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*Reading Shakespeare  
and the Classics.  
A Postgraduate Seminar*

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## INTRODUCTION

The age of Shakespeare was immersed in classical learning. This meant primarily Latin history, philosophy, and literature. “The chiefest labour of the school”, the Elizabethan teacher Richard Brinsley wrote in his *Ludus Literarius, or the Grammar Schoole* in 1612, “is to make those purest Authors our own, as Tully [Cicero] for prose, as Ovid and Virgil for verse, so to speak and write in Latin for the phrase, as they did”<sup>1</sup>. Upon completing his studies at the grammar school of Stratford-upon-Avon, therefore, Shakespeare was certainly familiar with the best fruits of the culture of ancient Romans, if not able to speak like a proper one. So much so that, as Jonathan Bate has demonstrated, it is possible to argue that in his works Shakespeare “was almost always Ovidian, more often than is usually supposed Horatian, sometimes Ciceronian, occasionally Tacitean, an interesting mix of Senecan and anti-Senecan, and [...] strikingly anti-Virgilian – insofar as Virgilian meant ‘epic’ or ‘heroic’”<sup>2</sup>. Contrarily to what has been long argued, moreover, he must have also been no stranger to Greek literary culture. To be sure, as Colin Burrow acknowledged, most grammar schools “aimed no higher than enabling their charges to work through the Greek New Testament, which was a low target”<sup>3</sup>. And yet, as Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard have recently pointed out, “[Greek] texts circulated in early modern England in Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages; as elaborately annotated folios, portable parallel-text editions, and accessible vernacular octavos; in the form of originals, imitations, and adaptations; as books, performances, and songs”<sup>4</sup>. This certainly accounts for Shakespeare’s undeniable knowledge of Homer and the great Greek tragedians, not to mention historians like Plutarch or philosophers like Plato.

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<sup>1</sup> Brinsley (1612: 195).

<sup>2</sup> Bate (2019: 16).

<sup>3</sup> Burrow (2015: 599).

<sup>4</sup> Demetriou and Pollard (2017: 3-4).

That being said, Ben Jonson's much-quoted remark on Shakespeare's "small Latin and less Greek" would thus seem to be quite unfair.

Along with the circulation of the originals, as mentioned above, early modern English translations played a crucial role in the transmission of the culture of classical antiquity to Shakespeare and his contemporaries<sup>5</sup>. "Up to a quarter of books printed in the Elizabethan era", Stuart Gillespie wrote, "seem to have been translations [...] classical and patristic Greek originals account for about 8 per cent to Latin's 40 per cent [...]"<sup>6</sup>. Many of these classical translations were used for pedagogical purposes, the translated authors being those studied in the grammar schools and universities. It has also been suggested that this 'translational movement' was spurred by a general willingness to make available the "raw material" of the originals to a wider readership, as well as provide "fresh stylistic and formal models" to English writers<sup>7</sup>. Most importantly, however, it was a matter of national pride. In the age when England managed to impose itself as a power at international level, translating from the classics meant acknowledging that English culture was becoming mature enough to render the prestigious languages of the past into its own vernacular and thus "assume a respectable role in the cultural life of Europe"<sup>8</sup>. This process implied a considerable degree of freedom or 'domestication', which can be found, to put it in Massimiliano Morini's words, "in the way the translators bring their own sensibility to the vocabulary, diction, metaphors, and prosody of the translated text, in the way the *elocutio* of the source text is modified in order to accommodate the translator's notions of what that text should be"<sup>9</sup>. In so doing, early modern translations proved fundamental in constructing "a bridge", as Gillespie maintained, between classical and English cultures, which allowed "new prospects and possibilities to be glimpsed"<sup>10</sup>.

Be it through direct access to the Greek and Latin originals or the several English translations available, Shakespeare certainly had more than a passing acquaintance with the classics, and made deft use of them in his plays and poems<sup>11</sup>. Overall, as Charles Martindale summarised, "[o]ne third of Shakespeare's

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. among the latest ones Morini (2006), Braden, Cummings, and Gillespie (2010) and Gillespie (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Gillespie (2015: 63).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gillespie (2015: 64-65).

