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THE INTELLIGENCE OF ANTIQUITY

WHAT DID SHAKESPEARE BELIEVE? We can only guess. He left neither a diary nor a philosophical treatise. His only recorded words are devoted to business transactions and legal cases.¹ His only surviving letters are conventional, if supremely elegantly phrased, pleas for patronage.² His will is orthodox and Anglican, but that is how wills were written in his England. It does not mean that he was orthodox and Anglican.

The only poems written in his own voice were the Sonnets. The man who wrote them clearly believed that love is a powerful and complicated thing, that poetry is an effective way of exploring its many dimensions, and—if his lines are to be taken at face value—that creative art is a way of achieving a kind of immortality for the beloved and perhaps for creative artists themselves. But his lines are not necessarily to be taken at face value. The “I” who speaks a poem, even an intimate love poem, is not synonymous with the person who writes the line. All poets rejoice in creating a *persona*. And if Shakespeare really believed that the purpose of writing love poetry was to immortalize the beloved, he might have taken the trouble to tell his readers the names of the addressees of his Sonnets.³

As for immortalizing himself, he was lackadaisical about publishing his works.⁴ The Sonnets may well have been published without his permission, and half his plays were unpublished at the time of his death. As is often observed, had it not been for the diligence of his fellow-actors in seeing into print the First Folio of his collected comedies, tragedies, and histories in 1623, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, and a dozen more would have been lost.

What kind of a thinker was Shakespeare? That is a better question.⁵ The patterns of his mind may be traced in his work and from his education. Here we need not guess. We can say many things that are incontestable. He loved words and word play. He was fascinated

by every variety of human character. He thought by way of dialogue and debate. He was sceptical of generalization about the ways of the world: almost every time a character in one of the plays gives voice to a piece of sententious wisdom, someone else says something that contradicts it—or a twist in the plot makes the seeming wisdom look foolish. “The gods are just,” says Edgar in *King Lear*, yet within minutes the old king comes on bearing the hanged body of his beloved, virtuous daughter Cordelia, most unjustly murdered.⁶

The few moments in the plays where a sententious or philosophical discourse is vindicated rather than subverted by surrounding events tend to be those when a character says that life is like a play.⁷ Most famously, there is Jaques’s “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” in *As You Like It*.⁸ As if to prove he is right, he has hardly closed his mouth when young Orlando comes on bearing the frail body of a man approaching the seventh and last age of human life. He is pointedly named Old Adam: he is Everyman. It would be hard to controvert the view that Shakespeare believed that life is a kind of theatre and that theatre is, as Hamlet describes it, a mirror of life. But an actor turned dramatist would believe that, wouldn’t he?

Sometimes “this great stage of fools” upon which we are born has an audience. “The gods look down,” says Coriolanus as his mother kneels to him (inverting the orthodoxy whereby children would kneel nightly to their parents and ask for blessing), “and this unnatural scene / They laugh at.”⁹ These gods are plural because this is a play set in the polytheistic world of antiquity, but Shakespeare lived in a society where everybody, with a few wildcard exceptions such as the alleged atheist Christopher Marlowe, believed that the world was looked down upon by a singular God—albeit with aspects of three-in-one and one-in-three. In some of the civically performed Biblical plays of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the actor representing God would physically look down upon the “human” players. But in 1559, Queen Elizabeth published a proclamation forbidding the theatrical treatment of “matters of religion.”¹⁰ In 1569, the Corpus Christi plays were suppressed in York; the Coventry cycle was performed for the last time in 1579. The Elizabethan theatre has many vestigial traces of this religious tradition, most famously Hamlet complaining about players who out-Herod Herod, but Shakespeare never overtly dramatized Biblical matter.¹¹ There were strict laws pro-

scribing stage blasphemy. Marlowe's fate hung over the stage-play world like an admonitory shadow. And the relationship between the church and the theatre became increasingly strained as "Puritan" polemicists voiced their disapproval of players, especially when adult male actors started kissing boys dressed as girls.¹² For all these reasons, Shakespeare was severely limited in his stage exploration and representation of Christian ideas, images, and doctrinal debates. He perforce handled such material cautiously, below the surface of the action; modern scholarship has unearthed rich polemical contexts and excavated subtle allusions, but it is not always clear that these would have been perceived by the original theatre audiences.¹³

In 1550, Parliament passed an Act "for the abolishing and putting away of divers books and images."¹⁴ Extreme Protestantism, taking the Biblical Second Commandment literally, regarded all graven images—which is to say inventions of the human imagination—as idolatrous because they encouraged worship of the image of God as opposed to his ineffable Reality. When the Protestant revolution reached Stratford-upon-Avon, the treasurer of the town council, John Shakespeare, paid for workmen to whitewash over the image of the Last Judgment in the Guild Chapel across the road from the well-appointed house that his son William would purchase many years later. A poet and dramatist whose business was the making of images, in words and in stage pictures, would hardly have shared the Puritan relish for this kind of iconoclasm. Killjoy Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is specifically described as a Puritan, while hypocritical Angelo in *Measure for Measure* is said to be "precise"—a "precisian" was another term for a Puritan.¹⁵ The humiliation of both characters derives from the way in which their stand against sexual desire collapses under the force of sexual desire. One thing we can say for sure about Shakespeare's beliefs is that he was not a Puritan. His works may indeed be read as defences of the imagination and of the theatre against the strictures of Puritanism.

