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Sophie Chiari

The letter! The litter!¹

¹ In Microcosmos (1603), John Davies of Hereford delivers a paradoxical praise of Shakespeare as a man of the theatre: “Though the stage doth stain pure gentle blood, / Yet generous ye are in mind and mood.”² Playwrights indeed belonged to a tainted profession and the social stain of the stage clearly stigmatized them. No wonder then if, in Sonnet 111, the speaker pointedly engages with this idea when referring to his “dyer’s hand” (l. 7), an image which stands both for his public profession and for moral and physical corruption.³

² Marks, spots and stains abound in early modern plays and poems; significantly, they can never be totally wiped out and, as such, are bound to reappear under various shapes. As polluted sites of exploration, they generate meaningful and sometimes violent tensions questioning early modern self-fashioning and writing practices. Today, critics generally tend to associate them with such negative notions as defilement, cruelty or dishonesty. Yet one may here wonder whether Shakespeare and his contemporaries always regarded them as markers of evil. How were they really used and perceived at the time? Did they point to the materiality of the early modern text or, on the contrary, did they foreground a philosophic approach to the creative process?

³ I would like to suggest that the lability of these blemishes actually calls for more careful examination, linked as it is to a poetics of stains which informs the literary production of a writer whose friends insisted, somewhat paradoxically, that he “scarce” left “a blot in his papers.”⁴ For Shakespeare’s fellow actors, any association of their companion with unpleasing blots would have sullied their own enterprise and given the late playwright a long-lasting reputation of laboriousness. However, we all know that such claims should not be taken literally. In the following development, probing material, spiritual, and
materialist layers of meaning, I thus argue that blots, these long-neglected marks of artistic creation, shape a poetics of stains constitutive of Shakespeare's oeuvre.

To explore the issue of spots and stains in the writing practices of the poet and playwright, I will first touch on the issue of the inkblots disseminated in his works. For if the playwright presumably “never blotted out a line”, his texts nonetheless allude to the difficulty of penning plays and poems as well as to the marginal condition of the early modern playwright. Assuredly, the “beauty” sometimes conveyed by the poet’s “black lines” (Sonnet 63) should not make us forget that black ink smears the blank page, all the more so as the recipes of the time insisted on the use of “wine”, “gumme” and “gals” to “make common inke”, thereby underlining the noxious nature of printing ink. I will then focus on bloodied cloths, on Imogen’s “cinque-spotted” mole, and on Lady Macbeth’s “damned spot”. In connection with physical and moral violence, smears can frequently be associated with trauma and guilt and, in this regard, Hamlet’s ghost is to be viewed as an anamorphic stain functioning as the play’s blind spot. Eventually, Nature’s smudges will allow me to shed fresh light on “mud” and “slime”, two elements that have recently paved the way for ecocritical approaches — particularly in Antony and Cleopatra, where the mud imagery relates to fertility and spontaneous regeneration —, and I will close on the idea of Shakespeare’s art as sullied/solidified by a consubstantial impurity.

Blood and ink blots: metapoetics

“England, bound in with the triumphant sea / [...] / [...] is now bound in with shame, / With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds” (2.2.61-64), John of Gaunt bitterly declares in his death-bed speech. Richard II is a play teeming with references to blots and, in the passage just quoted, England’s pristine purity and Christianity are said to be smeared by “visually as well as legally corrupted” charters. Paperwork is thus presented as both parasitic and dishonourable and, as a result, the authority of the written word is being questioned in the play.

The secretarial culture depicted in Richard II was giving way, in the sixteenth century, to a print culture which implied that the manuscript was no longer an end, but a means. Writers, scribes, printers and booksellers were now all embarked on one and the same task: circulating knowledge. Preoccupied with the readability of their manuscripts, early modern writers associated ink blots with “sloppiness or haste”. Puritan commentators, as to them, shifted the focus on licentious writers likely to defile readers’ minds. They associated poets, writers and actors with the stains of ink metaphorically seen as marks of adulteration. In the dedicatory epistle of Seaven helps to Heauen (1614), the preacher Stephen Jerome writes for instance:

First, in respect of the subiect here intreated of, which is not light and triuiall, such as Virgils Gnat, Erasmus his Mori, or commendation of Folly, Sir Thomas Moores Eutopia, or the generous Sidney’s Arcadia, or such as Lucians Flie, Apuleius his Golden Asse, Plutarkes Gryllus, &c. nor such friuolous and licentious stuffe as our Poets and Poetasters, Comedians, and Pamphleters, staine so much Paper withall, and adultere and defile the minds of so many: but the subiect is graue, sad, waigthy, ponderous, euen that which is the suburbs eyther of heauen or hell, the Prologue to euerlasting sollace or sorrow, [...]; beseeming your most retyred Meditations, sincerest Thoughts, greatest Priuacies, and deuoutest Soliloquies; [...].
“[S]tain[ing] so much paper” with “frivolous and licentious stuffe”, Shakespeare and his fellow writers bore the stigma of their profession. They stained the sheets of paper just as much as they were stained by their writings. For Puritans like Philip Stubbes, stage plays were all the more corrupting as they had the power to inscribe their contents directly upon the spectators’ minds, like a printing press: “For such is our grosse & dull nature, that what thing we see opposite before our eyes, do pearce further and printe deeper in our harts and minds, than that thing which is hard onely with the eares”. This implies that the theatrical transaction would have polluted even the most virtuous minds, since the heads and hearts of early modern playgoers could be stained on the spot by the visual messages of the performance.

