intelligible. In that sense, all writing finds its origins somewhere else and its limited originality resides in its difference from what has gone before. Moreover, the places where writing originates are not themselves moments of pure origin. Habits of narrative, theatre, propriety, meaning emerge from previous practices in an infinite regress. (2015, p. 62)

Given the theoretical and methodological propositions hitherto recalled, source-oriented multilingual archives could be of great help in exploring such

“infinite” (Belsey 2015, p. 62) stratifications of borrowings and resonances, democratizing data accessibility while also building free new tools meant to enable a more comprehensive assessment of early modern (inter)textuality.

3. Unearthing new sources through digital tools: from unnoticed intertextual relations to immaterial influences

If the above-cited experiments testify to the value digital projects can add to the visualisation and analysis of Shakespeare’s long-known sources, computer-aided searches and digital technologies could prove equally useful in illuminating the blind spots in the field, i.e. yet-unidentified forms of intertextual and subtextual exchange.

A pertinent, albeit divisive, example is given by Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter’s computational analysis of George North’s *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels* – a 1576 political treatise their study heralds as “a newly uncovered manuscript source for Shakespeare’s plays” (McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, front cover). According to the editors, the assessment of this work – “one of the most influential Shakespearean source texts in any form”, they claim (McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, p. 1) – was granted by an integrated use of *Early English Books Online-Text Creation Partnership (EEBO-TCP, Phase II)* and a freely-available plagiarism software application, *WCOPYFIND*. Following a methodology conveniently equated to “literary DNA” sequencing (McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, p. 2), McCarthy and Schlueter ran the database’s over 60,000 digitized documents through the programme in search for parallel wordings and unique correspondences, thereby tracing “more than twenty Shakespearean monologues and passages back to North’s essay” (2018, p. 3).

In presenting such results, the researchers rule out the possibility of happenstance by leveraging on the density and extent of the correspondences that link their 13,000-word manuscript to considerably longer Shakespearean plays – a set of specular passages “offered in the same context and sharing multiple words, phrases, and word groupings that were not merely unusual for Shakespeare but unique in the EEBO database” (McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, p. 89).

These premises are enticing, but the mixed responses drawn by the study are enough to curb unbridled enthusiasm. Whereas David Bevington marked McCarthy and Schlueter’s findings as “impressive”, hailing North’s manuscript as “a truly significant” new Shakespearean source (McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, back cover), and Andrea Campana has acknowledged them the merit of having moved the exploration of “the milieu in which the canon of Shakespeare was written [...] light years ahead” (Campana 2019, p. 193),

other early modernists have embraced more cautious, if not openly sceptical positions. It is “a stretch”, Alan Stewart warns, “to believe that [...] often commonplace discussions” such as those centred on the distortive effect of mirrors “are absolute proof of a borrowing” (2019, pp. 1155-1156) between North’s *Discourse* and Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (see McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, pp. 16-18). On a similar note, Rhodri Lewis finds it “slightly bewildering that anyone could see fit to discuss the representation of bees, hierarchy, and political order in early modern literature without referring to Book 4 of Virgil’s *Georgics*” (2018, p. 516), as is the case in *A Brief Discourse* and Act I of *Henry V* (see McCarthy, Schlueter 2018, pp. 21-27). On top of that, the scholar questions the narrowness of McCarthy and Schlueter’s textual sample, thereby contesting its probative value:

It draws not on the complete corpus of early modern writing in English, whether preserved in print or manuscript; nor on the complete corpus of early modern English printed material registered in Pollard and Redgrave; nor even on that part of the body registered in Pollard and Redgrave which is reproduced in facsimile on EEBO. Instead, it depends on those parts of Pollard and Redgrave (currently around fifty percent) whose facsimiles have been digitally transcribed by EEBO-TCP. (Lewis 2018, p. 515)

McCarthy has fiercely countered these allegations, blaming Lewis’s scathing review on the scholar’s biased approach and “innocence of the field” (2018, online) of source study. Lewis, however, is not the only academic to have shown perplexity over McCarthy and Schlueter’s *modus operandi*³ – a fact that makes it legitimate to wonder whether the statistical, multivariate analysis they employed can be considered as a reliable new tool for Shakespeare source study. If so, what is the benchmark against which to measure its trustworthiness and applicability?

