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## Controversies over Shakespeare's Classical Education

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## CONTROVERSIES OVER SHAKESPEARE'S CLASSICAL EDUCATION

At that time when English writers were asserting unprecedented autonomy and mastery over their own work through allegorical frontpieces, admonitory prefaces, overt and covert declarations of intent<sup>1</sup>, the memorial volume of Shakespeare's collected works did not display an authorial self-consciousness and pride. Published seven years after the authors's death, the First Folio (1623) constituted rather Shakespeare's contemporaries comment on his artistic aspirations and personal stature. Many of its dedicatory epistles and poems have become a part of our cultural response to Shakespeare, out of which Ben Jonson's commendatory ode: *To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare: And What he Has Left Us* is probably the most often cited and remembered.

His line about Shakespeare's "small Latine, and lesse Greeke" belongs to the deeply-rooted cultural categories by which Shakespeare as a man and artist has been judged:

And though thou hadst small Latine and lesse Greeke,  
From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke  
For names, but call forth thunder'ing Aeschilus,  
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,  
Paccuius, Accius, him of Cordoua dead,  
To life againe, to heare thy Buskin tread,  
And shake a Stage: Or, when thy Sockes were on,  
Leave thee alone, for the comparison  
Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome  
Set forth or since did from their ashes come<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf.: L. S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1988, Esp. chpt. I.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the First Folio come from the reproduction of its opening pages in: *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans, Boston 1974, p. 65–66.

Though this fragment of the ode has usually been understood as Jonson's belittling Shakespeare's latinity and his hellenity, a closer look at the Elizabethan context proves that this widely circulated assumption is wrong.

Jonson's comment on Shakespeare's supposed illiteracy in the classical languages is, in fact, a form of praise. His point was that when practiced by an artist of Shakespeare's stature, "Modern" drama is better even than classical. He applauded Shakespeare above all writers: Ancient and Modern, enlisting himself on the side of the Modern in the battle of the books, a literary quarrel between those who thought the classical poets beyond compare and those who chauvinistically argued for the prominence of their own vernacular literature<sup>3</sup>.

In his praise Jonson was drawing on a *topos*, or convention of literary criticism of his time. Francis Meres had done it before him. In *Palladis Tamia or Wit's Treasury*, published in 1598, he had praised Shakespeare and through him English literature by comparing him favourably with the classical writers:

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage. For comedy witness his Gentlemen of Verona, his *Errors*, his *Love Labour's Lost*, his *Love Labour's Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his *Merchant Venice*: for tragedy, his *Richard the 2*, *Richard the 3*, *Henry the 4*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>4</sup>.

Today this fact about the cultural context of Jonson's famous ode is not generally recognized. Further, it is not generally remembered what Shakespeare would have learned in grammar school, where the eight-year curriculum was all in Latin, with some Greek in the last years. Ben Jonson himself became the classicist he was, with no more formal training than Shakespeare. They both attained their education at school level. Jonson was apprenticed to his stepfather, a bricklayer, after finishing school; Shakespeare, legend says, became "a schoolmaster in the country". Neither went to Oxford or to Cambridge. Though Jonson's grammar school, Westminster, was more prestigious than Shakespeare's, the King's Free School in Stratford-upon-Avon was a serious institution with distinguished headmasters in Shakespeare's time, and a curriculum closely analogous to that at Westminster<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: S. S. Huxssey, *The Literary Language of Shakespeare*, London–New York, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford 1977, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> J. Schoenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 62–72.

In his ode *To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare*, Jonson was exaggerating conventionally to set up a contrast between him, the epitome of "The Moderns", and the greatest figures among "The Ancients". His primary meaning was not that Shakespeare was ignorant of Latin and Greek authors. Jonson enumerates in his poem: "Aeschylus, Euripides, [...] Sophocles, [...] Pacuuius, Accius, and him of Cordua (Cordova was the birthplace of Seneca). None of those cited was taught in grammar schools and a "learned grammarian" of his times might not know many of them. Since Pacuvius and Accius were early Roman tragedians whose work did not survive except in fragments, it is possible that Jonson was alluding here to classical poet Horace, who had used Pacuvius and Accius to stand for Ancients by contrast with his "Modern" contemporaries.

