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THE ROADS TO ROME

Shakespeare's conception of ancient Rome has long been a focal point in the larger debate concerning his classical learning. This debate began in earnest with Jonson's notorious aphorism imputing to Shakespeare "small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*" (1623), but hints of it appear earlier. The first printed allusion to Shakespeare, Robert Greene's attack on the "vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers" (1592), expressed the indignation of a university man at the pretensions of a less-educated rival.¹ And in *The Return from Parnassus, Part 2* (performed ca. 1600, pub. 1606), William Kemp humorously praised Shakespeare for outdoing those who "smell too much of that writer *Ouid*, and that writer *Metamorphosis*, and talke too much of *Proserpina* & *Iuppiter*." The debate, ably documented elsewhere, continued throughout the centuries and attracted luminaries to both sides.² In 1664, for example, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, admired the verisimilitude of the Roman plays, where fancy, it seemed, almost out-worked nature:

& certainly *Julius Caesar*, *Augustus Caesar*, and *Antonius*,
 did never Really Act their parts Better, if so Well, as he
 hath Described them, and I believe that *Antonius* and
Brutus did not Speak Better to the People, than he hath
 Feign'd them; nay, one would think that he had been
 Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could
 Describe *Cleopatra* Better than he hath done.³

¹Evans, Appendix B, "Records, Documents, and Allusions," p. 1835. The quotation below appears on p. 1838.

²See Baldwin, Vol. I, pp. 1–74; John W. Velz, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition: A Critical Guide to Commentary, 1660–1960* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), pp. 3–13; and his "The Ancient World in Shakespeare: Authenticity or Anachronism? A Retrospect," *ShS*, 31 (1978), 1–12.

³Evans, p. 1847.

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Others, including John Dennis and Richard Farmer, noted inaccuracies, collected anachronisms, and scoffed. The controversy goes on in our century. In 1952 a classicist, J. A. K. Thomson, reviewed the evidence and concluded solemnly that Shakespeare was “no scholar.”⁴ In 1976, however, Paul A. Cantor based his *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* on the assumption that the Roman plays provide “an opportunity to learn something about Rome as well as about Shakespeare.”⁵

Although the debate about Shakespeare's learning continues, “the ground of argument has shifted in the twentieth century,” according to one chronicler, John W. Velz.⁶ Since the time of M. W. MacCallum's *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background* (1910), students of Shakespeare's classicism have paid increasing attention to the Elizabethan and Jacobean context of his work. Instead of imposing modern notions of the classical world on Shakespeare, an impressive group of scholars has sought to discover contemporary ideas about the ancients. Robert Kilburn Root and Douglas Bush have traced the highways and byways behind Shakespeare's use of classical mythology. T. W. Baldwin, with daunting thoroughness, has studied Elizabethan school curricula and their possible influence on Shakespeare. Virgil K. Whitaker has explored the connections between Shakespeare's learning and his development as a dramatist. T. J. B. Spencer has illuminated contemporary attitudes toward ancient Greeks and Romans. Kenneth Muir and Geoffrey Bullough have reclaimed source study as a legitimate and potentially valuable interest and constructed a solid foundation for future scholarship. Reuben A. Brower has perceptively analyzed the commingling of classical and Christian in Shakespeare's England and in his works. And Emrys Jones has contributed stimulating studies of Shakespeare's imaginative processes and origins.⁷

⁴*Shakespeare and the Classics* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1952), passim.

⁵Cantor, p. 7.

⁶“Ancient World in Shakespeare,” p. 3.

⁷Root, *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare*, Yale Studies in English, No. 19 (New York: Holt, 1903); Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1963); Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry into the Growth of His Mind and Art* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1953); Spencer, “‘Greeks’ and ‘Merrygreeks’: A Back-

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In the intense light of these efforts it seems clear that some consideration of Elizabethan classicism should preface consideration of Shakespeare's Rome. Review of the standard sources and methods of classical learning in the period can illuminate the playwright's intentions and achievements. Surveying the substance and methods of English humanism will not, to be sure, guarantee understanding or appreciation of Shakespeare's art; it may, however, direct criticism by guarding against anachronistic misreading and by pointing out likely possibilities.



