

# SHAKESPEARE'S "LESSE GREEK"

Andrew Wertfi

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Cassio: But soft, I pray you: what, did Caesar swoon?

Casca: He fell down in the market-place, and foamed at mouth, and was speechless. . . .

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Brutus: And after that he came, thus sad, away?

Casca: Ay.

Brutus: Did Cicero say anything?

Casca: Ay, he spoke Greek.

Brutus: To what effect?

Casca: Nay, and I tell you that I'll ne'er look you in the face again: but those that understood him smiled at one another, and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me.

*Julius Caesar: Act I, Scene 2*

**D**ESPITE important evidence, orthodox scholars have ruled out Shakespeare's ability to read Greek. Implying the matter is closed, they tell us Shakespeare relied on few translated Greek writers, and read none in the original. We suggest that, on the contrary, the Greek classics were important to Shakespeare, and that he read them in Greek.

Let's begin with the conclusions of two popular orthodox works on the subject. One was written for the last generation: J.A.K. Thomson's *Shakespeare and the Classics*; the other is more recent and popular with today's readers: Charles and Michelle Martindale's *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity*. These are appropriate springboards for our discussion, not because they are thorough examinations of Shakespeare's sources (as are the multi-volume works by T.W. Baldwin, Geoffrey Bullough, and Kenneth Muir) but because they are widely read by teachers and students, and thus are influential in shaping popular thought. They also neatly summarize the orthodox opinions of those longer works; as the Martindales confirm, "[W]e have lived long in [Baldwin's] company while writing this book" (6). The Martindales' newer book is both an update and a response to Thomson's classic.

### The constraints of the Stratford biography

One of Thomson's tasks is to place as many limits on Shakespeare's knowledge as possible, proving thereby that because Shakespeare relied on a relatively small fund of classical knowledge, the plays were written largely by one man. This argument was vital in his day; scholars were finding evidence of an alarmingly erudite Shakespeare in the plays, and could align it with his biography only by proposing that the canon had many authors. These people were known, often derisively, as "disintegrators." Thomson's famous contemporary, John Velz, noted: "disintegrators of the canon have assigned passages to Shakespeare's contemporaries on the basis of their classicism" (viii). While Thomson does insist, at least, that Shakespeare was not an illiterate rustic (31), he also asserts "[w]e are for the most part what our education has made us" (10).<sup>1</sup> Thomson is determined to prove that the Stratford man knew just enough to be able to write the plays with the help of grammar school, popular translations, friends both well-placed and educated, handed-down traditions and (not to be overlooked) classical knowledge as expressed in "noblemen's gardens" (38). He concludes, "Shakespeare was not a scholar," and while he admits that Shakespeare's Latin was formidable, he decides, "Greek is out of the question" (238).

The Martindales allow Shakespeare even less classical knowledge, assuring us they will "resist the modern tendency . . . to exaggerate Shakespeare's learning. . . ." (xi).<sup>2</sup> Just as Thomson's task was to hold the canon together by showing that Shakespeare's sources were simple and few, the Martindales determine to further minify what little learning Thomson allowed. They conclude:

Any Greek language Shakespeare had would not have been sufficient to allow him to read the [classics]. . . . Moreover, despite all efforts, no one has yet succeeded in producing one single piece of evidence from the plays to make any such debt . . . particularly likely. (41-42).

However, Thomson himself provides examples of Shakespeare's use of untranslated Greek. In his discussion of *Titus*, he refers to the passage from Act I, Scene 1 in which Demetrius says:

Then, Madam, stand resolv'd, but hope withal  
The self-same gods that arm'd the Queen of Troy

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with opportunity of sharp revenge  
 upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent  
 May favor Tamara, the Queen of Goths.

"The reference," Thomson tells us, "is to a scene in the *Hecuba* of Euripides in which the eyes of Polymestor, a Thracian tyrant, are destroyed by Hecuba the Trojan queen." He continues, "one would have little hesitation in saying that the source of the English poet here is Ovid, were it not for the addition of the words 'in his tent.' Ovid says nothing about a tent, but it is in his tent that Polymestor is blinded [in Euripides' play]" (57-58). Absent any known translation, the Martindales can only dismiss this as a "slender peg" (44).<sup>3</sup>

Thomson then confronts Marcus Andronicus's admonition to Lucius:

Thou art a Roman; be not barbarous:  
 The Greeks upon advice did bury Ajax  
 That slew himself; and wise Laertes' son,  
 Did graciously plead for his funeral." (1.1.378)

This, says Thomson, reveals knowledge of the *Ajax* of Sophocles. He insists, "It cannot be the thirteenth book of the *Metamorphoses*, for there Ulysses is the villain of the piece, not, as in Sophocles, the chivalrous foe. It appears," he concludes, "that the author of *Titus* . . . had read the *Ajax*" (58). In this he agrees with George Steevens, the remarkable eighteenth-century editor of Shakespeare, who also reasoned that Shakespeare had read the *Ajax*, and that "the play before us was the work of one who was conversant with the Greek tragedies in their original language" (Ogburn 288). Reflecting on these examples, Thomson equivocates: "What it means I must leave to the experts to decide" (58).

To counter such evidence, the Martindales venture that Shakespeare might have spied this information in a footnote in Lambinus's edition of Horace's *Satires*. Sensing this explanation might not do, they conclude, ". . . to argue that Shakespeare read the *Ajax* is to convict him of wasting his time, if that is all the fruit it bore" (42). But according to Churton Collins, it yielded a far greater harvest than this, since "[r]eminiscences of [the *Ajax*] seem to haunt his dramas" (63).

In *Henry VI Part 3*, Warwick addresses Clarence, saying:

Our scouts have found the adventure very easy;  
 That as Ulysses and stout Diomede

With sleight and manhood stole to Rhesus' tents  
 And brought from thence the fatal Thracian steeds,  
 So we, well cover'd with the night's black mantle,  
 All unawares may beat down Edward's guard. (4.2.18-23)

This story is told in Homer's *Iliad* in Greek, and in the Greek version of Euripides's *Rhesus*; but, says Thomson, these cannot be the origin since "these are Greek sources" (94). If this is so, then several phrases, such as "fatal steeds," could only be derived from non-Greek sources if Shakespeare had collected them from a number of different translations. He surmises that Shakespeare picked from various lines in Ovid's *Heroides*, though the first line would have had to come from Book VIII of the *Metamorphoses*, and then gleaned "fatal steeds" from a "Latin commentary (based on Servius) upon Virgil, *Aeneid*. . . ." (94). This unlikely smorgasbord of attributions is necessary only because the logical source is Greek.

*Timon of Athens* presents yet another difficulty. The Riverside *Shakespeare* lists Lucian's *Timon, or the Misanthrope* as a possible source (86), but there was no English translation of this Greek author in Shakespeare's time. The Martindales surmise that Shakespeare might have seen Erasmus's Latin translation (42), but Thomson notes that Shakespeare's treatment of the material is devoid of the Latin feel we get, for example, in *Julius Caesar*, which is "studiously" Latinized (223). Both Riverside and the Martindales suggest possible foreign translations, although they must know this is unlikely. In the end, Thomson asserts, "few will suppose he read Lucian in Greek" (223).

### Shakespeare's Greek vocabulary

Shakespeare bequeathed many words to English, from *premeditated* to *puke*. Among the words coined by Shakespeare, several were taken directly from classical Greek. The number of words from Greek that Shakespeare coined is small compared with his coinages of words based in Latin, but this is only to be expected, since Latin, a second language in the Elizabethan Renaissance, was at the tip of every writer's pen. The Greek words coined by Shakespeare include *academe*, which appears in English for the first time in *Love's Labor's Lost*. In Act I, Scene 1, when the King predicts, "Our court shall be a little *academe*,/ Still and contemplative in living art," he perfectly mirrors the open, public grove in Athens where Plato taught. He uses it again when Berowne informs his fellow would-be scholars, "From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:/ They are the ground, the books, the *academes*/ from whence doth spring the true Promethean fire" (4.3.298-300). With these lines, Shakespeare was the first of many to use the name of the Greek hero, Prometheus, as an adjective.

Berowne also voices Shakespeare's coinage of *critic*, saying he'd be appalled to see Hercules play with a spinning top, or "the critic Timon laugh at idle toys" (4.3.168). Timon was the angry nobleman noted for his distrust of mankind that we (and Shakespeare) learn of through Lucian.

It seems Shakespeare's Greek words often appear when his mind is moving to Greek literature. The editors of *Coined by Shakespeare* breezily quote a critic who avers, despite Ben Jonson's deprecation, that in our age Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek would be considered "formidable" (52).<sup>4</sup> What a thing to mention in passing! Other Greek words coined by Shakespeare are directly linked to Greek literature; words such as *dialogue* (which he used first as a verb), *metamorphize*, *Olympian*, *pander* (from the character *Pandarus* in the *Iliad*), *ode*, and *mimic*.

### Sonnets 153 & 154

Two lasting difficulties for those who wish to disparage Shakespeare's Greek are *Sonnets 153* and *154*, the final two in Shakespeare's collection. They share the same subject: Cupid, who falls asleep near a pond, is discovered by a troupe of virgins devoted to the chaste Diana; they steal his fiery, love-inducing brand and cool it in a nearby pond. Almost unanimously, scholars accept that the source for these two sonnets is the *Greek Anthology*.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably, the significance of this attribution has been largely missed by those who doubt the Stratford man's authorship. Even heretical studies that offer a highly personal reading of the *Sonnets*, for example: Alfred Dodd's *The Personal Poems of Francis Bacon (Our Shake-Speare) the Son of Queen Elizabeth* (remarkable for its title alone), do not include these two sonnets in their analysis, considering them unimportant and unrevealing. Joseph Sobran, in *Alias Shakespeare*, dismisses them as "pure literary artifice" (79). In order to advance his case for Shakespeare's Greek, Greenwood gives them considerable attention (127-129), but since his argument is now almost a hundred years old, we should consider what more recent scholarship has to offer.<sup>6</sup>

#### Sonnet 154:

The little Love-god, lying once asleep,  
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,  
Whilst many nymphs that vow'd chaste life to keep  
Came tripping by, but in her maiden hand  
The fairest votary took up that fire,  
Which many legions of true hearts had warm'd,

And so the general of hot desire  
 Was sleeping by a virgin hand disarm'd.  
 This brand she quenched in a cool well by,  
 Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,  
 Growing a bath and healthful remedy  
 For men diseas'd, but I, my mistress' thrall,  
 Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:  
 Love's fire heats water, water cools not love. (Riverside 1871)

Compare this with the Greek epigram:

Beneath these plane trees, detained by gentle slumber, Love slept, having put his torch in the care of the Nymphs; but the Nymphs said one to another: "Why wait? Would that together with this we could quench the fire in the hearts of men." But the torch set fire even to the water, and with hot water thenceforth the Love-Nymphs filled the bath. (Hutton 385-403)

All past and present orthodox scholars who have sought the origin of these sonnets, among them Katherine Duncan-Jones, A.L. Rowse, Stephen Booth, and G. Blakemore Evans, agree that the source of both is the *Greek Anthology*.

However, unlike many examples of Shakespeare's use of Greek sources, scholars cannot point to a translation, since the first complete one (in Latin, by Lubinus) was not published until 1603 (in Heidelberg), and since that book was new and also rare, it is hard to argue that Shakespeare knew it. (To my knowledge, no one has made this argument.) Only one Latin translation before 1603 included the epigram that these sonnets are based on (Italy's Fausto Sabeo included it in his 1556 compilation), but Hutton's work (see below) shows that this is an unlikely source. Shakespeare's authorship of these sonnets after 1603 fits only the most radical chronologies. In fact, Helen Vendler, in her recent critical reading of these two poems, concludes that the two sonnets, because of their style, represent "early work" (649). Thus, both textual and chronological studies proscribe Shakespeare's use of the 1556 and 1603 Latin translations.

But the only known source of this epigram, outside of scattered translations, is in Greek—a serious problem for source scholars since the hundreds of orthodox biographies, a barbican defending Shakespeare's ignorance, assert that he did not have access to Greek works such as the *Greek Anthology*, and certainly could not read them. Several solutions have been tried.

Scholars have sought other possible sources so that Shakespeare's learning will not over-

reach the Shakespeare biography. The most thorough study of the two sonnets (found at the root of all subsequent studies) is James Hutton's "Analogues of Shakespeare's Sonnets 153 & 154" published in *Modern Philology*. Hutton exhaustively examines all possible analogues, but cannot find any that match as closely as the *Greek Anthology* epigram. Unwilling to venture that the Stratford man possessed the ability to read the Greek original, Hutton concludes in disappointment, "Shakespeare's immediate source still eludes us."

Since scholars could not seriously adduce another source, they tried a more direct solution: deny Shakespeare's authorship entirely. J.W. Mackail (who translated parts of the *Greek Anthology*) was "inclined to think that these sonnets are not by Shakespeare at all" (Rowse 317). T. W. Baldwin asserted that Sonnet 154 was not by Shakespeare; rather, when someone who could read the original Greek epigram wrote Sonnet 154, Shakespeare, upon reading that sonnet, composed one of his own, now Sonnet 153, with 154 later erroneously attributed to Shakespeare (RES 271).

Such attempts to disprove Shakespeare's authorship of the final two sonnets have not endured. A.L. Rowse, himself a poet, insists, "There is no reason whatever to doubt that they are [Shakespeare's]: they bear every mark of his characteristic ingenuity and suggestiveness" (317). Stephen Booth, editor of Yale's edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, comments, "Shakespeare's authorship of 153 and 154 has been regularly [but] unconvincingly challenged" (534). In fact, Booth notes that several puns in these two sonnets, such as plays on the word "will" and "well," appear in Shakespeare's plays, demonstrating even more clearly that the sonnets are by Shakespeare. G. Blakemore Evans admits that non-Shakespeare authorship of these two sonnets has been "discounted by recent criticism" (272). Most recently, Katherine Duncan-Jones, a well-known expositor of the sonnets, concludes that, although, as Hutton showed, there were scattered foreign-language translations of this epigram dating from the fifteenth century, "Shakespeare's *Sonnets* [153 and 154] seem closer to the original than to any [translation]" (422), a conclusion now echoed by most critics. This would seem to settle the question of whether or not Shakespeare had, at the very least, enough Greek to accurately translate these two poems.

But it doesn't. To reconcile the Shakespeare biography with these sonnets, Duncan-Jones surmises that Ben Jonson, who may have owned a copy of the *Greek Anthology*, might have translated the epigram, possibly for his projected second book of epigrams; and that his good friend Shakespeare, possibly having seen the epigram translated by Jonson, then possibly went on to write his own version as *Sonnets 153 and 154*, a solution that manages to outstretch Baldwin's (422). Booth agrees that "it is most unlikely that Shakespeare knew

the Greek text,” but in light of the difficult evidence, “there is no saying what [his] immediate source was” (533). Evans, though unable to offer an explanation, calls Shakespeare’s familiarity with the Greek text “highly unlikely” (272).

It should be obvious by now that if this were almost any other author, it would have been accepted long ago that the untranslated epigram in the *Greek Anthology* was the immediate source of these sonnets.

Yet another aspect of *Sonnets 153* and *154* leads us directly to the *Greek Anthology* rather than to some unknown translation of the solitary epigram. The epigram that Shakespeare used as a source is itself the second of a consecutive pair of epigrams in the *Greek Anthology* whose subject is baths with special properties, mirroring even more closely *Sonnets 153* and *154*, both of which are about this subject (Duncan-Jones 422). If the inability of scholars to find the man from Stratford in the first 152 sonnets has supplied his claim to *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* with a coffin, these last two may provide the nails.

### