

Place Names and Epithets in Homer and Shakespeare

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IT SEEMS NATURAL for poets to treat place names with loving care, to enrich them with epithets stimulating to the imagination and gratifying to the ear. In the second book of the *Iliad* one can scarcely read Homer's account of the assembly of "the flowing-haired Achaians" with its designation of their leaders and of the places from which they came, without taking delight in the ample store of choice epithets with which the poet graces these last. Here are some examples (as they appear in the Lang-Leaf-Myers rendering): rocky Aulis . . . Eteonos full of ridges . . . Mykalessos with wide lawns . . . Thisbe haunt of doves . . . grassy Haliartos . . . Arne rich in vineyards . . . sacred Nisa . . . holy Euboia . . . Tiryns of the great walls . . . wealthy Corinth . . . steep Gonoessa . . . Orchomenos abounding in flocks . . . windy Enispe . . . lovely Mantinea . . . goodly Elis . . . chalky Lykastos . . . Hellas the home of fair women . . . flowery Pyrasos . . . Iton mother of flocks . . . Pteleos couched in grass . . . rugged Olizon . . . terraced Ithome . . . Neriton with quivering leafage . . . wintry Dodona.

Similar epithets are to be found in Shakespeare. To instance a few: fertile France . . . waterish Burgundy . . . goodly Ilion . . . high Olympus . . . old Nile . . . royal Rome . . . fair Padua, nursery of arts . . . Pisa renowned for grave citizens . . . fruitful Lombardy . . . sandy-bottom'd Severn . . . tawny Spain. Some, like *the smug and silver Trent* and *the still-vex'd Bermoothes*, give the imagination such a fillip that one can only wish Shakespeare had seen fit to supply many more.

In comparison with Homer, though, Shakespeare accompanies few of his place names with epithets. For example, among names of places, that of Scotland appears over a score of times in Shake-

spare's plays but never with an epithet; the same is true of Egypt, which appears almost twice as often. France and Rome are each mentioned hundreds of times, but qualifying epithets are rather rare. Even for England I have noted no more than a dozen epithets. This last fact most certainly does not imply any lack of patriotic feeling in Shakespeare. No more stirring lines have ever been written than those given to John of Gaunt (in Act II, Scene I of *Richard II*) in praise of England, "this sceptred isle."

To turn for a moment to the place names themselves, in his history plays Shakespeare naturally makes the most of the resounding names—like Pomfret Castle, the Tower, Goodwin Sands, Milford-Haven, Bosworth Field—which came down in the chronicles of Halle and Holinshed. But his allusions to places found near his own home are notable primarily for their rarity. It is true that in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* are mentioned Burton heath (Barton-on-the-heath) and Wincot, villages near Stratford;¹ the Forest of Arden, though, in *As You Like It* is hardly identifiable with its namesake in Warwickshire or, indeed, with any terrestrial locale.² Possibly Shakespeare was not so place conscious as some poets. Certainly he shows little of that intense interest in the origin of names of places which the early Irish bards repeatedly exhibit.

We may note, as being relevant here, Shakespeare's indifference to matters of local color, and of geography generally, unless they furthered his particular dramatic purpose. For example, mention of the Rialto, of ducats, and of magnificoes sufficed, along with some Italian personal names for the characters, to create Venice for Shakespeare's audience;³ and so far as place names or local color goes, Illyria and the high jinks which took place there on a certain Twelfth Night might just as well have adorned the moon.

Homer's attitude in the *Iliad* toward place names and their epithets appears to have been quite different. Reciting the deeds of heroes, presumably in the courts of nobles who accounted themselves the not unworthy descendants of those heroes, he may often have had an additional motive for embellishing a place name with special care. It *might* designate the home of his present host. Whatever his reason, we are grateful to Homer for the many vividly epitheted place names which help to re-create for us the ancient land of the Achaians.

NOTES

¹ Concerning references to the Cotswold district in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and to the Gloucestershire village of Woodmancote (Woncot) in *King Henry IV, Part II*, see Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare* (London, 1925), pp. 248, 240.

² See Francis Griffin Stokes, *A Dictionary of the Characters & Proper Names in the Works of Shakespeare* (London, 1924), p. 21; also Edward H. Sugden, *A Topographical Dictionary to the Works of Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists* (Manchester, 1925), p. 28.

³ See Mario Praz, "Shakespeare's Italy," *Shakespeare Survey* 7, pp. 98-105.



Russian Versions of American Place Names.—Transliteration from English to Russian and back to English is apt to create strange names for familiar places. Publicity on the proposed visit to Iowa by a delegation of Russian farmers has made *Aiowa* and its capital, *De Moin* rather well-known to us, however. William F. Pyper, writing in the Bay City (Mich.) Times, tells us further that, according to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, *Bei-Siti* is located in Michigan on the *Sagino* River near Lake *Guron*. Other Michigan cities are listed, says Pyper, as *Kalamazu*, *Dzhekson*, and *Maskigon*.

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The following rhyme is made up of surnames found in the Los Angeles telephone directories:

Simm Pell Simon Mette Pye Mann
Goin Tudor Fair
Said Simm Pell Simon Tudor Pye Mann
Lett Mee Tay Sturr Ware
Said Derr Pye Manta Simm Pell Simon
Show Mee Furst Yure Penney
Said Simm Pell Simon Tudor Pye Mann
Deed Aye Haven Tenney

ARCHIE R. McCRADY