In fact, it was the printing process that actually stained the texts with dirt. As noted by Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, mingled in the ink which served to print them were “residual traces of urine of the print shop workers, who each night used urine to soak the balls that inked the press”. Still, rather than the bodily fluid used by the printers, it was the presumably “vile matter” (Romeo and Juliet, 3.2.83) produced by the writers that raised the Puritans’ eyebrows. If the poets and playwrights of the time may have exaggerated “the stigma of print” so as to fit the early modern standards of decency, they nonetheless had to cope with frequent attacks. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 111, the speaker bemoans that his “name receives a brand, / And almost thence [his] nature is subdu’d / To what it works in, like the Dyer’s hand” (l. 5-7). At the beginning of his career, Shakespeare, like his fellow playwrights, must have resented the disreputability of stage practice. So, more than a poet, the sonnet’s speaker first and foremost appears here as a man of the theatre. He is a “spotted” man (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 1.1.110) who feels the “brand” so intensely that it becomes a physical pain, even though his stain remains a purely social one since, contrary to the vagrant players, there was no risk for him to be physically branded with hot iron. In any case, lines 5 to 7 point to the materiality of the trauma caused by the opprobrium cast on writers and actors in the Elizabethan era. The poem’s persona then turns “patient” (l. 9) and decides to “drink / Potions of eisel ’gainst [his] strong infection” (l. 10), thus “requir[ing] bitter medicine”. In this particular context, the word “infection” must be understood etymologically. Derived from the Latin inficere, i.e. “to stain” or “to taint”, it then came to signify “corruption, including the miasmic putrefaction of water and air” for Galenic physicians and, in the late sixteenth century, the verb “to infect” still retained something of its residual meaning (“to dye” or “to stain”).

Tiffany Stern has noticed that, in the vocabulary used to stigmatize and dismiss writers, words like “patch” and “patched” were recurrent at a time when books were often described as “patched pamphlets”. While these derogatory terms obviously alluded to the fragmentary nature of early modern texts, I suggest that they may also have something to do with the stain evoked in Sonnet 111 since one of the meanings of “patch”, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, was “[a] part of a surface of recognizably different appearance or character from the rest; an irregular mark or spot” (OED, II.6.a). While the authors of such “patched” texts were naturally aware of the insult, they decided to use the very words of their detractors while giving them different meanings. “Patch” as a noun — often designating “a piece of material” (OED, n.1, I) or “a foolish person, a simpleton” (OED, n.2, 1) — or as a verb — often meaning “to apply a patch in order to repair strengthen, protect, or decorate” (OED, 1.a) — frequently crops up in the Shakespearean canon. Tellingly enough, the playwright occasionally resorts to it as
a synonym for “blot”, as in *King John* (3.1.47). *Hamlet* supplies yet another vivid example of Shakespeare’s strategic use of the term: in act 3, it is part and parcel of a lexical nexus betraying Denmark’s corruption. In the closet scene, the “king of shreds and patches” (3.4.92) bitterly depicted by the Prince accords with the “grainèd spots” (3.4.80) of Gertrude’s soul just a few lines earlier while, in the Q2 and Folio versions, Hamlet’s phrase can also be taken as a reference to the demoted ghost.22

Quite aware of their social stain and familiar with the disfiguring marks sometimes obliterating their own lines, early modern writers regarded spots in an abstract as well as in a very concrete way. The interchange of ink and blood had become something of a cliché,23 and in many poetic works of the period, blots of ink were associated with other dangerous fluids. In one of Thomas Middleton’s early works, a poem entitled “The Ghost of Lucrece” (1600), as the defiled heroine realizes that “[t]he stage is down” (l. 1. 593)24 (i.e. the play is over), she compares herself to Philomela and Tarquin to Tereus:

Bleed no more lines, my heart. This knife, my pen,
This blood, my ink, hath writ enough to lust.
Tarquin, to thee, thou very devil of men,
I send these lines. [...] (l. 563-566)25

As Jocelyn Catty remarks, “Lucrece’s knife [...] re-enacts the rape”,26 and in the lines just quoted, the figurative image of the bleeding heart is replaced with the more concrete one of the knife seen as a pen blotting out a bloody message to the rapist king of Rome.

In Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, Collatine’s wife similarly re-enacts her own rape by committing suicide with a phallic sword which is also a pen: paradoxically, Tarquin’s violation has released her speech and made her speak out the bitter truth. In the letter she writes to her husband, the sullied Lucrece makes it clear that she bequeaths to Tarquin her “stained blood” (l. 1181) now materialized by ink, a blood which “by him tainted shall for him be spent / As is his due writ in [her] testament” (l. 1182-1183).27 The fact that she decides to write her story with her pen’s black ink must have had a strong impact on the early modern imagination, since women were generally represented as books (rather than writers) whose first readers were men.28 In an anonymous epigram written in the 1640s but quite representative of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries altogether, this is stated quite bluntly:

Women are books, and men the readers be,
In whom ofte times they great Errata’s see;
Here sometimes wee a blot, there we espy,
A leafe misplac’d, at least a line awry.29

Lucrece refuses to be seen as such: the blot inflicted on her body is transmitted to the culprit when she takes her own life just after she has tainted the adulterer with her ink/blood. “Though my gross blood be stained with this abuse, / Immaculate and spotless is my mind” (l. 1655-1656), she reveals before stabbing herself with the dagger. Her blood being transmuted into ink, she has found the perfect way to stain the evildoer at the price of her own life. So, whereas Augustine had condemned Lucrece’s self-murder *in spite of* the indelible stain she had to endure, Shakespeare rehabilitates it not simply *because of* it, but also *thanks to* the long-lasting blot she finally inflicts upon Tarquin.10