To come to grips with the issue, let us go back to the theoretical framework that supports these researchers’ methodology. McCarthy and Schlueter were among the first to introduce string-matching algorithms into Shakespeare source study, but the employment of anti-plagiarism programmes in early modern literary studies, particularly in authorship attribution inquiries, is not trailblazing *per se* – Brian Vickers’s publications alone speak volumes on the subject.⁴ As is known, the viability of this method reposes on the widely accepted view of language as a “shared system” used by each person

³ See for instance Boyle 2018; De Benedictis 2019; Hess 2019.

⁴ See Vickers 2008, 2009, 2014. See also Macdonald 2007; Palmer 2009; Taylor *et al.* 2017 and, for an overview of the related methodologies, Craig 2021.

in special and individual ways. Literary language is only an extreme form of this self-expression. Writers, in fact, often seek to use language in new ways to express their own sensibility, their own particular vision and interpretation. This is especially helpful, then, because the data will show those particularities and can establish individual profiles of literary writers more quickly. (Craig, Kinney 2009, p. 8)

When correctly identified and collated with external evidence, this linguistic fingerprinting can therefore contribute to tracing spurious or anonymous works back to their alleged author. By the same token, distinctive verbal parallels, pinpointed through the joint use of searchable databases, plagiarism software, and processing algorithms, could be used to establish genetic links between differently authored texts, with the result of unveiling hidden intertextual relationships.

This computational approach to source study is clearly up-to-date and exciting, yet it should never be forgotten that digital quantitative analyses are not *ipso facto* unbiased or error-proof. More often than not, they actually create a false perception of objectivity and reliability, induced by the automatic data processing computers carry out. Even though machine-assisted analytical procedures reduce the likelihood of human error, allowing for quicker and more systematic textual siftings, it is indeed important to remark that the input that triggers and organizes such processes depends entirely on the operator's choices – a factor that makes room for all sorts of procedural shortcomings. Furthermore, any dataset – be it gathered via pre-digital or digital instruments – acquires meaning only when interpreted by flesh and blood scholars: computers may give “literary criticism (and its associated concerns such as authorship, development or influence) the means by which we may substantially advance our knowledge of Shakespeare”, but the related findings will always have to be analysed by the human critic for their “utility and interpretation to be determined” (Craig, Kinney 2009, p. 7).

This interpretative task is then further complicated by the disputable nature of any quantitative survey's results:

The quantitative approach leads to measured uncertainty rather than absolute findings. The methods foreground the possibility that a pattern is the result of chance, for instance. Tests for statistical significance frame the result: is it the sort of difference that we could expect to appear now and then, even when there is no genuine underlying contrast, or, on the other hand, is it so marked and persistent that it would take hundreds of trials of random data to come up with something similar – or thousands, or millions? (Craig, Greatley-Hirsch 2017, p. 3)

This intrinsic margin of error could also be widened by the limited capacity of digital archives themselves, which cannot be expected to cover the full

range of early modern English (let alone European) writing, even if operated in conjunction with one another. In the case of *EEBO-TCP*, for instance, we are offered painstakingly marked-up transcriptions of English-language works, but each record is still based on “one edition” (in most cases “the first”⁵) of said works, thus obscuring previous manuscript renderings and reprints. It follows that any crosscheck run through this corpus alone is doomed to lead to partial conclusions.

With these caveats in place, it is necessary to clarify that my aim here is not to discredit digital quantitative analyses or textual collations altogether – it would be anachronistic and quite short-sighted to do so – but rather to call attention to the potential pitfalls involved in such methodologies. Whereas it is evident that the joint use of string-matching software and machine-readable databases enables faster, more accurate comparisons among texts, increasing the chances of revealing unnoticed verbal correspondences, it is important not to overlook these procedures’ limitations in terms of scope, objectivity, and capacity, with a view to encouraging rigorously scrutinized approaches to them. After all, one needs only to look away from binary, source-derivative relationships and consider the broader theatrical context Shakespeare participated in to become fully aware of such inherent deficiencies.