<sup>8</sup> Morini (2006: 27). Cf. also Cattaneo (1996: 379-401) and Cummings and Gillespie (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Morini (2006: 28).

<sup>10</sup> Gillespie (2015: 66).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. among many others Martindale (1990), Miola (1992), Miola (1994), Martindale and Taylor (2004), Burrow (2013), Pollard (2017), and Bate (2019).

plays are set in the ancient world, and he has constant recourse to classical mythology and history, and to classical ideas”<sup>12</sup>. It is true, as Burrow reminded us, that he did not engage in “translations of classical verse” or “establish a new and distinctive interpretation of any particular text” like other fellow poets and playwrights – such as Christopher Marlowe or Ben Jonson<sup>13</sup>. Just like them, however, he did appropriate and imitate the classics, and made them new by his touch so that they were able to speak with a new voice to a new audience. In this sense, it must be remembered that at the time imitations and translations of the classics were considered “ways of negotiating spatial and temporal distances”<sup>14</sup>, and useful *escamotages* to address the most debated issues from what Stephen Greenblatt has defined an “oblique angle”<sup>15</sup>.

Today a thriving area of research interest, the relationship between Shakespeare and the classics has aroused mixed feelings in the past. While never denying the indebtedness to the cultural and literary heritage of classical Rome and Greece, scholarship has long tended to present English drama as substantially free from the *auctoritas* of classical antiquity, and stress Shakespeare’s individual and original voice. “These views of the early modern English theatre as intrinsically anti-classical”, Demetriou and Pollard wrote, “rest especially on understanding Shakespeare – often taken as metonym for the period’s popular drama – as a natural, unlettered genius, in contrast with bookish playwrights such as Jonson or Chapman”<sup>16</sup>. Not only has the imitation of the classics been long associated with a supposed lack of originality, but it has also been looked down on for its “unfortunate connotations of privilege and exclusivity”<sup>17</sup>. The very opposite, in other words, of the increasingly common view of Shakespeare as a specimen of popular culture<sup>18</sup>.

More recent studies on the early modern concept of ‘imitation’ and the re-fashioning of the classics in Elizabethan England have reassessed such biased views and looked into Shakespeare’s relationship with classical antiquity with less prejudiced eyes. These scholarly works, for instance, have particularly stressed how early modern imitation was a sign of the period’s complete lack of concern for ‘originality’, which actually resulted in its being much more inclu-

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<sup>12</sup> Martindale (1990: vii).

<sup>13</sup> Burrow (2015: 599).

<sup>14</sup> Brown (2004: 107).

<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt (2018: 4).

<sup>16</sup> Demetriou and Pollard (2017: 2-3).

<sup>17</sup> Brown (2004: 106).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Petrina and Calvo (2018).

sive than what is usually thought<sup>19</sup>. To be sure, imitation presented itself as a literary practice aiming to legitimise the artistic fruits of the present by linking them to the prominent classical models<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, however, as mentioned above, early modern authors' engagement with the classics also testified to their willingness to use that prestigious cultural heritage so as to "assert an independence in their address to the audience and concerns of their contemporary world"<sup>21</sup>. In this sense, 'imitation' for Shakespeare and his contemporaries can be understood as "a positive and dynamic process or relationship, through which the past is used to produce materials of a living present [...]"<sup>22</sup>. In the case of Shakespeare, this dynamism implied not only imitating – and often subverting – classical stories, themes, or motifs. It also meant, as Burrow maintained, taking from authors as varied as Seneca, Plautus, and Terence a "set of techniques and skills – how to structure speeches and scenes, how to interrelate plot and subplot, how to unify a play around a core of metaphors", which enabled him to produce plays and poems addressing contemporary anxieties and issues effectively<sup>23</sup>. Of course, such active and dynamic engagement with classical antiquity underwent an unavoidable evolution throughout Shakespeare's career – from the explicit antagonism characterizing his earlier plays to the more nuanced approach emerging from his later production – and was influenced "by a many-sided relationship between his reading, his audiences, the genres in which he worked, and his contemporaries" at large<sup>24</sup>.

In light of the above, it is undeniable, to borrow Bate's words, that "[Shakespeare's] 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' [...] 'fables'"<sup>25</sup>. Resulting from this varied set of relationships, Shakespeare's response to the classics testifies to a life-long engagement, which has certainly contributed to making his literary output stand out as multi-layered and open to different interpretations, just as the contributions collected in this volume show.

