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0521823455 - Shakespeare and the Classics

Edited by Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor

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## Introduction

In his own terms, Ben Jonson was right to remark on his friend's 'small Latine & lesse Greek', for to his eyes a grammar-school education, which may have been incomplete, had clearly left Shakespeare an ill-equipped classicist. If Shakespeare considered it necessary, he could read Latin texts: writing *The Rape of Lucrece* for the Earl of Southampton, he apparently studied the relevant section of Ovid's *Fasti* and also consulted the Latin notes by Paul Marsus in the standard edition; and for *The Comedy of Errors*, for a highly literate audience at the Inns of Court, he seems to have made extensive direct use of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, still untranslated at the time. But it is no coincidence that he could have studied both these works in school. In terms of the authors he used, Shakespeare seldom moved beyond the grammar-school ambit, and even within that ambit, perhaps partly because reading Latin texts clearly involved some effort, he habitually had recourse to available translations. For example, for his favourite Latin work, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, parts of which he demonstrably knew well in the original, he also constantly used Arthur Golding's translation, as well as occasionally dipping into other partial versions such as that provided by Abraham Fraunce in *Amintas Dale*. There is no evidence that his 'lesse Greek' (whatever quite that may mean) enabled any approach to texts in that language; the only Greek author he used heavily, Plutarch, paradoxically for his Roman plays, was accessed via an English translation of a French translation of the Greek text.

Yet ill-equipped as Shakespeare might have seemed to Jonson, if his interests were taken by Roman history or mythology or classical tragedy, he read omnivorously and blended what he had absorbed into his work with awesome power and subtlety. Hybrid though his sources were, if one wants to see, transmuted into English, Ovid's depiction of the swift and silent movement of time, or the magic of the myths of the *Metamorphoses*, or Seneca's defiant, tragic individuality, or Plutarch's study of the array of contradictory tensions within men's characters, not only caught but

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made into something miraculously new, it is to Shakespeare that one must turn. Along with particular features, the general ambience of the Graeco-Roman heritage which inspired the humanists of the Renaissance has been effortlessly absorbed and was explored in Shakespeare's work as never before.

Knowledge of the ancients which the humanists called the *studia humanitatis* informs his work throughout. In *Hamlet* it shapes the values of the 'sweet prince' who is taken from a philosophical and cultured dream of study of all that man might be, to be embroiled in a shuddering confrontation with the sordid reality of what is ugly in human nature. In *The Tempest*, that other embodiment of the humanist dream, the magus Prospero, controlling life on his own private island, finally has to put away his magic to renew his embrace of imperfect humanity, some of which is unrepentant and unshaken in its commitment to evil.

In the view of many scholars the classics were no more useful to Shakespeare than any other literature. This book is predicated on the obverse principle: that the classics are of central importance in Shakespeare's works and in the structure of his imagination. This was the result of the prestige of antiquity, the influence of Renaissance humanism and the character of the educational curriculum (not to mention the quality of the classical texts in their rich medieval and Renaissance receptions). Most time at grammar school was spent reading and writing Latin; if Shakespeare was not a learned man, he had still read a very great deal of Latin by today's standards. Investigating Shakespeare's classicism is thus not simply a matter of locating 'sources' (something already well done by T. W. Baldwin and others) but of showing how he was enabled by a variety of classical books to explore such crucial areas of human experience as love, politics, ethics, and history.

Our volume, while not attempting to provide any kind of survey, is designed as an early port of call for anyone interested in Shakespeare and the classics, including students and their teachers. There is no single book which currently performs this job in an entirely satisfactory way. Although there have been some fine studies of individual aspects of Shakespeare's use of the classics (for example, Jonathan Bate's *Shakespeare and Ovid*), the only attempt to present a rather more comprehensive account in recent years has been *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* by Charles and Michelle Martindale (London and New York 1990). Before that one has to go back to J. A. K. Thomson's rather jejune *Shakespeare and the Classics* in the 1950s. In contrast to the Martindales who opted for a more topic-centred approach, this volume concentrates on individual classical authors and the ways the great poet and dramatist knew and made use of them. Some of

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these he first met in school, Ovid, Virgil, Plautus, possibly Seneca; others like Plutarch (who, along with Lucian, was an author much more admired and widely read in the Renaissance than later) he devoured later as material for the playhouse. Contributors were asked not merely to introduce their subjects but to engage the reader with sophisticated and novel treatments, while not taking previous knowledge for granted.