He meant that Shakespeare was different from these dramatists, as a Modern was different from an Ancient. In fact, he meant that Shakespeare was better than those authors. But the men of English letters did not take Jonson's meaning fully or contextually, despite the firm roots of his topos in the literary culture of his time. The consequences of the literal interpretation of Jonson's culturally based figure of speech were enduring. In the popular mind they are still in operation.

The orthodox doctrine has embraced the notion that Shakespeare was an untutored genius who knew little or nothing of "Art" – understood as a disciplined exposure to the cultural tradition. He supposedly took his inspiration from "Nature" – in other words, from the world around him and from his untrained intellect. This *status quo* is, in fact, ironic, since in his ode Ben Jonson says of Shakespeare:

Yet must I not giue Nature all: Thy Art  
My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.  
For though the Poets matter Nature be.  
His Art both giue the fashion.

The Romantic distinction between urbanity and natural genius long antedates the Romantic Movement. John Milton in *L'Allegro*, written probably before 1632, states:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,  
If Jonson's learned Sock be on,  
Of Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child,  
Warble his native Wood-notes wild<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> From *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. D. Masson, London 1874, vol. II, p. 56.

In such formulations as these, Jonson himself was ironically cast as Shakespeare's opposite, the product of Learning and Art – Milton has him wearing a "learned Sock".

Yet, it is worth noting that in Milton's time the Ancients still prevailed. He and his contemporaries took it for granted that "learning" meant knowledge of the Ancient writers. Shakespeare, then, in this little distortion of Jonson's formula, was deprived of the only cultural heritage worth discussing. Three centuries passed before a fairer notion of Shakespeare's relationship to the world of Greece and Rome would come into general acceptance.

One of the first attempts to rehabilitate Shakespeare's acquaintance with classical literature took place in the middle years of the eighteenth century. A group of classically trained scholars who were neither well versed in Shakespeare nor in Elizabethan literature – especially Peter Whalley and John Upton – insisted that Shakespeare was as learned in the ancient languages and literature as they themselves were<sup>7</sup>. These enthusiasts found passages in quite obscure classics that looked enough like passages in Shakespeare to make them sure that Shakespeare had read and remembered a great deal of esoterica<sup>8</sup>.

The Elizabethan scholar Richard Farmer flattened these amateurs in 1767 in *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*, concluding:

I hope, my good Friends, you have by this time acquitted our great Poet of all piratical depredations on the Ancients [...] He remembered perhaps enough of his *school-boy* learning to put the *Hig, hag, hog*, into the mouth of Sir *Hugh Evans* [...]; and might pick up the Writers of the time or the course of his conversation a familiar phrase or two of *French or Italian*: but his *Studies* were most demonstratively confined to *Nature* and *his own Language*<sup>9</sup>.

Farmer showed without difficulty that many of the supposed parallels were commonplaces in Shakespeare's time; he might have found them in reference books<sup>10</sup>. In addition, he drew attention to the fact that Shakespeare's knowledge of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* came from Sir Thomas North's translation (1579), with three reprints in Shakespeare's lifetime. On the basis of this discovery he concluded gleefully that Shakespeare had no Greek.

<sup>7</sup> In many cases the history of Shakespearean scholarship is dotted with self-serving attempts to prove that Shakespeare knew what the author of the book or article knew.

<sup>8</sup> *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. Vickers, London 1979, vol. III, p. 254–258, 291.

<sup>9</sup> *Shakespeare: The Critical...*, vol. V, p. 159–278, *Quot.*, p. 278.

<sup>10</sup> You do not have to have read Albert Einstein's *Theory of Special Relativity* itself to allude to it, and you can discuss the id and the superego without having read Freud.

Nowadays Farmer's view that secondhand knowledge of a work or a culture is not knowledge at all, is surely untenable. Yet, his dictum became and remained the gospel of orthodoxy for many years. In the history of nineteenth century Shakespeare criticism, the opinion prevailed that Shakespeare had a smattering of Latin and no Greek<sup>11</sup>.