Roslyn L. Knutson, David McInnis, and Matthew Steggle have for example underlined that “no account of early modern literary culture is complete without the acknowledgment of” the substantial “lacunae” (2020, p. 2) that obscure the field – a copious amount of losses that, in the case of drama, encompasses not only playtexts but also non-performative documents, events, and even people associated with the early modern theatrical scene. We have hitherto discussed how digital technology can impact the visualisation and cross-examination of readily available textual matter, i.e. sources and derivatives whose linguistic makeup is materially at our disposal. What happens if we take into account lost or even intangible source material? Could partially irretrievable scripts and non-textual influences be put into starker relief in computer-aided Shakespeare source study?

The *Lost Plays Database (LPD)* offers a case in point in the matter. Created in 2009 by editors Knutson, McInnis, and Steggle⁶ and now hosted on the Folger Shakespeare Library’s website, the *LPD* is a wiki-style open-access publication designed to provide “the tools and the canvas” (McInnis 2014, p. 46) as well as scrupulous editorial supervision for more extensive,

⁵ *EEBO-TCP*, “Frequently Asked Questions”: <https://textcreationpartnership.org/faq/>.

⁶ At present, the Editors in charge of the *LPD* are David McInnis, Matthew Steggle, and Misha Teramura, with the contribution of Roslyn L. Knutson as Editor Emerita: https://lostplays.folger.edu/About_Us.

collaborative investigations into the “dark matter” (Borlik 2016, p. 158) of early modern English drama. For the purposes of this project, information about lost plays is gathered by means of voluntary scholarly contributions (hence the wiki format), but the database itself is not open to public editing: the editors reserve the right to check the aspiring contributors’ academic background and motivation before allowing them to create or edit content for the *LPD*, thus ensuring quality control without discouraging committed, knowledgeable collaborations. As for the entries themselves, they are “organised according to a pre-designed template” (McInnis 2014, p. 47) tailored to include a rich array of textual and performative data that can be browsed through thanks to a sidebar menu and a search box located at the top right corner of each webpage.

In broad terms, these snippets of evidence contribute to bringing early modern English theatricality into sharper focus, painting a more detailed picture of the kinds of plays that were performed in England between 1570 and 1642. When examined from the viewpoint of Shakespeare source study, however, this contextual background can prove invaluable in suggesting *why* the playwright was drawn to specific themes, motifs, storylines – and, consequently, source texts – within a given timespan, with the result of illuminating the environmental influences that impinged on his creativity.

Let us think, for example, of the genesis of *Hamlet*. Linear research into its genealogy has long revealed that Shakespeare resorted to Saxo Grammaticus’s *Historia Danica* and Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* to flesh out his Danish prince – a discovery that has “obvious value for author-centric” source inquiries into the play (McInnis 2018, p. 300). Nonetheless, the assessment of this tragedy’s inception becomes much more nuanced if we browse through the *LPD* and learn that, in the last decade of the sixteenth century, at least five lost plays, mostly staged by The Admiral’s, had exploited analogous Danish motifs in equally tragic scenarios.⁷ On a similar note, crosschecks between the Lord Chamberlain’s and the Admiral’s repertories for the years 1599-1600 reveal a shared interest in serial English history plays, displayed by their concurrent offerings of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and the lost *Oldcastle* (Chamberlain’s), *2 Henry Richmond*, and *Owen Tudor* (both Admiral’s) (Knutson 2004, 2005).

Although not probative, such contingencies show the presence of common dramatic patterns in Shakespeare’s ambience, highlighting subtle forms of mutual influence that could explain why he decided to engage with

⁷ In his analysis, McInnis recalls *The Tanner of Denmark* (1592, Strange’s), the anonymous *Hamlet* (1594, Admiral’s or Chamberlain’s), *Cutlack* (Admiral’s, 1594), *I&2 Earl Godwin and his Three Sons* (1598, Admiral’s), and *A Danish Tragedy* (1602, Admiral’s). He extrapolates such information from the diaries of Philip Henslowe, long-standing manager of the Admiral’s (McInnis 2018, pp. 300-301).