The roads to Rome in the Renaissance were many, winding, and various. Although they often ran concurrently, the major routes were well marked, and the most widely traveled one was probably that of the grammar schools. T. W. Baldwin has shown that elementary education included study of the *Disticha Moralia*, Terence, Plautus, Seneca, Cicero, Quintilian, *Ad Herennium*, Ovid, Vergil, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, and possibly Lucan and Catullus. The texts were often colored by commentary – grammatical, moral, or both – and accompanied by collections, that is, anthologies of memorable snippets and shavings culled from various sources. A schoolboy learned to parse his Latin, for example, by working with Leonhardus Culmannus's *Sententiae Pueriles* or the *Sententiae Ciceronis*. He learned to speak the mother tongue by memorizing phrases and sentences from collections of conversations (colloquia) or from florilegia. Later on, he modeled the substance and style of his prose on a Latin translation of Aphthonius, with reference to the *Adagia* of Desiderius Erasmus or the *Apothegms* of Conrad Lycosthenes. For verse he imitated the ex-

ground to *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*," in *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962), pp. 223–33; also his "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans," *ShS*, 10(1957), 27–38; Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources I: Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Methuen, 1957), revised and reprinted as *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); also his *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

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amples of Octavian Mirandula's *Flores Poetarum* with assistance from Simon Pelegromius's *Synonymorum Sylva* or Ravisius Textor's *Epitheta*. He probably supplemented his reading of Roman historians with a handbook on the order of Thomas Godwin's later *Romanae Historiae Anthologia* (1614); he sometimes resorted to Valerius Maximus, compiler of famous deeds and men, or to Florus, the epitomator. The study of moral philosophy, of course, was implicit in the whole enterprise, from the elementary sayings of Cato and Cicero on up, but there were numerous and hectic moral compendia available in Latin and English. William Baldwin's *A Treatise of Morall Philosophy* (1547, reprinted often with revisions and additions) was widely read, probably because it resembled neither a treatise of morals nor of philosophy.

Such a diversity of texts so variously presented could hardly have indoctrinated the student in the glories of Roman civilization or in the turpitude of the pagan ethos. Rome was much too vast and amorphous for simplistic reductions. The tendency to acquire classical learning by means of exuberantly miscellaneous collections characterized the age and worked against the development of any single political, theological, or historical perspective. *Copia*, not coherence, was the ideal that governed English humanism. And because rhetoric broadly defined, rather than history or philosophy, dominated the curricula, students learned to take a polemical approach to the classics, to watch for usable exempla, arguments, and rhetorical flourishes, and to record them in notebooks for future use. The reassessment and reconsideration of antiquity, as T. J. B. Spencer notes, was a common activity and a deeply ingrained habit of mind.⁸

The ideal of *copia* is evident in the second major source of classical learning – the growing number of English translations. Shakespeare relied on Englished classics throughout his career and in his Roman works made use of Golding's Ovid, North's Plutarch, W. B.'s Appian, possibly Heywood's *Thyestes* (for *Titus Andronicus*), Holland's Livy (for *Coriolanus*), and Underdowne's Heliodorus (for *Cymbeline*). His preference for Ovid's mythological treasury, Plutarch's moral and anecdotal history, and Appian's lively and readable chronicle mark him as a man of his time. For

⁸“Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans,” p. 33.

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Elizabethans demanded from their classics a generous supply of myth and an abundance of entertaining fact.⁹ In such a climate florilegia flourished; there appeared in translation bouquets from Ovid and Terence, as well as whole gardens of classical flowers: Richard Taverner's *The Garden of Wyshedome* (1538), for example; Erasmus's *Adagia* in Taverner's translation (1539); his *Apophthegmata* in Nicholas Udall's translation (1542); Timothy Kendall's *Flowers of Epigrammes* (1577). The environment was also hospitable to excerpts, abridgments, and epitomes. Polybius, Lucan, Caesar, Plutarch, and Livy all appeared in partial English versions. To be sure, there were classical scholars of great learning – men such as Thomas Drant, Henry Savile, Thomas Wilson, and the prolific Philemon Holland.¹⁰ Yet, these men were exceptions in the age of the amateur translator, the age whose critical temper is best illustrated by William Painter's well-read *Palace of Pleasure* (1566–7). This anthology of Continental *nouvelle* and classical story satisfied in one serving the public appetite for ancient anecdote, romantic intrigue, and lurid adventure. The miscellany of sources behind Painter's forty-one classical stories reveals the gloriously slapdash character of Elizabethan classicism: "Herodotus (two stories); Aelian (three); Plutarch's *Morals* (one); Aulus Gellius (twelve); Livy (eight); Quintus Curtius (three); Xenophon (one); Pedro Mexia (two); Guevara's *Letters* (three); Bandello (six)."¹¹