A tradition going back to the late seventeenth century affirms that he died a closet Papist. Yet despite three centuries of investigation and argument, there is no firm evidence, either internal to his plays or external in the biographical record, to confirm his recusancy or indeed that of his immediate family.¹⁶ Perhaps he was a "Church-Papist," conforming outwardly but maintaining the old faith in his heart. Or he may have been an orthodox Anglican. It seems that his

denominational allegiance could have been anything—other than “hot Protestant.”¹⁷ A play such as *King John* has at various times been used to “prove” that Shakespeare was a Papist and that he was an anti-Papist.¹⁸ One suspects that throughout his career he had a vestigial love for the more theatrical aspects of the old faith—dressing up, ceremony, ritual. That was above all because of their theatricality, their appeal to the *imagination*—aspects of the old faith despised by Puritans.

We are unlikely ever to resolve the debate about Shakespeare’s religious allegiance, or indeed the implicit religious attitudes within his plays. But there is no doubting his dependence on the pagan gods as an imaginative resource. The interest in resurrection and redemption that marks his last plays does not feel specifically Roman Catholic, or even specifically Christian: in *Pericles*, Thaisa expresses her gratitude for returning from the dead by becoming a priestess in the temple of Diana, while in *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione is reawakened under the aegis of Apollo’s oracle and the influence of Ovid’s Pygmalion through the agency of what Leontes calls Paulina’s “magic,” something that was regarded as the antithesis of “lawful” Christian faith.¹⁹ Shakespeare’s late plays, traditionally seen as his most spiritual works, take us to a number of temples, all of them ancient and pagan rather than Christian and modern: first those of Diana in *Pericles* and (by report) Apollo in *The Winter’s Tale*, then a trinity of shrines—to Venus, Mars, and Diana—in the final act of his final play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Add in the theophany of Jupiter in *Cymbeline* and the impersonation of Juno, Ceres, and Iris in *The Tempest*, and it becomes undeniable that Shakespeare’s way of dramatizing divinity was more profoundly shaped by the humanist inheritance from ancient Rome than the modern contentions between Rome and Geneva.

Again, when it came to certain matters of ethical debate, the Shakespearean way of thinking was more akin to pagan reflection than Christian doctrine. The gravediggers in *Hamlet*, discussing the burial of Ophelia, remind us that suicide is a sin so mortal that Christian burial is not allowed. Hamlet himself knows this. The first thing he tells the audience once he is alone is that he wants his own life to end, in defiance of God’s will: “O, that . . . the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon gainst self-slaughter.”²⁰ But where canon law

was unequivocal about suicide, Hamlet regards it as a question without a clear ethical answer: “To be or not to be” is indeed *the* question. To debate the case for and the case against self-slaughter places Hamlet in a long tradition of Greek and Roman thinkers going back to Plato’s dialogues on the last days of Socrates, the most famous suicide in history.²¹ Furthermore, one of the principal ways in which such thinkers pursued the debate was by means of virtuous examples. The two most famous of these were Lucretia, who committed suicide after being raped, and Cato, who did so (in a botched and messy way) after losing the fight against Julius Caesar—he preferred to die than to live under a dictatorship. Shakespeare knew these cases well: he wrote an entire poem about *The Rape of Lucrece*, and he made a point of remembering Cato by introducing his son as a minor character in *Julius Caesar*, defining himself as an enemy of tyranny in the spirit of his father.²² Brutus, whose wife, Portia, was Cato’s daughter, expresses doubt about the compatibility of Cato’s Stoic code with the act of self-slaughter,²³ but he kills himself all the same—as did Seneca, the exemplar of Roman Stoicism. Most Stoics, notably Seneca, argued that suicide was an honourable way out when circumstances became such that the integrity of the self could no longer be sustained.²⁴ Given the noble examples of Lucretia and Cato, not to mention the number of honourable characters who commit suicide in Shakespeare’s plays (one immediately thinks of Juliet, Enobarbus, Charmian, and the expressed intention of Kent in *King Lear*), it is clear that Shakespeare thought of the question of self-slaughter as an open, not a closed case. Canon law was firmly “fixed,” whereas Shakespeare’s imagination was always fluid.²⁵