This volume uses the talents of classical and Shakespearean scholars (some established, some younger and emergent) from the UK, the USA, and Europe. Inevitably it lacks the individually focused vision that a single author could have brought to the task. But multi-authorship has compensating and great advantages. It enables the reader to experience a range of approaches, from New Historicism (Sheen), varieties of feminism (James, Zajko), the poetics of space (Lyne), reception theory (Brown) to more traditional humanistic approaches. No effort has been made to impose an artificial orthodoxy, and the differences of view should spur the reader to further reflection. Thus the book includes numerous exemplary readings of particular instances of intertextuality, reflecting this or that theoretical approach, in such a way that the reader should be encouraged to explore other instances with a different play, or ancient author, or theme.

We begin with an introductory chapter which provides an initial perspective on Shakespeare's classical knowledge, and in which Colin Burrow examines Shakespeare's humanistic culture and suggests that the dynamic in his work derives from a response to its problems and inconsistencies. There follows a series of studies of Shakespeare's use of favourite classical authors and genres. In a book of this kind any organisation will necessarily emphasise some aspects of the subject at the expense of others, and thus have disadvantages as well as advantages. Concentrating on authors has obvious convenience for both reader and contributor, but it must of course always be remembered that often Shakespeare drew on a range of classical writings in combination (Virgil and Ovid in particular are constantly entwined). The structure also embodies a particular ideological belief: an unfoucauldian commitment to the importance of individual authorship and the notion of 'genius' which often accompanies it.<sup>1</sup> Since Latin was of far more moment to Shakespeare than Greek, we start with Roman authors in their approximate order of importance for Shakespeare, Ovid incontestably first, then Virgil and the dramatists. Although after he left school Shakespeare may not have read many words of Greek, Greece and Greek literature have left their mark on his plays, through translations (into Latin and English), through imitations in the vernaculars, and through intermediaries like Erasmus. Comparatively little work has been done on Shakespeare's Greek, so the

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chapters on Plutarch, the romances, and Greek drama will help to fill out the picture of Shakespeare's classicism currently available.

Michael Silk's essay on Shakespeare and Greek tragedy (often compared, though Shakespeare had probably had no direct encounter even with Euripides, the best known of the dramatists at the time) leads smoothly to the two chapters which deal, by way of conclusion and in necessarily synecdochal fashion, with the reception of Shakespeare's classicism, and explore some important moments in this vital ongoing process. In this way we highlight the issue of Shakespeare's classicism within the wider perspective of reception. This is an integral part of the project as we have conceived it. We want readers to be aware of the limitations of the positivism which (despite frequent protestations to the contrary) still holds sway in source studies, since we believe that the processes of interpretation and reception are always implicated in each other in a form of continuing dialogue. For example, Shakespeare used Plutarch among other ancient writers in constructing his view of Rome; that view in turn nourished subsequent literature, criticism, and culture in a way that affected later responses to Shakespeare's Rome, including ours. Thus the relationship between Shakespeare and the classics, it could be said, has been created as much as simply discovered by later writers. Part of the book's function is to get away from the idea that the dramatist's classicism is primarily a matter of sources, references, allusions. Rather, as the final essay shows, there is a far deeper interrelationship between 'Shakespeare' and 'Antiquity' (where 'Shakespeare' means 'all the forces that created the plays and their reception'). Though this chapter concludes the volume, it does not seek to impose closure: the relationship between Shakespeare and the classics has not yet run its course.

Documentation and full bibliographical details will be found in the notes to individual chapters. The bibliography is not a bibliography to the book, but a select bibliography to the subject of Shakespeare's classicism, organised for maximum utility to likely users. Although it offers a more rounded treatment of the subject than is available elsewhere, this book obviously cannot claim to be comprehensive; the bibliography gives material on authors known to Shakespeare but not treated here (including Apuleius, Cicero, Horace, Livy). The editors would like to thank: Jo Paul for compiling this bibliography; Sarah Stanton, their understanding editor at CUP; the three readers chosen by CUP to referee the original project for numerous invaluable suggestions; Stuart Gillespie who helped with the bibliography; Colin Burrow, Mark Llewellyn, and Liz Prettejohn; as well as the individual contributors.

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Finally, we would also like to dedicate this book to the memory of Thomas M. Greene (17 May 1926 – 23 June 2003), distinguished author of *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*. Thomas Greene was originally to have been a contributor but his untimely final illness supervened.

C. A. M., A. B. T.  
*September 2003*

NOTE

1. See Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London and Basingstoke 1997).

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PART I

AN INITIAL PERSPECTIVE

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## CHAPTER I

*Shakespeare and humanistic culture**Colin Burrow*

No one knows exactly how and when Shakespeare read ‘the classics’, or even what he might have thought they were. Indeed it may be slightly misleading to talk about ‘the classics’ in relation to Shakespeare at all. The word is not recorded before the eighteenth century in the sense ‘A writer, or a literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence; esp. (as originally used) in Greek or Latin’ (*OED* B.1), and Shakespeare does not use any form of the word ‘classic’ or ‘classical’ at any point in his career. It’s highly unlikely that he had a rigid or restricted sense of a fixed canon of texts which he regarded as the ultimate literary authorities. There was for him much weaker an imaginary boundary than there is now between the Augustan ‘classics’ – Virgil, Horace, and Ovid – and a larger sphere of reading which encompassed, probably in a hodge-podge of languages and surrounded by a variety of levels of commentary, Plutarch, Greek prose romance, a sprinkling of Lucan, the distiches of Cato, a dash of Homer, and perhaps some of Philostratus’ *Imagines*, some of Aphthonius’ dialogues, a little Livy, some Cicero, a bit of Quintilian, all of which would be tumbled together with quotations from classical authors which were used to illustrate grammatical points in Lily’s Grammar or in Erasmus’ educational works. Shakespeare read, remembered, misremembered and hybridised the works which we call ‘the classics’.<sup>1</sup>

He did this in ways which are distinctive to him, but which also reflect recognisably Tudor humanist methods of reading. These were in all probability drummed into him at school from about the age of seven, and several more or less successful attempts have been made to peer into the satchel of the young Shakespeare as, like the young Lucius in *Titus Andronicus* 4.1, he set off to school with a copy of Ovid tucked under his arm. T. W. Baldwin, in his massive survey of grammar-school curricula *William Shakespeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, argued that Shakespeare read more Latin at school than most classics undergraduates do at university today, and that ‘William Shakespeare was trained in the heroic age of grammar school

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rhetoric in England, and he shows knowledge of the complete system, in its most heroic proportions.<sup>2</sup> Baldwin's view of Shakespeare as by modern standards a learned author took a while to take root, but is now effectively an orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> The line from Ben Jonson's elegy on Shakespeare which gave Baldwin his title ('And, though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek') was read as a direct criticism of Shakespeare's ignorance of the classics by later seventeenth-century readers, and was often taken to support a view that Shakespeare studied nature rather than books by most critics before the twentieth century. Commentators since Baldwin, however, have tended to gloss Jonson's remark as a counterfactual speculation rather than a direct attack on Shakespeare's ignorance: "Even if you had little scholarship" – which was not the case – "I would not seek to honour you by comparing you with classical poets".<sup>4</sup> This may well be to overstate Jonson's generosity of spirit, just as Baldwin may have overstated Shakespeare's learning. But in the late 1970s Emrys Jones and Joel Altman argued not just that Shakespeare read a lot of Latin and perhaps some Greek, but that central aspects of his habits of thought derived from the Latinate rhetorical training which he received at school.<sup>5</sup> Pupils in the higher forms of Elizabethan grammar schools would have learnt to argue, in Latin, on either side of the question, and to compose orations in the persona of historical characters. Both Jones and (less explicitly) Altman argued that without this training Shakespeare could not have staged debates on either side of a question between Cassius and Brutus, or between Brutus and his conscience. The long-term result of this work has been a high measure of consensus that there was effectively a straightforwardly supportive relationship between Shakespeare's works and his classical education at school.

More recent studies of humanistic forms of education, however, have tended to argue that it was not as spiritually liberating or as effective as it set out to be. For Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine the predominantly rhetorical and 'literary' educational system deriving from Erasmus, which filtered throughout England as grammar school after grammar school emulated the Erasmian statutes and ideals of St Paul's School, was far less suited to the practical needs of its pupils than the forms of logical instruction which it replaced.<sup>6</sup> They emphasise the practical failings of the system: even pupils such as the young Edward VI, who is frequently presented as the greatest product of Erasmian forms of education, had an imperfect grasp on the finer points of Latin grammar. The emphasis in the humanist classroom on rote learning, on the authority of a master, and on the authority of Latin texts, they suggest, helped to fashion docile servants of absolutist regimes. This is certainly debatable: there is strong evidence



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to suggest that there was in fact a delicate balance between magisterial authority and freedom in the Tudor classroom.<sup>7</sup> Erasmus encouraged his students to argue whether democracy was preferable to monarchy, and to compose orations condemning the tyranny of Julius Caesar.<sup>8</sup> Pupils who had learned to conduct such debates might not be expected to be simple slaves to monarchs.