In Shakespeare’s plays and poems, stains are never reduced to their denotative functions. Because of their suggestiveness, they become poetic objects and sites of powerful creation. This should come as no surprise as stains have been constitutive of the creative process since the Renaissance, if not earlier. Promoting the role of *fantasia* in creation, Leonardo Da Vinci notably thought that painters invented works that Nature could not
have imagined and that labile stains turned out to be strong natural incentives to artistic creation. In his posthumous book, Trattato della pittura, first published in 1651 in Italian and French, he explains that “the unauthored and formless stains on a wall or the veining of marble” are liable to prompt “varie inventioni” in the painter’s mind. Stains, Alexander Nagel suggests, “not only encourage the fantasia to make up new formations; once recognized as pregnant with images, they are themselves instances of image formation, externalizations of the image-forming faculty as it were presented to itself.”

It was in this spirit that Da Vinci asked painters to rehabilitate stains, asking them to focus on the power of confused shapes, such as clouds or muddy water. You should look at walls stained with damp, or stones or uneven colour. If you have to invent backgrounds, you will be able to see in these mountains, ruins, rocks, plains, hills and valleys and then battles and figures in violent action, and an infinity of things you will be able to reduce to their complete and proper forms.

These lines enhance the ambiguity of stains which can turn the simple act of staring into an active process of creation. While Shakespeare probably never read such words, his work testifies to the gradual digestion and acceptance of Da Vinci’s ideas in Europe and to their specific relevance to the world of the theatre. In Antony and Cleopatra, Mark Antony literally follows Da Vinci’s injunction as he reads the clouds’ confused shapes smearing the skies:

Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish,
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon’t that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with aire. Thou hast seen these signs?
They are black vesper’s pageants.

Antony’s sunset is reflected in the transient forms in the sky at dusk. Here, I would like to suggest that the clouds, like stains in the heavens, are part and parcel of Nature’s disegno, a connection found in other Shakespearean works. Sonnet 35, for instance, overtly links clouds with stains (“Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun, / And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud” (l. 3-4)), and Richard’s appearance in Richard II is likened to the sun emerging from the “envious clouds” (3.3.64) that “stain” (65) his “bright passage to the occident” (66).

Not only do Antony’s lines provide an odd parallel to Da Vinci’s recommendations, they are also clearly reminiscent of a passage from De rerum natura, the six-book poem written by Lucretius in the first century B.C.:

[...] we sometimes see clouds quickly gathering
Aloft together, marring heaven’s clear face,
While with their motion they caress the air:
For often visages of giants are seen
To float along, trailing a far-spread shadow;
Sometimes mighty mountains, or rocks torn off
From mountains, seem to go before and pass
Across the sun; then some huge beast appears
To lead and drag behind it other clouds.

Shakespeare must have found Lucretius’ “phenomenal world of largely fleeting appearances and transitory entities” particularly compelling since his own obsession with clouds, from A Midsummer Night’s Dream to The Tempest, testifies to his long-lasting interest in the topic. We should remember, at this point, that Antony and Cleopatra...
contains a clear reference to Lucretius in act 2, when Antony suspects Lepidus of being “a very epicure” (2.7.51). Montaigne, in his Essays, often quotes Lucretius, and as an avid reader of the French writer, Shakespeare in turn borrows some of his Lucretian material. As a result, in Antony and Cleopatra, the playwright promotes a poetic and materialist approach to the world as the only viable alternative to the typical Roman thirst for conquest and power.

No wonder if Antony's changing clouds are strikingly similar to Lucretius’ nubila (clouds), seen as “spontaneously begotten” forms “marring” (or smearing) heaven’s vault. Shakespeare could also resort to the encyclopaedic Natural History, written in the first century A.D., in which Pliny explained that the sky was engraved with figures of animals and things, “the seeds of which fall upon the earth or into the sea and give birth to beings”. In Antony and Cleopatra, the playwright thus recycles a well-known conception of clouds and turns it into a poetic image of stains that smacks of the transcendental rather than of the usual material corruption attached to these ephemeral shapes.

Dramatic smears: body and soul

In a symbolic perspective, the stains on the writer’s blank page may also have evoked those on white wedding sheets which generally raised positive comments. Indeed, they bore witness to the bride’s virginity since “the stained wedding sheets” of marriage were then regarded “as evidence of the sanctified marital blood pact”.

By contrast, stained cloths like those in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, As You Like It, Othello, or Cymbeline, are much more ambiguous tokens which point to misprision and dismemberment because they are no longer associated with the traditional act of defloration, but with the lover’s fantasised and eroticized body. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the mechanicals remind us that it is Thisbe’s bloody mantle which leads Pyramus to believe that she is dead. In As You Like It, Rosalind faints after she has caught sight of Orlando’s bloody napkin. In Othello, the Moor is persuaded that the loss of the spotted handkerchief he had offered his bride is a sign of her infidelity. Finally, in Cymbeline, Posthumus Leonatus keeps a handkerchief he wrongly presumes to be stained with the blood of Imogen. Incidentally, yet another bloody napkin appears in 3 Henry VI, where it is not linked with any eroticized vision. In Shakespeare’s history play, the Duke of York is forced to wipe his brow with a napkin dipped in the blood of his son before being stabbed to death. All of these spotted cloths, be they absent or present, capture the audience’s imagination. Remarkably, the gaze perverts the stains’ initial function, so to speak. If we follow Daniel Arasse’s analysis in Histoires de peinture, the spots that maculate the white cloths are comparable to “a pictorial detail functioning like a smear, like a macchia”, and no longer refer to the message of the painting but instead “dislocate the whole picture”.