A third major source of classical learning, one that catered largely to the public demand for quick information, was the various reference books of the Renaissance. The popular mythographies of Giovanni Boccaccio, Lilius Giraldus, Natalis Comes, and Vincenzo Cartari¹² begot English offspring: Stephan Batman, *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Goddes* (1577); Abraham Fraunce, *The Third Part of the Countesse of Pembrokes Yuychurch* (1592); and Richard Linche, *The Fovntaine of Ancient Fiction* (1599). Related to these handbooks in content and influence were the

⁹See Henry Burrowes Lathrop, *Translations from the Classics into English from Caxton to Chapman, 1477–1620* (1933; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1967).

¹⁰I rely here on Lathrop, *Translations*, especially p. 232.

¹¹Bush, *Mythology*, p. 33.

¹²Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (14th cent.); Giraldus, *De Deis Gentium* (1548); Comes, *Mythologiae; sive, Explicationum Fabularum* (1551); Cartari, *Le Imagine, con la Spositione de i Dei degli Antichi* (1556).

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dictionaries of Sir Thomas Elyot, Thomas Cooper, and the Stephani (Robert and Charles), works that apparently everyone used, including Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood, and John Milton.¹³ The quintessential Renaissance reference book – the encyclopedia – borrowed from various traditions and gathered information into vast, sometimes accessible summaries of human learning. Such works as Pierre Charron's *Of Wisdome* (1606) and Pierre de La Primaudaye's *The French Academie* (1618) crammed classical lore, legend, fact, and fiction into essays that addressed an astonishingly diverse range of topics.

Living after the labors of Diderot in an age of computerized bibliography, many today may entertain misconceptions about the nature of Renaissance encyclopedias. Typically, such volumes gathered in one place essays on subjects as far apart as the Creation, the vices of Heliogabalus, and the unique properties of bulls' blood. Some, such as the works of Charron and La Primaudaye, were organized after a fashion and showed signs of a guiding intelligence and purpose; others were not. An instructive example of the disorganized type is Pedro Mexía's Spanish compilation, *Silva de Varia Lecion* (1542), which achieved translation and popularity on the Continent as well as in England. An abridged and Englished version of Mexía's work appeared as *The Foreste* (1571, 1576), translated by Thomas Fortescue from a French version. Much of *The Foreste*, along with much else of Mexía, reappeared in the first volume of Thomas Milles's *The Treasurie of Avncient and Moderne Times* (1613), translated largely from French and Italian versions. This book clearly illustrates the motley abundance of Renaissance classicism as well as Elizabethan willingness to use intermediary translations. Here biographical sketches (e.g., Polybius 4:32; Tamberlaine 7:2) and stories about ancient lives and works (Plutarch 1:19; Diogenes 3:7) sit quite comfortably with unrelated chapters on history, both civil (Sparta 2:3; Athens 2:4) and ecclesiastical (Popes 1:27; Heresies 6:14). Travelogs describe such exotic lands as Persia (4:1), Fez (6:1), and Moscovia (7:34); moral essays strike closer to home, reminding the reader of his duties (Manhood 3:11; Prodigality

¹³Here I rely upon De Witt T. Starnes and Ernest William Talbert, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

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8:20). Essays in the sciences – natural (Honey 3:15; Crocodiles 5:31; Gold 8:30), medical (Melancholy 5:26; Dangerous Years 4:16), and political (Monarchy 8:33; Foreign Civil Wars 9:9) – do not dilute the effects of the abounding mirabilia (Man 3:8; Marvelous Things 9:30). An allegorical description of Charon (2:23), paradoxes (4:38; 7:43; 8:38), moral tales (8:15), and romantic tragedies (7:46) round out the collection. The range of purposes and historical methods here may be illustrated by comparison of the chapter on Ancient Rome (3:1), a detailed and objective description of civil institutions running thirty folio pages, with the brief account of the legendary maiden of Poictu (6:8), who reportedly lived for three years without food or drink.