The full history that begins with the misinterpretation of a cliché of literary criticism is, of course, more complicated than my brief account makes it seem. In nineteenth century Germany, for example, scholars found plenty of evidence of Shakespeare's Latin. A few British scholars were similarly aware<sup>12</sup>. But the dominant notion was that Shakespeare was a brilliant ignoramus, and this paradox had strange consequences. Perhaps the strangest of them was the belief that Shakespeare did not write the plays after all: he was ignorant and the plays show some learning.

The anti-Stratfordian heresy has begun<sup>13</sup>. Fuss is made about Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford, including moot trials before Supreme Court Justices and members of the House of Lords. Some try to prove that Francis Bacon was, in fact, the author of Shakespeare's works; some try to prove that it was Christopher Marlowe. Another misinterpretation was "disintegration", which is excision from Shakespearean canon all the parts of plays that showed "too much learning" for the actor from a provincial Warwickshire<sup>14</sup>. Of these two heresies, anti-Stratfordianism has never influenced respectable academic circles. Disintegration, though no longer fashionable, was a dominant mode in the early years of the twentieth century.

The publication of Thomas Whitfield Baldwin's *William Shakespeare's "Small Latine and Lesse Greeke"* in 1944<sup>15</sup> constituted a major turning point in the history of Shakespeare criticism. This 1500 page study researches Tudor grammar school education with special attention to the King's Free School at Stratford-upon-Avon, which was modelled on St. Paul's School in London. The curriculum was entirely in Latin from the beginning of the school. Boys had to be able to read and write English before they were admitted at the age of seven. (No one taught English language and literature in British and American schools until 1857. It

<sup>11</sup> Cf.: A. M. Eastman, *A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism*, New York 1968.

<sup>12</sup> A. M. Eastman, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. for example: J. F. Forbis, *The Shakespearean Enigma and the Elizabethan Mania*, New York 1924; B. E. Laurence, *Notes on the Authorship of the Shakespeare Plays and Poems*, London 1925; R. Gittings, *Shakespeare's Rival: A Study in Three Parts*, London 1960; H. N. Gibson, *The Shakespeare Claimants*, London 1962.

<sup>14</sup> G. Evans, B. Evans, *Everyman's Companion to Shakespeare*, London-Melbourne-Toronto 1978, p. 144-181.

<sup>15</sup> T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's "Small Latine and Lesse Greeke"*, Urbana 1944, vol. 1-2.

shows how long the Ancients held their ground on the battlefield against the Moderns).

In his monumental book Baldwin presents the textbooks, from William Lily's *Latin Grammar* through *Distichs* of pseudo-Cato and the fables of Aesop (in Latin) to Terence, Plautus, Cicero, Quintilian, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, including Renaissance latinists, and in the last years of schooling New Testament Greek. It was quite a list for boys to master from the age of seven to the age of fifteen. If this can be labelled "small Latine", I wonder how the curricula of nowadays classical departments can be described!

Though the records naming the boys who attended the King's Free School in Shakespeare's childhood do not survive, the likelihood that Shakespeare's name was on the list is extremely high. His father had been Mayor of the town and was a prominent citizen, and the education was free<sup>16</sup>. Baldwin "examines" Shakespeare, through his plays, on the Stratford curriculum. His results are very interesting: if a classical author was taught at the King's Free School, Shakespeare "passes" easily; if a classical author was not taught there, Shakespeare often "fails". He seems not to have pursued the classics much after leaving school, Jonson definitely did. Yet, the difference between Shakespeare and Jonson, of course, offers another way of defining what "small" and "lesse" mean in the famous offending phrase.

Baldwin establishes also the principles of composition that were taught to the boys on a theme, or an image (called *copia*), logical discourse, and imaginative use of rhetorical schemes and tropes. Owing to his study, we have acquired a knowledge of the curriculum that was intended by the founders of Tudor education to produce statesmen schooled in arts of oratorical persuasion and in ethics. Shakespeare, Jonson and many of their contemporaries were also exposed to this curriculum, which helped them to become intellectually supple and verbally gracious poets and dramatists<sup>17</sup>.