Othello’s handkerchief seems close to Arasse’s macchia, defined in 1598 by John Florio as “a spot, a blemish, a speckle, a note of infamie or reproche”. Not a purely Shakespearean invention since in his 1565 Hecatommithi, Cinthio mentioned a napkin embroidered alla moresca (i.e. “in the Moorish fashion”), Desdemona’s white handkerchief is however quite distinctive as it is “[s]potted with strawberries” (3.3.440) — a possible echo of Venus and Adonis’s statement “Or as the berry breaks before it staineth” (l. 460). Once lost, it is no longer a symbol of marital consummation and truthfulness, but a fetishized item hinting at tainted love and adultery.
The same motif of the stained cloth is found in *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes is haunted by the obsessive idea of “the purity and whiteness of [his] sheets” (1.2.325) and where his comic alter ego, the vagrant peddler Autolycus, refers to his “traffic” in “sheets” (4.3.23) and sings of “the white sheet bleaching on the hedge” (4.3.5). The attitudes of both men point to a latent phobia of spots, stains and sin. Of course, when designated by Autolycus, the sheets are also an implicit reference to the single sheets, or broadsides, on which the early seventeenth-century street ballads were printed. Once again, writing and sexual practices overlap, linked by the same longing for an impossible purity. Besides, Autolycus’s song implies that the spotted sheets of adultery can be bleached and that, once stolen on the line, these laundered items may become black market commodities.

This obsession with stains is actually detectable elsewhere in the canon, as Shakespeare revels in the blurring of lines and the smearing of immaculate surfaces. While blots primarily refer to a disfiguring process, he paradoxically saw in them loci swarming with life and enabling him to reconfigure meaning. The idea of linking blots with poetic inspiration and composition may seem a paradoxical one, though. The action of blotting refers both to staining (*OED*, 1.a.) and to deleting (*OED*, 5.a), while blots also point to physical deformity (*OED*, 1.c), three meanings which are found in *King John* when the young Arthur’s grandmother questions his legitimacy:

> Constance […] My boy a bastard? By my sol I think
> His father never was so true begot —
> It cannot be, and if thou wert his mother.
> Elinor There’s a good mother, boy, that blots thy father.
> Constance. There’s a good grandname, boy, that would blot thee. (2.1.129-133)

Elinor’s quibble on “boy” and “blot” is a sly allusion to Arthur’s presumed bastardy, a means of eliminating the young heir in opposition. In the next act, Constance draws on the same imagery as she praises the physical appearance of her son:

> If thou, that bid’st me content, wert grim,
> Ugly and slanderous to thy mother’s womb,
> Full of unpleasing blots and sightless stains,
> Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
> Patch’d with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
> I would not care, I then would be content,
> For then I should not love thee, no, nor thou
> Become thy great birth nor deserve a crown. (3.1.42-50, my emphases)

Shakespeare’s contemporaries believed that the “blots of Nature’s hand”, as Puck calls them in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (5.1.409), doomed a child’s existence and made him a monster. Yet, depending on their shape and place on the body, especially the female body, blots could also become the objects of voyeuristic desire. In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo notices “on [Imogen’s] left breast / A mole, cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops / I’th’ bottom of a cowslip” (2.2.38-39). A remarkable *locus* of memory, this detail triggers both Iachimo’s voyeuristic rapture and Posthumus’s fury, convinced as he is of his wife’s adultery. Its function is reminiscent of the spots on Desdemona’s handkerchief, the spotted cloth and the “mole cinque-spotted” both referring to the lady’s defilement. Iachimo cleverly singles out a body-part which is not simply erotic but which also emphasises Imogen’s presumed guilt. A spot was indeed frequently associated with “[a] moral stain” or “a moral flaw” (*OED*, 2.a) by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. In their daily sermons, preachers often insisted on God’s spotless nature in sharp contrast to man’s blemishes. One of these preachers, Richard Crakanthorpe, fittingly illustrates the point:
This was the prerogatiue of Christ alone, that he knew no sinne, and in all things he was tempted like vs, sine onely excepted: Of whom S. Austen saith, That hee was therefore prefigured by the spotlesse lambe, to signifie that he alone should be without all spot of sin, to heale all our sins, Slas in hominibus qua quarebatur in pecoribus: He onely among men was such as they sought among the beasts, that is, without spot and blemish. But of all other besides him, the Scripture saith, All wee like sheepe haue gone astray [...].

This short passage makes spots synecdoches of sin. For most early modern poets and playwrights, spots denoted a sinful conscience while “stains” more surely connoted the stigma caused by a form of luxuriousness — Lucrece’s “forcèd stain” (The Rape of Lucrece, l. 1701) being a case in point. This suggests that the two words were generally used in separate and complementary meanings even though they could sometimes be synonyms.

Lady Macbeth’s famous “Out, damned spot!” (5.1.33) implies both her transgressive sexuality (“transgressive” in the sense that she repeatedly usurps male prerogatives) and her sinful state. Her plea almost sounds like a confession, an acknowledgement of her involvement in Duncan’s murder. Guilt-ridden, prone to sleep-walking (one of the symptoms of hysteria), she sees on her hands indelible stains that only exist in her imagination. Yet her vision also testifies to a degree of lucidity as these spots are an “objective correlative” which encapsulates her entire life, reducing it to insignificance, and which points to the murderous deeds that keep haunting her.