certain topics at specific moments in his career. As Janet Clare argues, the “matter and practice of plays” were indeed “trafficked amongst playwrights and amongst communities of spectators” (2014, p. 18) in the Tudor Age, according to complex dynamics of competition and negotiation dictated by the marketplace logic of London’s playhouses. This “matrix of professional and commercial rivalry” (Clare 2014, p. 18) cannot be separated from early modern scripts, which were conceived as fully-fledged commodities designed to meet audience demands and rival flanking theatre companies. It is only natural, therefore, that playwrights like Shakespeare felt impelled to look around for inspiration, so as to come up with scripts that could be both different from other circulating plays and in line with the emerging or consolidated trends of the season. In view of this creative interdependence, crowdsourced scholarly researches into lost Renaissance drama could prove useful for clarifying whether and how Shakespeare reacted to the works of his contemporaries and predecessors, laying bare the latent contextual influences that shaped his production.

On a complementary basis, the *LPD* may offer another enticing, albeit remote and insidious, prospect to Shakespeare source study: the possibility of coming across lost plays that bear enough textual or paratextual traces to be interlocked with other surviving scripts, thus qualifying as potential sources for them. To remain within the bounds of Shakespearean drama, David McInnis (2021, pp. 62-66; see also 2018, p. 300) mentions the case of *Hester and Ahasuerus* – an anonymous Biblical play that “appears in Henslowe’s diary on 3 June 1594 in the list of plays offered by the Admiral’s men and Chamberlain’s men playing at the playhouse of Newington” (Knutson 2012, online). No manuscript or printed copy has come down to us, but a German translation of it, *Comoedia von der Königin Esther und hoffertigen Haman*, can still be found in a collection published in Leipzig in 1620. According to Martin Wiggins, this version features a “shrew-taming sub-plot, which includes an incident in which the clown’s wife is forced to say that black is white in order to avoid her husband’s violence” – an episode that may “be the source of the sun/moon incident in *The Taming of the Shrew*” (2014, p. 265).

In truth, here we move on treacherous ground – we have no notion of the original play, and an alternative source for the scene has been identified in *El Conde Lucanor*⁸ – but the perils of the task do not diminish the database’s potential for broadening the spectrum of Shakespeare source study, supplementing linear investigations with more extensive contextual

⁸ See Hodgdon 2010, p. 60. This narrative congruence does not exclude the possibility that Shakespeare actually came across *Hester and Ahasueros*. For all we know, this Biblical play may have been influenced by Juan Manuel’s material in its own turn, or it may have been entirely independent from it.

information. Scrolling through the *LPD* we may not stumble upon unacknowledged sources of Shakespeare’s plays, but we can surely gain a clearer idea of the milieu that nurtured them, of the external influences that encroached on their textuality and aesthetics.

For specular reasons, it is also worthwhile to pay attention to the physical space Shakespeare inhabited, i.e. early modern London – a vibrant background that proved instrumental in the conception of his plays. As is known, many Elizabethan and Jacobean scripts are indeed hinged on an intimate familiarity with this city’s topography and its streets often appear as settings in Renaissance history plays, including Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *Henry VIII*. What is more, recent scholarship has pointed out that London bears a certain agency even upon Shakespearean plays that are not set in England, such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Merchant of Venice*.⁹ It goes without saying, then, that a better framing of this geographical and cultural milieu would greatly improve our understanding of early modern drama as a whole, while also helping to enlighten these locations’ generative impact on Shakespeare’s creativity.

The *Map of Early Modern London (MoEML)* shows promise in unlocking such potential. Drawing content from six databases, which in turn serve seven interoperable projects – a digital edition of Agas’s birds-eye-view map of London, two repositories of primary and secondary sources replete with London-related information (*Library* and *Encyclopedia*), a TEI-encoded, versioned edition of Stow’s *Survey of London*, an anthology of old-spelling and modern editions of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline mayoral shows (forthcoming), the *London Parish* project (forthcoming), and the *Browsing the Bookstalls of St. Paul’s* project (forthcoming) – this platform enables the reconnaissance of sixteenth and seventeenth-century London through an intuitive map interface, structured to “plot people, historical documents, literary works, and recent critical research onto topography and the built environment” (*MoEML*, online). Users are also welcome to customise their virtual ramblings through the Renaissance capital by drawing their own routes of interest, which can then be bookmarked and downloaded for non-commercial purposes. This interactive approach to digital thick mapping¹⁰ appears very promising with regards to Shakespeare source study, as it could help to gauge a better sense of Shakespeare’s spatial and cultural frame of reference and reveal previously neglected sources of inspiration for his plays. To prove this point, let us briefly turn back to *The Taming of the Shrew*.