This chapter will suggest that Shakespeare's grammar-school education did not feed simply and beneficially into his poems and plays. But it will not argue that we should adopt the iconoclasm of Grafton and Jardine, and assume that Shakespeare's grasp on Latin literature was slight. Rather there were a number of failings, both practical and theoretical, in how Shakespeare was trained to read the classics in his early years, and, oddly enough, those failings were part of what made his later responses to his reading so powerful. Emrys Jones is correct to say that 'Without humanism . . . there could have been no Elizabethan literature: without Erasmus, no Shakespeare';<sup>9</sup> but this chapter will suggest that the quirks of and failings within humanist methods of responding to the classics mattered for Shakespeare as much as, or perhaps more than, their successes.

First things first. What did Shakespeare read at the King's Free Grammar School at Stratford? The statutes and records of this tiny school, refounded by the humanist prodigy Edward VI in 1553 and crammed into an upstairs room in the Guildhall in Stratford, do not survive.<sup>10</sup> As a result we do not have certain proof that Shakespeare attended it at all. If he did attend it, he would have done so from about 1571.<sup>11</sup> Our knowledge of what he may have read at school depends entirely on inference from what we know about other schools, and often the surviving evidence about these consists of statements of principles and ideals (curricula and timetables) rather than detailed descriptions of what actually happened in practice. Stratford's single master, who was reasonably paid at £20 per annum and was usually a graduate, probably aspired to follow something similar to the educational regime laid out in the statutes and curricula of St Paul's School in London. St Paul's had been founded by Dean Colet in 1509,<sup>12</sup> and for its foundation Colet had solicited from Erasmus the *De Ratione Studii* ('Concerning the Method of Study'), which was supplemented by what was to become one of the most influential books in the sixteenth century: the *De Duplici Copia Verborum atque Rerum* ('Concerning the Double Abundance of Words and Matter'). The *De Copia*, a handbook describing how to achieve a rich and eloquent style, went through 150 editions before 1572.<sup>13</sup> Colet's statutes were designed to produce pupils skilled in Latin and

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Greek, who would go on to thrive in the formal disputations required of students at the universities, and eventually perhaps to act as secretaries to noblemen or even as counsellors to monarchs. Colet insisted that the study of literature was the best way to achieve these outcomes: 'I would they were taught always in good literature bothe Laten and Greeke, and good autors such as have the verraye *Romayne* eloquence joined with wisdom, specially Christen autors that wrote their wisdom with clean and chaste Laten.'<sup>14</sup> Colet's emphasis on moral content led him to present a curriculum which was not, to modern eyes, very 'classical', including as it did

*Institutum Christiani Hominis*, which that Learned Erasmus made at my requeste, and the boke called *Copia* of the same Erasmus. And then other authors Christian, as *Lactantius*, *Prudentius*, and *Proba*, and *Sedulius*, and *Juvenus*, and *Baptista Mantuanus*, and suche other as shall be thought convenient and most to purpose unto the true Laten speech . . . I saye that fylthiness and all suche abusion whiche the later blynde worlde brought in, whiche more rather may be called *Blotterature* then *Litterature*, I utterly abannyshe and exclude out of this Schole, and charge the Maisters that they teche alwaye that is beste.<sup>15</sup>

St Paul's School, along with Westminster and Eton, certainly provided the model for the statutes of many Tudor grammar schools, but this does not mean that all schools were like them in practice.<sup>16</sup> Even William Lily, the first High Master of St Paul's and the author of a Latin grammar which was to be prescribed by statute as the only one to be used in schools, noted that 'The varietie of teaching is diuers yet, and alwaies wil be.'<sup>17</sup> Richard Brinsley's *Ludus Literarius*, printed in 1612, a century after Colet's statutes, is probably our best guide to Shakespeare's school, since it was explicitly designed to assist provincial schoolmasters rather than teachers at elite urban institutions such as St Paul's or Westminster. Brinsley, schoolmaster at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, fifty miles from Stratford and a similar distance from London, begins by emphasising the exhaustion and demoralisation of the provincial schoolmaster: 'I wax vtterly wearie of my place, and my life is a continual burden vnto me.'<sup>18</sup> It is likely that keeping order and keeping going was the highest priority for masters in the poorer schools.<sup>19</sup> Brinsley has a clearer conception than Colet of the ancient texts which might be most worthy of imitation by modern pupils: 'And therefore I would haue the cheifest labor to make these purest Authors our owne, as Tully for prose, so Ouid and Virgil for verse, so to speake and write in Latine for the phrase, as they did.'<sup>20</sup> It is very likely that Shakespeare would have read at least some of 'Cato, Corderius dialogues, Aesop's fables, Tullies [Cicero's] epistles gathered by Sturmius, Tullies Offices, de Amicitia, Senectute, Paradoxes, Ovid's *Tristia* and *Metamorphoses*, Virgil. Also *Terentius Christianus*.'<sup>21</sup>