While stains, spots and smears have generated a spate of critical comments which generally highlight a crude and cruel sexuality, little has been said about their associations with grief, doubt and self-delusion, a link made obvious not just in Macbeth, but also in Hamlet where the ghost functions like a Lacanian stain. In Seminar XI, Jacques Lacan uses Hans Holbein’s painting of the Ambassadors (1533) in order to connect the stain on the floor (i.e. the skull anamorphosis) with the spectator’s gaze. Between the eye and the gaze, according to Lacan, “there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure”. Like the unconscious, the gaze can become operative through an oblique approach. In Lacan’s analysis, the gaze is attracted by the blurred spot in the painting’s foreground, indistinguishable and yet sufficiently noticeable to arouse the viewer’s interest and make him/her detect, as he/she is about to depart, an anamorphic skull. This barely visible shape at the bottom of the painting may “remind us of the skull in Hamlet” but it can more surely be paralleled with the haunting figure of Old Hamlet seen by the anxious Prince who is the only onlooker endowed with the power of a piercing, oblique vision in the play. He alone identifies the spectre: to the eyes of others, the ghost coincides with a degree of blindness.

Hamlet is an artist at heart, painting his own tragedy, staging his own trauma as a stain to be both revered and destroyed if he wants to survive, something clearly beyond his power. In the second half of the play, he manages to have Gertrude look into her own heart and exclaim:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grainèd spots
As will not leave their tinct. (3.4.78-81)

The black “tinct” mentioned by Gertrude is here reminiscent of the black bile, as if Hamlet had successfully, at last, “engendered in her a melancholic fume”. Indeed, once the Prince of Denmark has spoken “dagger” (3.2.385) to his mother, her belated
wistfulness allows her to have an access to remorse and to see her own “grainèd spots”. These are interiorized, so that she still cannot see the spectre of her late husband when he enters her room, while her son immediately notices him (3.4.93 s.d.). If we accept to take for granted that, in the words of Giorgio Mobili, “the stain is real insofar as it signals the inevitable distortion of perception brought on by desire”, we can then assume that the ghost does exist insofar as it stems from Hamlet’s fundamentally biased vision. Betraying Hamlet’s impossible mourning and his longing to see his father alive, the revenant operates as an un-metaphorized, indelible stain tainting the Prince’s soul as well as an external manifestation of Gertrude’s “grainèd spots”.

As a matter of fact, the ghost-as-stain sheds light on a variety of Shakespearean smudges. If we reconsider the numerous bloody cloths featured in the plays, we realize that their red spots generally correspond to black spots betraying the gazers’ lacunae and not-so-blissful ignorance. From this point of view, spots in Shakespeare are loci of truth only visible to clear-sighted viewers, i.e. attentive spectators. The playwright cunningly provides them with a liminal space bridging the gap between the objective and the subjective, the body and the mind, the outside and the inside, which allows them to feel superior to blinded and gullible characters.

One could probably go as far as to say that, besides Hamlet’s ghost, Shakespeare created a number of bit parts which truly function as theatrical stains. Stephen Greenblatt focuses on Barnadine in Measure for Measure, a character who stubbornly refuses to die and who can be regarded as an “individual” who “makes his mark on the play — or better perhaps, given his moral and physical nature, his smudge”. Other examples may come to mind, such as the rustic Costard who, in Love’s Labour’s Lost, has sex with the dairymaid in spite of the King of Navarre’s edict forbidding any contact with women, or the bastard Edmund who, in King Lear, by any means whatsoever, desperately tries to come into being in a primitive, patriarchal society that banishes bastards. For better or worse, they all endeavour to “make their marks” on the plays by obliging the spectator to look obliquely at the margins.

Mud stains

So, stains in Shakespeare can neither be ignored nor interpreted in a cut-and-dried way. Rather than signalling ordinary pollution or corruption in a moral sense, they testify to the complexity of man’s thinking and acting processes. Leaving their marks on page and stage, they provide poetic and dramatic access points, be they caused by writing practices (ink), violent deeds (blood), or a close proximity with nature (mud). If we consider the word “soil”, for instance, it designates, as Holophernes puts it, the “face of terra” (Love’s Labour’s Lost, 4.2.7), while also referring, as a verb, to the action of sullying (from the Latin suculus, “little pig”). These two very different meanings could be used in a combined, polysemic way. When, at the beginning of 1 Henry IV, the King declares that “[n]o more the thirsty entrance of this soil / Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood” (1.1.5-6), he alludes to the soil as a synonym for “ground” and, by extension, for the English nation as a whole. Yet the presence of the verb “daub” in the following line suggests that “soil” is also here to be associated with dirt. The King actually mentions a great nation which, for lack of peace, has been tarnished and turned into a muddy hell.
This image must have struck the Elizabethan spectators who themselves often lived in a filthy environment. Bruce R. Smith reminds us that London’s streets, not being cobbled, must have been rather muddy. He relies for this on the testimony of the Italian ambassador Orsino Busino who attended a mob scene “in Cheapside during the Lord Mayor’s Show in November 1617”. Reporting on the scene, Busino depicts a Spaniard whose “garments were foully smeared with a sort of soft and very stinking mud, which abound here at all seasons, so that the place deserves to be called Lorda (filth) rather than Londra (London)”. Such a description suggests, if anything, that “there was plenty of sound-absorbing mud at hand”. As a result, in sheer contrast to the purity of the celestial spheres, dirty, murky London must have sometimes looked like hell on earth to strangers and visitors.