Once Baldwin had substantiated the facts about Shakespeare's education, other scholars began to interpret Shakespeare's intellectual life unfettered by a misinformed tradition. In 1953, Virgil K. Whitaker published *Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry Into the Growth of His Mind and Art*<sup>18</sup>. The

<sup>16</sup> S. Schoenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the Tudor educational system and its incidental benefit to literature had consequences beyond Tudor and Stuart times. The system remained largely unchanged until about 1910, and therefore Churchill was disciplined in statecraft out of the same curriculum that had disciplined the statesmen around Queen Elizabeth. Similarly, Shelly and Arnold were taught out of the very books that had made poets of Shakespeare and Jonson. I am indebted for this information to George Peabody, Professor of Education and Human Development, at Homerton College, Cambridge 1992.

<sup>18</sup> V. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry Into the Growth of His Mind and Art*, San Marino (California) 1953.

book was a serious attempt to observe the workings of Shakespeare's mind. Whitaker showed that Shakespeare used the classics for decorative and ostentatious purposes in his early works, while in his maturity, he assimilated them more naturally into the structures of his plays.

His emphasis on the chronology of the canon has inspired many scholars to think of Shakespeare's classicism in specific time frames. If we know what Shakespeare was reading for one play, and if we are alert in our reading of surrounding plays, we may learn some interesting things about how Shakespeare worked with the classics. When he was finishing *Henry V* (ready in 1599), Shakespeare was reading Plutarch's *Life of Julius Caesar* for his play *Julius Caesar* (written at the end of 1599). This chronology of creative influences can be seen in the allusions to ancient Roman military tactics, to Pompeius Magnus, and Marcus Antonius, and to Alexander the Great that proliferate in *Henry V*. While working on *Macbeth* (1606), Shakespeare was reading for *Antony and Cleopatra*. Six allusions to Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius* – the source of *Antony and Cleopatra* – turn up in *Macbeth*. Examples of this kind can be multiplied. The point is that Shakespeare did not decide to write a play, stack up books for it like a student writing a term paper, or a scholar writing an article, and go to work. He seems to have been reading in advance, and what he read he remembered, as it were, permanently.

At the end of his career Shakespeare alludes in passing, but familiarly and in detail, to classical stories that he used as the sources of the plays and poems as much as two decades earlier. A striking example is the brief allusions in both *Macbeth* (1606) and *Cymbeline* (1610) to Tarquin, the villainous rapist of Lucrece in classical legend. Shakespeare wrote a long narrative poem of the story in 1593 or 1594. Each of the later references comes just as a villain is entering a bedroom with evil in his heart. Macbeth is to murder Duncan and Iachimo is to obtain evidence, which he will use to slander the innocent Imogen, asleep in her bed, as Lucrece was when Tarquin assaulted her. Each of these villains compares himself to Tarquin in ways that evoke the classical legend and the poem that Shakespeare had made from that legend.

Another piece of evidence for this belief that Shakespeare worked from memory when he wrote, is the famous and vivid passage in *The Tempest*, where Prospero bids farewell to his art<sup>19</sup>. William Maginn showed in 1839

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<sup>19</sup> Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves;  
And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that  
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,  
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime



what others since have shown: that Prospero's vivid incantation is a melding of lines from Book VII of Ovid's Latin *Metamorphoses* – Medea's invocation of the magical powers as she gathers the herbs for her rejuvenation brew – and Arthur Golding's English translation of the same passage (1593). The Medea story was one of Shakespeare's favourite passages in *Metamorphoses*. He draws on it in *The Rape of Lucrece*, in *Measure for Measure*, and repeatedly in *The Merchant of Venice*. He studied Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in grammar school in an edition with the Raphael Regius notes.

If we were to suppose that Shakespeare patiently compared Golding's (sometimes inaccurate) translation with a Latin original open on the desk before him as he wrote, we would have to imagine a Shakespeare who was more a pedant than a poet. It is pleasant to suppose instead that Shakespeare remembered the Latin from grammar school days long ago and conflated it unconsciously with Golding's translation read more recently.

We may even suppose that, in grammar school nearly forty years before, Will Shakespeare had been asked to translate Medea's invocation into English and then to put that verse back into Latin verse (not Ovid's but his own). There is no reason we should not do this, as this process was a standard pedagogical device in Elizabethan grammar schools. If so, we have Shakespeare as a pre-adolescent making a "first draft" of what was to become Prospero's great poetry. As for Golding, Shakespeare might have had it open to: "Ye Ayre and windes: ye Elves of Hilles, of Brookes, of Woods alone, Of standing Lakes [...]" But I would like to believe that Shakespeare could call up Golding (as Medea called up her spirits) "without a book".

Another method of researching Shakespeare's classicism deals with drawing attention to the fact that he very often appropriated classical form without necessarily borrowing the content itself. Emerys Jones first showed us how to observe Shakespeare in these terms in *The Origins of Shakespeare*

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Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice  
 To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid –  
 Weak masters though ye be – I have bedimm'd  
 The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,  
 And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault  
 Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder  
 Have I given fire, and rifted Jov's stout oak  
 With his own bolt; the strong-bas'd promontory  
 Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up  
 The pine and cedar: graves at my command  
 Have wak'd their sleepers, opt'd, and let'em forth  
 By my so potent Art. (5.1.33–55)

The citation from *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare "The Tempest"*, ed. F. Kermode, London–New York (1954) 1980.

(1977)<sup>20</sup>. Under the influence of Jones's intellectual impact new scholarship is beginning to think of rhetorical shapes – of a soliloquy, or an oration, or an epic invocation, or more ambitiously, the form of a scene – as sources Shakespeare could borrow from.

For instance two of Shakespeare characters in the grip of sexual passion, Tarquin who is about to rape Lucrece and in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo who is about to propose a monstrous sexual bargain to Isabella, express their passion and their anguish at that passion in soliloquies that appropriate the form of soliloquies in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid six young women in separate stories are suddenly and newly passionate (Medea is the prototype). They question themselves, blame the gods or someone other than themselves, universalize their situation, fear the future, and see their passion as part of a larger conflict – all this in sculptured rhetoric wryly out of keeping with overwhelming emotion. The same pattern appears in Shakespeare's two young men soliloquizing in the strong grip of lust. From reading Ovid as a schoolboy, Shakespeare apparently came to feel that this pattern is the inherent form of lustful self-communion, and he adapted it to his purposes when he wrote about young men tempted to sexual crimes.

In a way roughly similar, Shakespeare extrapolated rhetorical questions and *ad hominem* argument – two formulas of persuasive oratory from the works of Quintilian and Cicero. When he found no exact source in Plutarch for the orations of Brutus and Antony in *Julius Caesar* he embodied what he made Brutus and Antony say in these two formulas. Actually, *Julius Caesar* is full of other persuasive speeches: Marullus haranguing the Plebeians in the street; Cassius wooing Brutus towards conspiracy; later, Cassius doing the same to Casca; Portia pleading with Brutus in their orchard, and so on. These speeches, too, made use of the two rhetorical devices Shakespeare thought of as the orator's stock in trade.

It would be pleasing to go on with a subject as all-absorbing as this one, if this work's had no stringent limits. I will leave with the observation that, ironically enough. Jonson's ode written to praise his friend and colleague resulted in an impossible Shakespeare, a man who was utterly ignorant of the Ancients. More than three centuries later scholarship has returned (and is still returning Shakespeare's knowledge of the Ancients to him). It has learnt to think about the kinds of creative things Shakespeare did with his "small Latine and lesse Greeke". Shakespeare, like Ben Jonson, was a Modern; they both would define an excellent Modern as one whose Nature was shaped by an Art that the Ancients bequeathed him.

<sup>20</sup> E. Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare*, Oxford 1977.