At the turn of the century the Elizabethan who studied Latin sententiae in school, who browsed through translations as they appeared, or who came upon intriguing Roman examples in the pages of reference books could easily acquire further information from numerous chronicles and biographies. Livy and Tacitus told the story of Rome in the original language and in translation; Saint Augustine and Orosius offered a Christian reading of the history and achievements of the Earthly City. Polybius, Velleius Paterculus, Pomponius Mela, Lucan, Josephus, Pliny, Aulus Gellius, Solinus, Aelianus, Eutropius, and Ammianus Marcellinus also provided occasional commentary. Holinshed's *Chronicles* contained information on Roman–British relations in antiquity, as did other histories of Britain. Some English writers were more intent on boiling Roman history down to a tasteless porridge of platitudes on the horror of rebellion, the punishment of pride, the necessity of obedience or monarchy. William Fulbecke's *An Historicall Collection of the Continvall Factions, Tumults, and Massacres of the Romans and Italians* (1601) is a clear example of the type.¹⁴ Biographical information was available in the histories

¹⁴Cf. Richard Reynoldes, *A Chronicle of All the Noble Emperours of the Romaines* (1571). J. Leeds Barroll, "Shakespeare and Roman History," *MLR*, 53 (1958), 327–43 (335–6), considers briefly other Elizabethan chronicles of Rome (I list first editions only): Thomas Lanquet, *Epitome of Cronicles* (1549); John Sleidan, *Brief Chronicle of the Foure Principall Empires*, trans. Stephen Wythers (1563); Lodowick Lloid, *The Consent of Time* (1590); John Carion, *Thre Bokes of Cronicles*, trans. Walter Lynne (1550); Joseph Ben Gorion, *A Compendious and Most Marueilous Historie* (1558); the first part of Richard Grafton's *Chronicle at Large and Meere History* (1569); David Lyndsay, *The*

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themselves and in the works of Plutarch and Suetonius. A popular form of pseudobiography was the collecting of wise men's sayings. This subgenre of "dictes," according to D. T. Starnes, began in England with Walter Burley's *De Vita* and William Caxton's *Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres* (1477) and continued (sometimes indirectly) in similar compilations by Erasmus, Sir Thomas Elyot, William Baldwin, Nicholas Ling, Robert Allott, John Bodenham, Thomas Floyd, Henry Crosse, and Francis Bacon.¹⁵

As every student knows, the literature of England rooted itself in classical examples and blossomed with classical allusions. Sometimes the *imitatio* is bold and blatant; sometimes it is subtle and implicit – *ut intelligi simile queat potius quam dici*, "so that the likeness can be sensed rather than defined."¹⁶ Whatever the form, imitation of classical models is pervasive and transformative. Prose writers such as Thomas Lodge, Philip Sidney, and Robert Greene, for example, breathed new life into Greek romances; William Painter and George Pettie diluted old wine and poured it into new bottles. Every poet, it seems, from the plodding undergraduate versifier to the brilliant and courtly Edmund Spenser, busied himself with imitations of Horace, Vergil, or Ovid. And some, more strictly meditating the thankless Muse, tried to fit their native English to classical meters. No form of literature was more steeped in classical example than the drama. The use of classical subjects and conventions in the plays of Nicholas Udall, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, William Shakespeare,

Monarche (Edinburgh, 1552); Arthur Kelton, *A Chronycle with a Genealogie* (1547); *Romes Monarchie*, trans. E. L. (1596); Giovanni Botero, *Observations*, trans. B. J. B. (1602).

¹⁵ "Sir Thomas Elyot and 'Sayings of the Philosophers,'" *Texas University Studies in English*, 13 (1933), 5–35. Starnes gives the titles and dates of first editions as follows: Erasmus, *Apophthegmes* (1531); Elyot, *The Bankett of Sapience* (1539); Baldwin, *A Treatise of Morall Philosophy* (1547); Ling (?), *Politeuphuia or Wits Commonwealth* (1597–8); Allott (?), *Wits Theater of the Little World* (1599); Bodenham, *Belvédère, or the Garden of the Muses* (1600); Floyd, *The Picture of a Perfit Commonwealth* (1600); Crosse, *Vertues Commonwealth* (1603); Bacon, *Apophthegmes New and Old* [1625].