While, for the Greeks, mud was a substance often used in purification rituals, it was commonly associated with simple dirt in the early modern period. In 2 Henry VI, for example, spots and mud are closely associated when the Duke of Gloucester ironically declares:

A heart unspotted is not easily daunted.  
The purest spring is not so free from mud  
As I am clear from treason to my sovereign. (3.1.100-102, my emphases)

Another especially “soft” and “glutinous” type of mud referring to “alluvial ooze”, namely “slime” (OED 1.a), could also be connected with filth. In Othello, the titular character betrays his blind faithfulness to Iago in the following terms: “An honest man he is, and hates the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2.155-156). Other occurrences of the term link it with death, as in Clarence’s dream in Richard III, when the heir to the throne imagines himself drowning and reaching “the slimy bottom of the deep” (1.4.32). Yet “slime” was also synonymous with fertility, as in Antony and Cleopatra where it is interchangeable with the word “mud” and proves both fruitful and destructive.

As noted by Dan Brayton, “[s]lime matters in Shakespeare, as a mediating term between living and inanimate objects”. While this evidently applies to Antony and Cleopatra, I suggest that, first and foremost, in this particular play, the slime and ooze of the Nile serves to materialize the moral “spots” of the two title parts. In act 1, scene 4, Lepidus tries to absolve Anthony from his faults as Caesar blames the latter for his permanent stay in Alexandria: “[Anthony’s] faults in him seem as the spots of heaven” (1.4.12). Later on, an infuriated Antony wishes Cleopatra were taken prisoner and exhibited to the plebeians, forced to “[f]ollow [Caesar’s] chariot like the greatest spot / of all [her] sex” (4.12.35-36). Yet beyond that, the Egyptian soil gives us an insight into the very principles of life in the east. In the play’s opening scene, a defiant Antony exclaims:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space!  
Kingdoms are clay! Our dungy earth alike  
Feeds beast as man. […] (1.1.34-37)

For an early modern audience, the image of the “dungy earth” must have contributed to refamiliarize Egypt as a version of rainy, muddy England. As opposed to the “new heaven” (1.1.17) mentioned a few lines before, “clay” is what the Roman general must be satisfied with. Yet more importantly, Antony also refers, in his speech, to some sort of generative matrix levelling all living creatures. Now, the idea that putrefaction was the very principle of nutrition must have rung a bell for the literati, since it was borrowed from Aristotle’s theory of spontaneous generation. For Gabriel Egan, this overdetermined
presence of an oozy fruitfulness makes love appear superior to mere fecundity since “the Earth’s reproductive principle generates food”, while Antony and Cleopatra’s “coupling is something better because non-reproductive”. The muddy Nile would thus embody a reality principle, namely that of reproduction, against the pleasure principle blindly and selfishly followed by the two lovers. Of course, the association between the Nile and the idea of creation was not new. In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser also evokes the fecundity of the Nile as he compares the birth of Belphoebe and Amoret to the myriad creatures born from the mud: “So after Nilus inundation, / Infinite shapes of creatures men do fynd, / Informed in the mud, on which the Sunne hath shynd”. Yet, “this analogy also recalls the repugnance of Error’s brood” which Spenser links to the ooze of the Nile. This parallel between mud and error is often found in other texts of the period. Therefore, for an early modern audience, the muddy ground of Alexandria in Shakespeare’s tragedy must also have symbolized the upside down, confused relationship of Antony and Cleopatra. Indeed, disruption soon becomes general in Alexandria where the lovers inhabit a riparian area between land and water and where, as a result, they never find the firm ground and grip that would allow them to avoid the “quicksands” (2.7.58) of their unstable union.

Yet the slimy banks of the Nile do not only generate negative feelings and meanings. Fundamentally linked to the feminine element and to Cleopatra’s metamorphic and acting skills, the slime is endowed with the power to sully and smear as much as to shape and give birth. In fact, the muddy, overflowing Nile depicted by Shakespeare is to be placed against an Epicurean background in order to be correctly understood. In Lucretius’ poem *De rerum natura*, life is indeed presented like a flux in which “the primal particles of things / Are all in motion”.

Beyond the agricultural information they provide, these erotically loaded lines point to the intense physical relationships of the two title parts. Yet the word “seedsman” also suggests another interpretative track. The English word used as an equivalent for the Greek *atomoi* was then the word “seeds”, and it is worth noting that, against all odds, Lucretius himself never resorted to the word *atomus* in his *De rerum natura*, where the atoms are called *semina rerum* (“the seeds of things”). So, in Shakespeare, seeds and, by extension, grains and germens, can often be perceived as half-veiled allusions to the atomist doctrine. Read in an Epicurean perspective, the passage quoted above reveals the world as both evanescent and placed in a constant de- and re-composition process. The “grain[s]” mentioned by Antony refer to the atoms composing the universe of pagan Alexandria, i.e. the void/nihil of Egypt’s atmosphere. Seen in this way, the ooze of the Nile is neither debasing nor destructive. It simultaneously shapes and dissolves things and beings alike, melting and changing them as swiftly as the clouds in the sky. Like the writer’s ink, this mud is the material element that allows poetry to come to life. The
seedsman scattering his grains in the mud is therefore no mere harvester; he is also the embodiment of the poet playing with words and filling up the void/nihil of the page.

**Conclusion: a poetics of stains**

For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets and playwrights, copulation and/or corruption were the underlying images behind numerous references to stains. Yet, to reduce spots and smears to a debasing meaning would not do justice to the complexity of Shakespeare’s poetic language.

First, they point to the material conditions of writing in the early modern era, at a time when crossing and blotting out were the only quick and convenient techniques to remove words suddenly become, for whatever reason, undesirable. Removing ink by scratching it with a knife was difficult and could damage the paper. These erasures, however, blissfully preserve what they were originally meant to delete.