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” asked Tertullian fourteen hundred years before Shakespeare. “Or the Academy with the Church?”²⁶ The compulsion of churchgoing and the habits of daily piety meant that the language of the Bible and Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* is echoed throughout the plays.²⁷ And religious faith is of the essence for such characters as Isabella of *Measure for Measure*, who wishes to be a nun, and Helen of *All’s Well that Ends Well*, who goes on a pilgrimage. Yet there is suggestive evidence that Shakespeare’s contemporaries especially associated him—or at least the poetic tradition in which he wrote—with pagan matter. Robert Southwell, in what many critics see as an allusion to *Venus and*

Adonis, complains of contemporary poets spending the sweet vein of their wit on “Paynim toys” instead of lending their talents to “Christian works.”²⁸

In a different way, Shakespeare was not wholly enamoured of the claims of Athens. There is philosophy in his works, but he was not a philosopher. His three plays set in the ancient city of philosophers all turn on a movement away from the *polis* into some form of greenwood, strikingly rejecting the patriarchal tyranny of Theseus (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) and the philosophical cynicism of Apemantus (*Timon of Athens*).²⁹ As for *Troilus and Cressida*, the play with Shakespeare's largest cast of ancient heroes, it is hardly an advertisement for the virtue and clarity of Greek thought. We may conclude that, in response to the great debate between Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation, natural and divine law, Academy and Church, Platonic-Aristotelian and Judaeo-Christian world pictures, Shakespeare says not precisely “a plague on both your houses” but rather something to the effect of “I am sceptical of what we can know, more interested in how we react to what we experience.” Or, as he put it in what may well have been his last words written for the stage,

O, you heavenly charmers,
What things you make of us! For what we lack
We laugh, for what we have are sorry, still
Are children in some kind. Let us be thankful
For that which is, and with you leave dispute
That are above our question. Let's go off,
And bear us like the time.³⁰

Every now and then in the plays, Shakespeare makes a glancing allusion to a theological “dispute” (the question of whether or not Purgatory exists, for example),³¹ but for the most part he seems to have regarded metaphysics and ontology as “above our question.” Though Hamlet's “To be or not to be” is on the surface a meditation in the neo-Stoic mold, laying out the cases for and against suicide, debating a question (*questio*) in the manner of an academic textbook,³² in a deeper sense it is a mechanism for the unfolding of character and plot. It is an overheard soliloquy: a key question for the audience is whether or not Hamlet knows that he is being overheard, and if he does, whether he is putting on the act of being a

student philosopher, just as he has previously claimed that he will put on an “antic disposition.” “To be or not to be” may be a *performance* in a double sense. The very fact that it can be played so many different ways makes it into a species of utterance antithetical to the rigor of philosophical logic.

Shakespearean questions are only ever resolved dramatically, never philosophically. Because drama is an action unfolding in time, metaphysical generalization on stage is always liable to be subverted by context. And because drama involves characters in conflict, there is always another side to the question. What had Shakespeare to do with Athens or Jerusalem? His was neither the Academy’s quest for truth nor the Church’s for faith, but the Theatre’s dream of mirroring and yet making sense of the multiplicity and the mess of life.



What fired Shakespeare’s imagination? That is a very much better question than the one about what he believed. As the prologue to *Henry V* tells us, he sought to set alight his audience’s *imaginary* forces. This book is about the formation of some key aspects of Shakespeare’s imagination, and indeed about his distinctive valuation of the imagination, which, I argue, owed a huge debt to pagan antiquity.

The ancients bequeathed to Shakespeare a way of thinking, a form of intelligence. *Intelligentia* is defined in Thomas Thomas’s Latin-English dictionary of 1587 as “A perceiving or understanding: intelligence: memorie, knowledge, sense, skilfullnes.”³³ It is in these several senses that Shakespeare had a classical intelligence. One might even say that it was his intelligence (in the sense of *information about*) of antiquity that shaped his intelligence (in the sense of *cast of mind*). His memory, knowledge, and skilfulness were honed by classical ways of thinking: the art of rhetoric, the recourse to mythological exemplars, the desire to improvise within the constraints of literary genre, the ethical and patriotic imperatives, the consciousness of an economy of artistic patronage, the love of debate, the delight in images.

Where did he gain that intelligence? First when he crept, willingly or not, Latin textbooks in satchel, to school. There he was taught the art of memory and the skills of the writer. It was Stratford-upon-Avon grammar school that formed the mind of young William, to

whom he surely nods in the scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (his most English play), where a Welsh schoolmaster (he apparently had one himself)³⁴ gives a Latin lesson to a bright but cheeky school-boy called William.³⁵ Sir Hugh Evans's declension of hig, hag, and hog in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comic reminder of the tedium of Elizabethan early years education, which was all accidence and syntax. But once one had grasped the essentials of Lily's Latin grammar, there were rewards in store.