⁹ On the subject, see Crawford *et al.* 2014. For a detailed survey of Shakespeare’s topographical references to London, see Dustangheer 2020.

¹⁰ An interesting overview of this method is offered in Presner *et al.* 2014 and Richardson 2018.

This comedy is famously set in Italy, precisely in Padua: its characters occasionally speak Italian, they bear Italian names and travel across the North of the Peninsula throughout the course of action. In Act 4.3 Petruchio and Kate are in Verona, but they are about to set off to Padua to attend Bianca's wedding. Owing to such a sound Italian ambience, it is all the more peculiar to hear Petruchio ask Grumio to bring his horses "unto Long-lane end" (4.3.179)¹¹ before departure – a toponym that must have rung a bell with the play's sixteenth-century London audience. At that time, Long Lane was indeed a street located on the outskirts of the capital, connecting Aldergate street to Smithfield Market – a piece of information *MoEML* brings just one click away from any informed user. Typing the street's name in the upper-right search bar of its Agas Map, we can highlight the location, zoom in and out to get a clearer idea of its surroundings, and even gain access to several in-built primary sources that mention the street, among which we find Stow's *Survey of London*. Consulting this versioned edition of the account, we learn that the street was "a lane, truelie called Long, [...] inclosed with Innes, Brewhouses, and large tenements of the west side" (Stow, Fitz-Stephen 2021, online) – a suburban scenario that perfectly fits the scene conjured up by *The Shrew*. Then, if we reach out to the descriptive *Gazetteer*, letter L, we are provided with a table that lists all known spelling variants for the toponym, including "Long-lane" (*MoEML*, online), i.e. the variant featured in the *First Folio* edition of the play.

At the moment, many of said references are available only as drafts, empty documents or are still undergoing peer review – the project is *in fieri*, after all – but everything suggests that, when duly completed, a digital resource like *MoEML* will positively affect Shakespeare source study, allowing for a more accurate assessment of the connections between the playwright's works and the spatio-cultural milieu in which they were conceived and performed.

4. Conclusion

In this brief excursus, I have tried to shed light on the digitally inflected changes occurring in Shakespeare source study – a resurrecting research field (Walter, Klann 2018) that burst back into prominence in the last few years. Since the 1990s, electronic resources and computational methods have become "one inescapable element of Shakespeare studies" (Lavagnino 2014, p. 22), and Shakespeare source criticism has accordingly capitalised upon this "flood of digital possibilities" (Lavagnino 2014, p. 21) to rethink the study of

¹¹ The quotation is from Shakespeare (2017, p. 150).

linear transmission and start to identify more indirect yet pervasive forms of subtextual and contextual influence.

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by these methodologies, the gains digital tools and resources promise to bring to Shakespeare source study remain significant. To borrow Carson and Kirwan’s insight, while “‘Shakespeare’ as a cultural concept may be in a state of perpetual change, the specific and temporally contingent effect of the impact of digital technology in recent years has been the foregrounding of multiplicity” (2014, p. 239). More often than ever before, today “we are studying Shakespeares” (Carson, Kirwan 2014, p. 239), profiting from new instruments and research methods to reconceptualise not only the playwright’s textuality *per se* but also the multi-layered creative process that underpins it.

One of the major problems with ‘old-fashioned’ source study is that “the sources identified have so often remained inert in the process of interpretation, dead bones uncovered in the living text but with few implications for its final shape” (Belsey 2015, p. 62). What digital technologies seem to offer is precisely a way to dust off those bones and put them on a better display, bringing new light on their hermeneutic value for the study of Shakespeare’s textuality and early modern European theatricality *tout court*.

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