Moreover, from an interpretative viewpoint, if the spots mentioned in many of Shakespeare’s plays and poems can frequently be understood as permanent signs of wrongdoing, they are also linked with sin and short-sightedness, and this leads us to an uncharted territory—or, say, a poorly charted one. They are, so to speak, blind spots which materialize trauma and prove strikingly anamorphic. Like the Lacanian stain in Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, they resist dramatic integration and force the viewers to look awry in order to get a complete grasp of the scene under their eyes.

Eventually, spots, stains and slime empower the spectator/reader by making him/her a spontaneously active participant in the creative process, whatever his/her degree of education. In the Introduction to this essay, I already noticed that spots are never successfully cleaned off in Shakespeare’s works. We have now seen that the playwright prefers to point to an impossible purification, making it clear that stains cannot and must not be erased because art, theatrical art in particular, is itself hybrid and impure. If for Erasmus, stains or “clouds” on a wall were “most similar to nothing” and proved therefore “too unsubstantial to be expressed by colors”; for Lucretius, Da Vinci and Shakespeare alike, such “nothing” was the stuff of human imagination and artistic freedom. In Shakespeare’s plays and poems, therefore, the stains, like the clouds in the sky, become meaningful loci for literary creation. They generate consciously derived images allowing the poet to bind dreams to reality, thus making poetry originate from and be shaped by these ink/blood/mud stains that smudge both page and stage.

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**NOTES**


7. See Hamlet’s monologue “O that this too solid flesh would melt” (1.2.129). Whether Hamlet alludes here to the flesh that has become soiled or to the solidity of the flesh remains an open debate. The Folio gives “solid”. The word “sullied”, which neither appears in the Folio nor in the Quartos, was first proposed by John Dover Wilson in the Cambridge edition of the play published in 1934.

8. See 1.3.195; 3.2.77; 4.1.226; 4.1.315; and 5.3.64.


16. I refer here to the 1572 act regulating the “Punishment of Vagabonds and the Relief of the Poor and Impotent” by which the actors who were not licensed were threatened with whipping and branding.


20. The first example recorded for this particular meaning dates back to 1557.

21. For more on Gertrude “grainèd spots”, see below, paragraphs 28 and 29.


23. In this regard, Mitchell M. Harris explains that “[b]lood, in the stead of vermilion (a word that Shakespeare uses in Sonnet 98 to describe red), also was a constitutive element of some red ink recipes”. See Mitchell M. Harris, “The Expense of Ink and Wastes of Shame”, in *The Materiality of Colour*, ed. cit., p. 72.


25. Ibid.


28. On this commonplace, see Wendy Wall, “Reading for the Blot: Textual Desire in Early Modern English Literature”, in *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare*, ed. David M. Bergeron, Newark University of Delaware Press, 1996, p. 131-159 (p. 132): “the writer is always already masculinized, the pen symbolically the phallus, and the page a virgin female. As Renaissance readers interpret the writing, they embed the physical text in an erotic terminology that defines the condition of reading and writing as scandalous; the page marks a site of wayward inscription and illicit mixing [...]”.


33. Ibid.


35. See Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011. Healey shows that, in this context, the word “stain” is endowed with the alchemical meaning of “the unclean matter of the stone, which had to be purified in the philosophical fire” (p. 73).


40. Lucretius, *op. cit.*, Book IV, l. 132, p. 133.


48. By “fetishized item”, I refer to an object which whose significance is over-interpreted and sexualised by the masculine gaze.

49. According to the OED, this meaning was already in use during the thirteenth century.


51. See also George Chapman, *Bussy d’Ambois* [1607], ed. N.S. Brooke, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999; “Tamyra [to Bussy] So confident a spotless conscience is; / So weak a guilty: O the dangerous siege / Sin lays about us!” (3.1.8-10).

52. See also George Chapman, *Bussy d’Ambois*, ibid. “Tamyra O happy woman! Comes my stain from him?” (4.1.173). Tamyra’s is the stain of luxuriousness.

53. Abraham Fleming, for instance, testifies to this possibility: “The waie of all flesh remembred, as it is rehearsed, the hearts of men by litte and litte must nees growe into a misliking of sinne. For as to haue a looking glasse before thy face, and therin to take a view of thy phisiognomie, is a present and readie waie to make thee see anie blemish, wart, speckle, freckle, mole, staine, spot, or wrinkle in thy countenance, and to amend and reforme it, if it be not naturall, and brought euene from the verie cradle [...]” (my emphasis). See Abraham Fleming, *The diamond of deuotion*, London, Printed by Henrie Denham, 1581, STC (2nd ed.) / 11041, chap. 9, p. 43.

55. The phrase was used by T. S. Eliot in “Hamlet and his Problems” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1960, p. 100.
60. Here, by “biased”, I mean both “prejudiced” and “oblique”, since etymologically, the noun “bias” comes from the French *biais* signifying “awry”.
69. Indeed, the hell-like vision of London often stemmed from satirists and foreign travellers. For a more nuanced approach to the city’s filthiness, see Mark Jenner, “The Prevention and Cure of Plague” in *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680*, ed. Andrew Wear, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 317 (314-52). Incidentally, hell is particularly muddy in Chapman’s *Bussy d’Amboise*: “Guise D’Ambois is pardon’d: where’s a King? Where law? / See how it runs, much like a turbulent sea; / Here high, and glorious, as it did contend / To wash the heavens, and make the stars more pure: / And here so low, it leaves the mud of hell / To every common view […]” (2.2.24-29).
71. Mud could also connote ugliness. See Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*: “A woman moved is like a fountain troubled, / Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty” (5.2.147-148).
72. See 2.7.26-27: “Lepidus Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun; […]”; and 5.2.56-57: “Cleopatra […] rather on Nилus’ mud / Lay me stark naked […]”.
74. The *OED* records the first usage of the adjective “dungy” as meaning “[o]f the nature of dung; abounding in dung” (*OED*, 1) in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It must therefore have caught the audience’s attention, even though it had been known as a synonym for “foul or filthy” or “vile, defiling” (*OED*, 2) since the fifteenth century. Still according to the *OED*, “dung” had been used to designate the “excrementitious and decayed matter employed to fertilize the soil” since the eleventh century.
75. In the very English forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania complains that the “nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud” (2.1.98), for instance, and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mistress Ford alludes to a “muddy ditch close by the Thames' side” (3.3.13).