Play acting, for one thing. The dramatization of scenes from classical myth and history was a common schoolroom task of a kind evoked in the early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* when Julia, disguised as the boy Sebastian, imagines herself as a boy actor playing the "lamentable part" of "Ariadne, passioning / For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight," which she "so lively acted" with tears that her audience is moved to tears.³⁶ Emotional education—the art of "passioning"—is taught by way of a dramatization of one of the stories in Ovid's *Heroides*. The rhetorical art of persuading listeners to change their minds here becomes a dramatic art of moving an audience to tears—in anticipation of the player's speech to Hamlet.

Then there were exemplary stories. In *Titus Andronicus*, a school-boy's book (albeit one received from his late mother, not his school-master) is the device whereby the silenced and mutilated Lavinia reveals her own history:

Soft, so busily she turns the leaves!
What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape—
And rape, I fear, was root of thine annoy.³⁷

Storytelling was Shakespeare's method of making sense of the world, and no stories gripped him more fully than those of classical antiquity.

"What books readeth your master unto you?" asks the interlocutor's voice in a language textbook printed in 1591 by Shakespeare's schoolfellow Richard Field: "he readeth Terence, Virgil, Horace, Tully's *Offices*."³⁸ Shakespeare's encounters with these authors in grammar school laid the foundations of his art: Terence introduced him to comedy and scenic structure, Virgil to the heroic idiom, Horace to lyrical, occasional, and satirical poetry, and Tully (Cicero)

to thoughtful reflection upon ethics, politics, and public duty. These classic authors, together with the more dangerous figure of Ovid, were formative of his thinking.

When we apply the label “Shakespeare’s Roman Plays” to the quartet of *Titus Andronicus* and the three tragedies based directly on Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, we sometimes forget that no fewer than thirteen of Shakespeare’s forty or so works are set in the world of ancient Greece or Rome. That constitutes one-third of his corpus, a body of work ranging from erotic and narrative poetry to tragedy to comedy to ancient history to satire to romance, covering a time-span from the Trojan war to fifth-century Athens to the early years of Rome to the assassination of Julius Caesar to the Roman Empire, with excursions into mythological narrative, Hellenistic seafaring romance, and more.

The Comedy of Errors is a free adaptation of the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, with embellishments from the same author’s *Amphitryon*. *Titus Andronicus* is a tragedy in the style of Seneca that brings onto stage the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. *Venus and Adonis* is also developed from the *Metamorphoses*, while *The Rape of Lucrece* is derived from a fusion of a story in Livy’s *History of Rome* with that same story’s retelling in Ovid’s *Fasti*, along with a diversion into the siege of Troy. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is set in the mythical Greece of Theseus and Hippolyta, whilst incorporating a dramatization of the Pyramus and Thisbe story that Shakespeare read in Arthur Golding’s English translation of the *Metamorphoses*. *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* all derive from Plutarch’s *Lives* in the English translation of Thomas North. *Troilus and Cressida* draws on both classical and medieval narrations of the matter of Troy. *Timon of Athens* brings Plutarch’s life of Alcibiades together with the Timon digression in his life of Mark Antony, perhaps mediated via a satirical dialogue by Lucian (known directly or indirectly). *Pericles* is in a tradition that dates back, via Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower, to third-century Greek romance. The world of *Cymbeline* holds chronicle histories concerning the Roman occupation of Britain together with the appearance of Jupiter as a *deus ex machina*. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* returns to Theseus and Hippolyta via Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, a story of the rivalry of the nephews of Creon, the mythical King of Thebes who is best known from the Oedipus and Antigone stories.

Among Shakespeare's characters are not only such famous figures from the classical tradition as Venus and Hymen, Theseus and Hippolyta, Achilles and Hector, Lucrece and Alcibiades, Caesar and Cleopatra, but also Soothsayers, Goths sacking Rome, and (offstage) the Delphic oracle of Apollo. Furthermore, all his works, wherever and whenever set, were shaped by the arts of classical rhetoric that he learned in school. All include frequent allusions to the mythology, literature, history, and culture of ancient Greece and Rome.³⁹ And his favourite books were either classical works or contemporary ones influenced by the classics.

In 1595, Richard Field, fellow-alumnus of the King Edward grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon, printed *The lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes, compared together by that grave learned philosopher and historiographer, Plutarke of Chaeronea: translated out of Greeke into French by James Amiot, abbot of Bellozane, Bishop of Auxerre, one of the Kings privie counsell, and great Amner of France, and out of French into English, by Thomas North*. This was the book that got Shakespeare thinking seriously about politics: monarchy versus republicanism versus empire; the choices we make and their tragic consequences; the conflict between public duty and private desire. He absorbed classical thought, but was not enslaved to it. Shakespeare was a thinker who always made it new, adapted his source materials, and put his own spin on them. In the case of Plutarch, he feminized the very masculine Roman world. Brutus and Caesar are seen through the prism of their wives, Portia and Calpurnia; Coriolanus through his mother, Volumnia; Mark Antony through his lover, Cleopatra. Roman women were traditionally silent, confined to the domestic sphere. Cleopatra is the very antithesis of such a woman, while Volumnia is given the full force of that supreme Ciceronian skill, a persuasive rhetorical voice.⁴⁰ Timon of Athens is alone and unhappy precisely because his obsession with money has cut him off from the love of, and for, women (the only females in Timon's strange play are two prostitutes). Paradoxically, the very masculinity of Plutarch's version of ancient history stimulated Shakespeare into demonstrating that women are more than the equal of men. Where most thinkers among his contemporaries took the traditional view of female inferiority, he again and again wrote comedies in which the girls are smarter than the boys—Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Portia in *The*

Merchant of Venice—and tragedies in which women exercise forceful authority for good or ill (Tamora, Cleopatra, Volumnia, and Cymbeline's Queen in his imagined antiquity, but also Queen Margaret in his rendition of the Wars of the Roses).⁴¹

Before he read Plutarch, he read Ovid, the author in whose work he found the things that made him a poet and a dramatist: magic, myth, metamorphosis, rendered with playfulness, verbal dexterity, and generic promiscuity. He acknowledged as much by bringing a copy of the *Metamorphoses* on stage in his first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*; by basing his first published poem, *Venus and Adonis* (the book that made his name), on one of Ovid's tales; and by choosing another of them, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, for the play within the play at the climax of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ovidian strangeness and wonder weave a golden thread that runs all the way through his career from these early works to the late visions of *The Winter's Tale*, where the exquisite animation of Hermione's statue nods to the story of Pygmalion, and *The Tempest*, which alludes to the sinister magic of the sorceress Medea. Ovid was the master who taught Shakespeare that what makes great literary art is extreme human passion. Ovid showed him how to represent grief: in *Hamlet* it is learnt from Hecuba, in *Lear* from Niobe. And Ovid gave him the theme that is the driving force of all his comedies and several of his tragedies: erotic desire.⁴²

A discovery that came some time after that of Plutarch was *The Essays of Lord Michael de Montaigne*, in the translation of John Florio, a prime example of an encounter with a very modern mind that was deeply shaped by the ancients. The more philosophical tenor of the works in the second half of Shakespeare's career can be attributed to his reading of this book when it was published in 1603, or maybe to a first acquaintance with parts of it in manuscript some time before—there is circumstantial evidence that he knew the translator Florio via his pursuit of the patronage of the Earl of Southampton. Shakespeare seems to have found an echo of his own intellectual growth in the progression of thought through the three books of Montaigne's endlessly re-readable meditative essays: a broad movement from attention to the Roman Stoical idea that “to philosophize is to learn how to die”⁴³ (which could stand as the set theme of *Hamlet*) to a severe scepticism about the Christian idea that God's providence is revealed through natural justice (the position that

Montaigne eviscerated in his lengthy “Apology of Raymond Sebond,” which is echoed very closely in the deeply sceptical language of *King Lear*), to a coming to rest in a philosophy of acceptance associated with the ancient Epicurean tradition.⁴⁴

There could be no better example of the rhetorical figure of *litotes*—understatement by way of ironizing negative—than to say that *Shakespeare was not unfamiliar with the classics*, whatever the formidably learned Ben Jonson might have been implying when he joked that his friend and rival was worthy to be named alongside the great dramatists of antiquity “Though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek.”⁴⁵ As has often been remarked, the “small Latin” of a provincial grammar-school boy in the age of the first Queen Elizabeth would have been large by the standards of many a university Classics graduate in the age of the second.



There have been many admirable and thorough studies of Shakespeare and the classics.⁴⁶ Why add to the groaning shelf? Partly because certain aspects of Shakespeare’s classical inheritance have been curiously neglected, perhaps because they are hiding in plain sight. It is always easier for a scholar to be “original” by positing a “hitherto unknown obscure source” than by remaining focused on the common currency of the canonical figures who shaped a tradition—in our case, most notably Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Seneca. Shakespeare’s periodic adoption of a Horatian tone has rarely been discussed, despite the importance of Horace to Ben Jonson—or perhaps *because* of the importance of Horace to Ben Jonson, who from early anecdotes to modern criticism has been branded as Shakespeare’s mighty opposite.⁴⁷ The exemplary force of Cicero, who actually appears as a character in *Julius Caesar*, has not been properly considered in the light of recent scholarship regarding the centrality of Ciceronian ideas to early modern humanist political thought. Little has been made of the significance of an allusion in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* to the neo-Latin pastoral poet Mantuan.