This book grew from a Comparative Literature postgraduate seminar held at the Department of Studi Umanistici of the University of Torino, and devoted to

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<sup>19</sup> Cf., among others, Braden (1978) and Greene (1982).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Quint (1983).

<sup>21</sup> Cheney and Hardie (2015: 16).

<sup>22</sup> Cheney and Hardie (2015: 17).

<sup>23</sup> Burrow (2015: 610).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Burrow (2015: 616).

<sup>25</sup> Bate (2019: 15).

recent studies in classical reception. The focus was Shakespeare's reception of the Greek and Latin culture. Basing the work on the essays by Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (*Shakespeare and the Classics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), and by Jonathan Bate (*Shakespeare and Ovid*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993; *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019), the class explored how the various patterns of the classical world influenced Shakespeare's thought, imagery and style, and his sense of performance. "What fired Shakespeare's imagination?" is the question from which Bate's volumes starts<sup>26</sup>. Strongly trained in the classics, and initiated into the study of Literary theories and Comparative Literature, the young scholars engaged in this work tried to answer the question by concentrating their research on what we defined *the intelligence of the archetypes* (again, following in Bate's footsteps<sup>27</sup>). From this point of view, the characters of ancient literature have been considered as privileged interlocutors for Shakespeare, inasmuch they embody and perform social roles and values that strongly affected the collective imagery; at the same time, throughout time Greek and Latin literary genres, modes, and forms have been treated as basic patterns for representing and making sense of the world in aesthetic forms that are absolutely unique: Greek tragedy and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, provided a cultural experience which touched the *extreme limits* of the representation, and in this sense the sublime<sup>28</sup>, in terms of plot, philosophical thought and formal strength.

Accordingly, we may say that Shakespeare questioned antiquity not unlikely the ancient Greeks and Latins questioned their oracles, anxiously looking for a meaning that was as obscure and complex, as deeply and widely revealing. His use of the past implies, therefore, a sort of *descent to fathers* (to paraphrase Goethe's *Faust* descent to mothers<sup>29</sup>), undertaken to find out the emotional and rational (or pre-rational) sources and models of the human behavior, which the theater mirrors and adapts to the present. Looking at the present time from the perspective of the past also meant to adopt what Bakhtin called an *extralocalised* position, that is the best viewpoint for representing and understanding the complexity of the world, of human beings and history, and the contemporary history as well, through self-critic and internally dialogical forms<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Bate (2019: 7).

<sup>27</sup> Bate (2019: 1-20, *The Intelligence of Antiquity*).

<sup>28</sup> Boitani (1989).

<sup>29</sup> Lombardi (2016; 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin (1981; 1986).

Shakespeare's *artigianal* art also shows the playwright's exceptional attitude to put together the most varied sources creating something completely new<sup>31</sup>. In their complexity, his texts may be read as sort of *force field* endowed with the power of transforming at the same time the present and the past. Moreover, the reception of the classics for the playwright also follows a principle of pleasure implied in the joy of reading, discovering, and recreating ancient stories and fables. As told in the first verses of *Pericles* through the *prosopopeia* of John Gower, the author of *Confessio amantis* who brought to light the Prince of Tyre and his adventures, "To sing a song that old was sung" means to assume "man's infirmities", and to "glad your ear and please your eyes" (*Pericles*, Sc. 1, 1-4)<sup>32</sup>. The act of telling, reading, and (well) performing stories, and to keep on resounding old songs, has a therapeutic function ("for restoratives"), according to a message that stems – among thousands of examples – from the *Arabian nights* to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The unlocking of the pagan matter and world, finally, was a way to react to Puritan iconoclasm and restricted views, by exploring the deep connections between aesthetics and ethics implied in the same forbidden forms and images of antiquity, and by providing the public with a sort of "emotional education" taught by the dramatization of the *antique fables*<sup>33</sup>.