76. For a similar contrast, see *The Merchant of Venice* where Lorenzo declares in act 5, scene 1: “Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven / Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold: / There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st / But in his motion like an angel sings, / [...]; / Such harmony is in immortal souls; / But whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it”.


81. By contrast, in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser sees the slimy Nile as masculine: “As when old father Nilus gins to swell / [...] His fattie waves do fertile slime outwell” (I.i.21.1-3).

82. Lucretius, *op. cit.*, Book II, l. 308-309, p. 54.

83. See Jonathan Pollock, “Of Mites and Motes: Shakespearean Readings of Epicurean Science”, in *Spectacular Science, Technology and Superstition in the Age of Shakespeare*, eds. Sophie Chiari and Mickaël Popelard, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, p. 119-132 (p. 123-124). Pollock reminds us that “[w]hen referring to ‘the school of Leucippus and Democritus and Epicurus’ in his essay ‘Of Atheism’, Francis Bacon will follow Lucretius’ example and translate *atomoi* by ‘seeds’: he can scarcely believe ‘that an army of infinite small portions or seeds unplaced should have produced this order and beauty without a divine marshal’”.

84. See for instance Lucretius, *op. cit.*, Book II, p. 46. R. C. Trevelyan writes “primordial atoms” (l. 80) or “primal atoms” (l. 91).


87. On this, see Theseus’s speech at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “[...] And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name” (5.1.14-17).
Spots, stains and smears keep recurring in Shakespeare’s plays and poems, where they often appear as the marks of sin, evil and violence. While this is undoubtedly the case in a number of occurrences, I argue here that these polluted sites of exploration also allow a deeper understanding of Shakespeare’s poetics since, in the early modern period, smears were often linked to the creative process. This article first explores “patched” texts as well as ink and bloodstains in the context of writing practices, before proceeding with an analysis of dramatic spots and stains to show that, if “stains” often implied sexual violence, “spots” were more specifically connected to sin and soul, even though the meanings of the two words sometimes overlapped. In this context, I suggest that Old Hamlet’s ghost, who materializes Hamlet’s doubts and trauma on stage, is not just one of Shakespeare’s great theatrical stunts but also a major dramatic stain. In the last section, I address smears as slime and ooze in *Antony and Cleopatra*, seen from the perspective of Lucretian philosophy. Egypt’s mud both defiles and revives through the Nile’s powers of regeneration. Like the clouds in the sky, this constant process of de/re-composition provides an analogy for Shakespeare’s writing process. Marked by stains and impurity, the playwright’s poetics reveals its textual fabric to be simultaneously soiled and sublimated by its blots and spots.

Les taches, souillures et autres salissures reviennent souvent dans les pièces et les poèmes de Shakespeare où elles sont généralement le signe du péché, du mal et de la violence. Si la plupart des occurrences renvoient à ce symbolisme négatif, j’entends démontrer que ces lieux emblématiques de pollution permettent, de par leur ambivalence, de dévoiler certains aspects de la poétique shakespearienne, les taches, aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles, étant aussi fréquemment associées à l’activité créatrice. Cet article s’intéresse donc d’abord à la nature irrégulière et imparfaite des textes de la première modernité (souvent décrits par les détracteurs de l’époque comme des « patched texts ») ainsi qu’aux taches de sang et d’encre liées au processus de composition dramatique, avant de prendre en compte la question de la souillure : alors que le mot « stain » implique fréquemment la violence sexuelle, « spot » s’applique davantage au péché et à l’âme, même si ces deux significations fusionnent parfois. Dans ce contexte, je suggère que le fantôme de la tragédie d’*Hamlet*, qui matérialise le doute et le trauma, n’est pas simplement un tour de force théâtral mais aussi une tache, un point aveugle essentiel à la structure de l’œuvre. La dernière partie de l’article est consacrée à la vase, à la boue et au limon, les principales formes de salissure dans *Antoine et Cléopâtre*, qui sont analysées dans une perspective essentiellement lucrétienne. Dans les eaux du Nil en effet, la boue égyptienne est source de souillure autant que de régénération. Comme les nuages dans le ciel qui ne cessent de se décomposer pour mieux se recomposer, la boue détruit et recrée et elle offre ainsi une analogie éclairante du procédé d’écriture shakespearien, qui décompose et recompose sans cesse la matière textuelle. La poétique shakespearienne, marquée au sceau de l’impureté, se révèle en fin de compte à la fois souillée et sublimée par les nombreuses taches ou macules qu’elle porte en elle.
INDEX

**Keywords:** blots, clouds, ink, mud, William Shakespeare, slime, smear, soil, stain, writing practices

**Mots-clés:** taches, nuages, encre, boue, William Shakespeare, moississure, souillure, flétrissure, terreau, salissure, pratiques d’écriture

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