¹⁶ I quote from a letter of Petrarch reprinted in Thomas M. Greene's "Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic," in *Italian Literature: Roots and Branches, Essays in Honor of Thomas Goddard Bergin*, ed. Giose Rimaneli and Kenneth John Atchity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 211.

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Ben Jonson, and George Chapman is well known, but the cumulative importance of classical elements to English drama defies tabulation. Harbage and Schoenbaum's *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700* records, on the average, the appearance of at least one classical drama for every year of Shakespeare's life.¹⁷ And according to Clifford J. Ronan, no fewer than forty-three Roman plays survive from the period 1588–1651.¹⁸

The ubiquity of the classical presence in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature should humble any surveyor of English humanism. The effort to chart the main courses of classical learning in the Renaissance must end by soberly acknowledging the magnitude of the source material and the incalculable variety of the conduits. The routes of classical learning were crisscrossed at every point by auxiliary roads and bypaths. Miscellaneous sources abounded, each with its own coloration and perspective. In addition to those noted above, there were medieval works by William Caxton, John Lydgate, John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer, as well as the *Gesta Romanorum*. Also pervasive and influential was the classical learning contained in various mirrors, emblem books, cosmographies, biblical commentaries, homilies, political treatises, theological debates, and works of art – paintings, tapestries, and statues. The figure of Hercules holding up the world at Shakespeare's Globe images the vital and supportive relationship of the classics to Elizabethan culture.

After even so brief a survey several observations seem reasonable. The prevailing attitude toward the classics in England was enthusiastically acquisitive and indiscriminating. The impulse to collect was so forceful as to overwhelm whatever reservations many had about context or accuracy. This impulse was, at bottom, utilitarian. For Elizabethans, ancient authors provided a treasury of practical information on everything from the raising of bees to the attaining of wisdom. Their advice and examples pointed the way to a better, richer, and fuller life. As a result, English classicism came to be ahistorical and eclectic in character, little

¹⁷Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700*, rev. S. Schoenbaum (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).

¹⁸"The 'Antique Roman' in Elizabethan Drama," dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1971.

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concerned with understanding the past on its own terms. Shakespeare's anachronisms are to the point here, evidencing the age's disregard for historical accuracy, at least as we understand the concept. Also pertinent are the classical translations that directly aim at establishing instructive parallels between ancient history and contemporary politics.¹⁹

What is more, English humanism was undogmatic and flexible in character. Writers continually appropriated the same classical figures and incidents to point different (sometimes contradictory) morals and to adorn a wide variety of tales.²⁰ This flexibility bespeaks a deep fascination with classical culture and a serious (though not scholarly) engagement with it. Speaking of the Elizabethan view of ancient Rome, Emrys Jones describes succinctly the origins and nature of this engagement:

Those who had been through a grammar-school had been saturated in the literature of classical Rome. There was an immense amount of learning by rote. Boys who had spent the best part of six long days a week for perhaps as many as ten or eleven years reading, translating, analysing, and explicating Latin literature would have memorized hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lines or scraps of lines from the poets, as well as having innumerable phrases, constructions, and rhythms from the prose writers impressed on their minds. A classical colouring would be cast over everything they read or wrote.²¹

Such early training, continued by innumerable other contacts and experiences, deserves notice and respect. It provided the material,

¹⁹Sir Anthony Cope, for example, translated the story of Hannibal and Scipio from Livy (1544) to embolden Henry VIII and to assist England against its enemies. Thomas Wilson's translation of Demosthenes (1570) incited readers against Philip of Spain, not Philip of Macedon.

²⁰Some of the finest studies of classical backgrounds recognize this diversity: Marilyn L. Williamson, *Infinite Variety: Antony and Cleopatra in Renaissance Drama and Earlier Tradition* (Mystic, Conn.: Lawrence Verry, 1974); Bullough, Vol. V, pp. 3–57. See also Robert Kimbrough, *Shakespeare's "Troilus & Cressida" and Its Setting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 27–39; and Mark Sacharoff, "The Traditions of the Troy-Story Heroes and the Problem of Satire in *Troilus and Cressida*," *ShakS*, 6 (1972 for 1970), 125–35, for discussions of various attitudes toward Troy and Trojans.

²¹*Origins of Shakespeare*, pp. 12–13.