Starting from these premises, and from the assumption that, on the one hand, "meaning is always realised at the point of reception"<sup>34</sup>, and that, on the other, "classical reception must be engaged not only with the past but also with the present"<sup>35</sup>, the contributors of this volume have chosen a further posture to *question Shakespeare questioning antiquity*, which has been focused on the performance of specific social roles, such as kingships, heroism, family relationships, etc., both in themselves and in their classical patterns. These concepts have been

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor (2007) and Marengo (2021).

<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare (2005).

<sup>33</sup> Bate (2019: 8). Cf. *supra*, n. 25.

<sup>34</sup> Martindale (1993:3).

<sup>35</sup> Leonard and Prins (2010: 5). Furthermore, "beyond the interaction it establishes between past and present, classical reception may also open the way to an alternative future, a future that has been concealed or obscured by the present, and to which the past, paradoxically, allows us access. Thus, an act of classical reception is not a matter of just looking back to the past, nor is it simply being trapped by the obsessions of the present. It draws its inspiration from what the past makes possible for the future" (*ibidem*). This political engagement underlying the classical reception studies has been widely stressed in the essays of this volume.

explored from different angles, blending close reading and philological method with the contemporary, theoretical approaches of gender studies and body studies, but avoiding mere contextualism.

The volume is divided into six essays, aimed at exploring the ramifications of this intertextual network, recalling a wide range of authors and works of both Greek and Latin literature. The analysis covers different genres and themes: the representation of the king's body in Shakespeare's history plays is compared with the Ovidian notion of metamorphosis; the deconstruction of the archetype of the warrior in characters such as Antony and Coriolanus is linked to the tragic fate of Ajax; the meta-theatrical implications of cross-dressing are explained through the Plautine model; the thematic core of the relationship between fathers and daughters is linked to the tradition of Latin comedy; a taxonomy of Shakespearean ghostly apparitions is outlined through their antecedents in Seneca's tragedies. The essays face a fervent critical debate which has involved, in recent years, scholars such as – beyond the already quoted Charles Martindale and Jonathan Bate – Lorna Chadwick, Robert S. Miola, Coppélia Kahn, Lynn Enterline, Tanya Pollard, and Sasha Handley, among others. The original perspective of these essays is based on a notion of intertextuality that tempers close textual analysis with the enquiry into the performative dimension of theatre and the study of the reception of readers over time.

The first chapter of the volume, by Valentina Monateri, explores the Ovidian intertext of *Richard III* (1592-1593) and *Richard II* (1595), focusing on the metamorphoses of the kings' bodies throughout the plays. The theme of the weak king frequently recurs in Shakespeare's plays at the beginning of the 1590s: the identity of these characters is inseparable from their physical representation, gestures, and body language. Weaving Ernst Kantorowicz's pivotal study on the representation of the king with Lynn Enterline's theories on the emotional implications of the rhetoric of the body, this chapter analyses the relationship between the Ovidian pattern of metamorphosis, the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorisis* and the tragic notion of *hybris* in both the plays. The recognitions of Richard III – the 'unfinished' king – and Richard II – the king with an 'usurped' name – symbolise moments of self-awareness. While Richard III's unfinished shape reflects his own cruelty, Richard II's mirroring shows something artificial, like an inner reality: according to Monateri, the shadow of *metamorphosis* is cast over both the kings as a metaphor for change.

Marta Romagnoli's essay is focused on the presence of the figure of Ajax in Shakespeare's work, taken as a classical archetype of manhood. In his Roman plays, Shakespeare outlines several figures of heroic men. *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) and *Coriolanus* (1608), in particular, embody two opposite existential attitudes and two kinds of tragical errors: the first imposed by *eros*; the other by pride. From Plutarch, Shakespeare drew not only the subject of these plays, but

also the comparative pattern of the parallel lives. Both these plays, as Coppélia Kahn argued, do put into question the Latin notion of *virtus* as a disciplined behaviour related to males. Ajax is the perfect narrative archetype for challenging this concept, since his myth emphasises the contradictions of the notion of honour. On the one hand, Coriolanus is outraged like Ajax, and his turning against his country demythologises the tradition of the warrior and its values. On the other hand, Antony's inner moral conflict reveals the fragility of military ideals. Both Coriolanus, the 'man of action', and Antony, the 'man of words', experience a painful process of humiliation, bringing to light the vanity of war-like ethics.

Erika Grasso's contribution compares Plautus' *Casina* and Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-1598), analysing the representation of the hybrid and unstable notion of gender identity through the narrative motive of male-to-female cross-dressing. Far from merely being a plot device, cross-dressing reveals the author's views on gender roles, while its reception displays the removed pulses of social imagination. In recent years, gender studies have investigated female-to-male cross-dressing more widely than the opposite. Grasso's analysis focuses instead on male-to-female cross-dressing, arguing that it can be useful in unfolding social conventions around gender roles. Even if some critics have dismissed the importance of Falstaff's cross-dressing, according to Grasso, it implied an undeniable metatheatrical dimension, representing the stage as the ideal place where exceptions to social norms were possible. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* shows a soldier who loses masculinity because of the plotting of two women. Shakespeare reworked the Plautine *topos* to bring onstage a play that echoed and ridiculed the fears of Puritan moralists: the performance of cross-dressing, in other words, forced the audience to face the consequences of gender instability.

Marianna Biga's chapter revolves around the thematic core of the relationship between fathers and daughters. From *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1589-1591) to *The Tempest* (1610-1611), Shakespeare represented this relationship throughout his career. His ambivalent fathers are reluctant to lose their power over their daughters, even when they love them. As Robert S. Miola put forward, the rhetorical and symbolic language of this theme derived from Latin comedy, which was widely read in the schools of early modern England, despite its moral ambiguity, and mediated through many adaptations and reworkings, such as the Italian novellas. Many Plautine plays features a father/daughter relationship in which the young woman has a passive role, barely speaking during the representation. Biga compares Plautus' *Aulularia* and *Stichus* with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) and *The Tempest*, focusing on the conflict between fathers and daughters. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *Aulularia* present possessive fathers, *The Tempest* brings onstage an ambivalent

father whose actions resemble those of the father in *Stichus*: they both interfere with their daughters' romantic feelings at first but, in the end, accept their will, thus reshaping the traditional comic pattern and bringing renewal to the stereotypical *senex iratus*.

Virginia Nencetti's essay investigates the traces of Sophocles' Antigone in the character of Joan of Arc in Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI* (1592). Though Sophocles' actual influence on Shakespeare's work is still debated, the two heroines present many similarities in their characterisations, as emerge in their relations with the male world, in their sexualisation, in their deaths, and in their near-supernatural ability to interact with the natural elements. *Antigone* and *1 Henry VI* bring onstage two female characters whose main feature is firm opposition to an all-male power, which deprecated them more for their femininity, seen as outrageous alterity, than for their actual actions. According to Nencetti, who based her analysis on Tanya Pollard's studies, it is not too far-fetched to assume that, in shaping his Joan Puzel, Shakespeare created a sort of reversed Antigone. If the Greek character was the archetype of the outsider, Joan Puzel, as a foreigner, was the perfect subject for a reworking aimed at contesting the role of woman in early modern England without fearing controversies. Her being French, acting on the battlefield, and being tragically murdered by males are elements that contributed to making Joan Puzel a modern literary declination of Sophocles' Antigone.

Carlotta Ferrando's contribution analyses the ghostly apparitions in Shakespeare's work, remarking on their connections to the classical dramatic production, particularly to the Senecan drama. Taking into account Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*, the essay underscores the role the Latin author played both in recollecting the previous Greek literary tradition (merging together the examples by Aeschylus and Euripides) and in shaping the image of the ghosts that would later appear in the Renaissance revenge tragedies. According to Ferrando, Shakespeare's ghosts can be divided into two main groups: on the one hand, the ghosts that appear in *Richard III* (1592-1593), *Julius Caesar* (1599), and *Macbeth* (1606) can be viewed as the manifestation of the murderer's sense of guilt; on the other hand, the ghost of the father in *Hamlet* (1600-1601) is at the same time the closest to the Senecan paradigm and the furthest from it. Discussing the 'theology of ghosts' – in Sasha Handley's terms – in early modern England, the essay put forward that ghostly apparitions continued to recur in the scenes despite the cultural changes imposed by the Reformation. From this perspective, Shakespeare's plays represented a 'cultural locus', where past and present beliefs merged and collided, shaping the social imagination of their time.

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