This list could be extended considerably, especially if we are willing to expand our notion of “influence” and “inheritance” beyond the realm of direct “sources.” Shakespeare did not, we can be fairly sure, read deeply in Justus Lipsius, but there are traces in his work of the neo-Stoic frame of mind associated with Lipsius. Similarly

with that vein of political thinking which intellectual historians call “Tacitism.” And with the Epicurean tradition: we can be almost certain that he never read the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius, but we can be absolutely certain that he read many of the essays of Montaigne, who read, quoted from, and was profoundly influenced by Lucretius.⁴⁸

The usual starting points for studies of Shakespeare and classical “influence” are direct quotations, verbal parallels, and explicit allusions. This was the approach exhaustively pursued by T. W. Baldwin in the two huge volumes of his *William Shakspeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, which remains the most comprehensive work in the field.⁴⁹ Studies of this sort seek particular passages that provide firm evidence of Shakespeare’s knowledge of particular classical texts. Typically, Baldwin sounds disappointed when he discovers that a Shakespearean echo of, say, “a verse in Horace,” proves to be not prime evidence of Shakespeare’s familiarity with the *Odes* but something of which the young dramatist might have said, as he makes Chiron say in *Titus Andronicus*, “I know it well: I read it in the grammar long ago.”⁵⁰ The fallacy is to suppose that absence of evidence regarding Shakespeare’s actual reading of Horace is evidence of absence of his awareness of what was understood by the Horatian idiom.

For educated Elizabethans, the names of Horace and Juvenal served as shorthand for satirical writing (Juvenal’s being of the sharper kind): hence William Watson’s reference in 1602 to “Horatian Satyriques” and Robert Greene’s identification in his *Groatsworth of Wit* of Thomas Nashe as “Young Juvenal, that biting satirist.”⁵¹ But Horace’s name was also synonymous with the trope of *beatus ille*: “happy is the man” who retreats from the political intrigue of the court to a healthy life in the country. To an educated Elizabethan, the character of Alexander Iden in *Henry VI Part 2* would have been instantly identifiable as a Horatian gentleman.⁵²

Greene’s coinage “He and Isabel . . . began to be as Ciceronical as they were amorous” assumes that readers in the 1590s would have been familiar with the idea of Cicero as a model of prose style even if their own schoolday memories of Cicero’s actual works were vague.⁵³ Similarly, a passage in Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynd*, the source for *As You Like It*, reveals that “Ovidian” was a shorthand term for the language of seduction: “Then, as the fishers put the sweetest bait

to the fairest fish: so these Ovidians . . . write that they be wrapped in an endless labyrinth of sorrow, when walking in the large leas of liberty.”⁵⁴ Shakespeare was eminently capable of being—and recognized by his audience as being—Ciceronian, Horatian, or Ovidian without explicitly quoting or even naming Cicero, Horace, and Ovid.

Another limitation of the approach that confines Shakespeare’s engagement with the classical tradition to his direct reading is that it forgets about his acting. He was, after all, in the cast of Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus*, the most self-consciously classical drama of the age, played at court, probably during the Christmas 1603 season, then booed off the stage at the Globe in 1604. There is nothing like acting in a play, committing a part to heart, for gaining an intimate knowledge of its words and its world. Whether or not Shakespeare played the part of the Emperor Tiberius, as has often been conjectured,⁵⁵ his participation in *Sejanus* would have given him close acquaintance with a work that was based mainly on Tacitus but also steeped in Dio Cassius, Suetonius, and Juvenal. He would have either spoken in or heard a key piece of dialogue about the political power of historical writing:

SEJANUS. Then is there one Cremutius
Cordus, a writing fellow they have got
To gather notes of the precedent times,
And make them into annals—a most tart
And bitter spirit, I hear, who, under colour
Of praising those, doth tax the present state,
Censures the men, the actions, leaves no trick,
No practice unexamined, parallels
The times, the governments; a professed champion
For the old liberty—

TIBERIUS. A perishing wretch!
As if there were that chaos bred in things,
That laws and liberty would not rather choose
To be quite broken, and ta’en hence by us,
Than have the stain to be preserved by such.⁵⁶

As a play about a notorious political conspiracy in ancient Rome, *Sejanus* was deeply influenced by *Julius Caesar*. Jonson wrote it, and Shakespeare acted in it, in full knowledge that Shakespeare’s own Roman drama, though far less self-conscious in flagging its classical

sources, was equally steeped in “parallels” between “precedent times” and the “government” of “the present state.” In this sense, Shakespeare was a Cremutius Cordus to Jonson’s Tacitus.⁵⁷ If that analogy holds, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Jonson saw a parallel between the arraignment of Cremutius Cordus forced by Sejanus—according to Tacitus, Cordus was the first person in Roman history to be charged with *maiestas* (treason) for writing a history (*editis annalibus*)—and the embroilment of both the Tacitean historian Sir John Hayward and Shakespeare’s acting company some years earlier in the treason trial of the Earl of Essex.⁵⁸

By considering the diversity of Shakespeare’s direct and indirect encounters with the classics, this book attempts not only to fill some of those gaps in the existing scholarship but also to demonstrate more broadly that his imagination and his sympathies were shaped above all else by forms of thinking derived from what the character of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* calls “antique” (or “antic”) “fables.”⁵⁹ In this, he was not alone. One purpose of this book is to contextualize Shakespeare within the wider “intelligence of antiquity” in England in the sixteenth century, for example by tracing the visual allusions to ancient Rome in Elizabethan London and by exploring the political and cultural imperatives that drove the urge to imitate Roman exemplars, none more important than Cicero. But the classical idea of *poiesis* (“making”) presented a peculiar difficulty for Reformation culture, creating a need for what I will describe as “the defence of phantasms.” Such defences are to be found in many places: I offer the examples of Sir Philip Sidney’s theory of poetry as a golden world, the carefully chosen words in a song in *Cymbeline*, and the provocative dialogue between Poet and Painter in *Timon of Athens*.

This book argues that Shakespeare was almost always Ovidian, more often than is usually supposed Horatian, sometimes Ciceroian, occasionally Tacitean, an interesting mix of Senecan and anti-Senecan, and, I suggest, strikingly anti-Virgilian—insofar as Virgilian meant “epic” or “heroic.” One key argument is that Shakespeare’s form of classical fabling was profoundly *antiheroic* because it was constantly attuned to the force of sexual desire. When Shakespeare uses his classical inheritance most creatively, the Virgilian heroic brushes against the Ovidian erotic, poetry strives to outdo painting, and the muscular figure of Hercules is effeminized by love. The

double meaning that the Elizabethans found in the word “heroic” (discussed in chapter 11) may provide a hidden key that unlocks the distinctive imaginative vision of a wide array of the plays and poems.

At the heart of the book, I propose an intimate relationship between the magical, the erotic, and the imaginative, or, in the terms of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, “The lunatic, the lover and the poet.”⁶⁰ Shakespeare’s imagination was magnetically drawn to dreams and visions, nightmares and ghostly apparitions, to the magic of theatre and desire, and thence to intimations of immortality. The question of survival beyond the grave leads me to consider Shakespeare’s attitude to posthumous fame, and so into a closing argument about how his own immortality, seeded in his lifetime and coming to fruition in the eighteenth century, was assured when he began to function for modernity as the classics of antiquity functioned for him. Thus the arc of the book curves from Shakespeare *and* the classical tradition to Shakespeare *becoming* the classical tradition—precisely at the moment when, paradoxically, he was being praised for not being overlearned in the classics.⁶¹ This brings my own work on Shakespeare full circle to its starting point, my studies of his eighteenth-century and Romantic *Nachleben*.⁶²



In 1948, W. H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for a book-length poem called *The Age of Anxiety*. This (somewhat turgid) work is now little read, but the title phrase has endured and become shorthand for the ills of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: in Auden’s time, totalitarianism, world war, and the fear of nuclear annihilation; in ours, “the degradation of the environment, nuclear energy, religious fundamentalism, threats to privacy and the family, drugs, pornography, violence, terrorism”⁶³—not to mention xenophobia, nationalism, and disillusionment with mainstream democratic politics. What is the place of the classics of literature, what hope is there for the future of humanist traditions, in a world dominated by anxieties such as these?

Studia humanitatis, that great intellectual movement which scholars would eventually call Renaissance humanism, was based on the belief that we may develop our understanding of humanity by studying the grammar, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy, and

above all the poetry of classical antiquity. In Auden's age of anxiety, the ambition of the Warburg school of cultural historians was to study and preserve that tradition, which they believed was in danger of obliteration.

In the year that Auden's poem was published, a far greater book appeared in Switzerland. It too grew from a sense of anxiety—and the scholarly author was much closer than the fugitive poet to the nightmare of the previous decade. The book was *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*) by Ernst Robert Curtius, dedicated to the memory of Aby Warburg.⁶⁴ Curtius acknowledged that his method owed a great debt to the approach to the history of art that was fashioned by Warburg, eldest son in the Warburg banking dynasty, who famously gave over to his younger brother the right to inherit the bank in return for a deal whereby he would be given enough money to buy books for the rest of his life. Aby Warburg duly devoted that life to scholarship and to the creation of his *Warburg-Bibliothek für Kulturwissenschaft*, the library that was moved to London in the year when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and in which the great Jewish émigré scholars Friz Saxl, Edgar Wind, Erwin Panowsky, and E. H. Gombrich pioneered the study of the classical tradition.⁶⁵

European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages made two lasting contributions to humanist scholarship. By drawing attention to the Latin writing of the Middle Ages, Curtius questioned the nineteenth-century historical model that imagined a development from Classical to Medieval to Renaissance, finding instead a continuity of literary devices and preoccupations. Secondly, Curtius pioneered the study of literary texts by way of themes, or *topoi*: the representation of the goddess *Natura*, the image of the hero, the features of the ideal landscape, the conception of the poet's divine frenzy, and so forth. His method proposed that literary creativity comes from a conjunction of continuity and change, convention and innovation, historicity and transcendence of history, tradition and individual talent, what one might call "presentness" and "pastness." In a crucial passage, Curtius proposed that literature possesses a freedom that is denied to visual art because "For literature, all the past is present, or can become so." He argued that Homer's *Iliad* can be "present" to its every reader in every age, whereas a painting by Titian is only truly

present to the person standing in the room in front of it, and furthermore that

The “timeless present” which is an essential characteristic of literature means that the literature of the past can always be active in that of the present. So Homer in Virgil, Virgil in Dante, Plutarch and Seneca in Shakespeare, Shakespeare in Goethe’s *Götz von Berlichingen*, Euripides in Racine’s *Iphigenia* and Goethe’s. Or in our day: *The Thousand and One Nights* and Calderón in Hofmannsthal; the *Odyssey* in Joyce; Aeschylus, Petronius, Dante, Tristan Cobière, Spanish mysticism in T. S. Eliot. There is here an inexhaustible wealth of possible interrelations. Furthermore, there is the garden of literary forms—be they the genres . . . or metrical and stanzaic forms; be they set formulas or narrative motifs or linguistic devices. It is a boundless realm. Finally, there is the wealth of figures which literature has formed and which can forever pass into new bodies: Achilles, Oedipus, Semiramis, Faust, Don Juan. André Gide’s last and ripest work is a *Theseus* (1946).⁶⁶

This is what we mean by “the classical tradition.” For Curtius, it was the essence of civilized culture: “A community of great authors throughout the centuries must be maintained if a kingdom of the mind is to exist at all.”⁶⁷ He never wrote at length on Shakespeare, but he could have found no better exemplification of the literature of the past being active in the present than in Shakespeare’s reinvention of inherited narrative motifs, of figures such as Achilles and Theseus, and of the “garden” of literary genres—not to mention his adept deployment of a panoply of rhetorical techniques.

Curtius contended that “a historical consideration of European literature must begin at [its] darkest point”⁶⁸—the point, that was to say, when the literature of antiquity was preserved only by means of manuscripts known to, and copied by, a small number of scholars and clerks, mostly monks. He was inspired by their curation of the classical tradition because he feared that Europe was on the brink of another dark age. As he explained in the foreword to the English translation of his book, “When the German catastrophe came I decided to serve the idea of a medievalistic humanism by studying the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. These studies occupied me for fifteen years.” He made clear that his work was “not the product of purely scholarly interests”: “it grew out of a concern for the preser-

vation of Western culture.”⁶⁹ The study of ancient works of culture was a way of responding to the barbarism of the present.

Given this ambition, it would be anachronistic to blame Curtius for ignoring the admonition of his contemporary Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilization that is not also a record of barbarism, or for fixing his gaze on the Western tradition and failing to look East or South. It should, nevertheless, be acknowledged that he was a man of his time and that if a scholar in the twenty-first century were to retrace his steps, the perspective would need to be more globalized. Curtius was not interested in the fact that Terence, whom he rightly calls “one of the favorite school authors of the entire Middle Ages,”⁷⁰ was a slave, probably born in or near Carthage. He barely noticed the gendering of the classical tradition. And he was very thin on the role of Arabic scholars in preserving the ancient Greek foundations of Western thought. Averroes and Avicenna each get two passing mentions in a book of nearly seven hundred pages, and there is not a single reference to the eleventh-century Muslim-born physician Constantinus Africanus, writers who were formative in the transmission of classical thinking about many of Shakespeare’s leading themes.⁷¹

Mercifully, we do not live in the world of book-burnings that Curtius inhabited in Germany as he was researching and writing his book between 1933 and 1945. We do, nevertheless, live in a world in which the classical tradition as he understood it is in danger of burial beneath the avalanche of the information revolution, and where its spirit of dialogue between different languages and cultures is ebbing rapidly away. Underlying my narrative about the creative regeneration of the classical tradition and the eventual emergence of Shakespeare as the modern classic are twin anxieties: for how much longer will his own classicism be recognizable to playgoers and students, who are no longer versed in the stories of Virgil and Ovid or a knowledge of Roman history? And will he continue to be a living classic in a future where attention spans are short and the long view of the past is flattened by the simultaneity of data derived from the digital world?

More information is now available at the push of a mouse to anybody in the world with an Internet connection than was ever available to the whole of history before our time. Shakespeare inherited a classical tradition that had been painstakingly constructed and

reconstructed from manuscripts, fragments, broken statues, and other artifacts over several hundred years. We, by contrast, have an instantaneous and seemingly atemporal digital simulacrum of the whole of that tradition alongside the “modern classics” from Shakespeare to Milton to Modernism and far beyond. The question of the “immortal” Shakespeare’s future survival—will he in fact prove mortal at some point between the four hundredth and the five hundredth anniversary of the burial of his physical remains?—is a synecdoche for the question of the future survival of any kind of “classical tradition” in the welter of the information age. These much-expanded E. H. Gombrich Lectures are accordingly a small contribution to the ongoing work of the Warburg school.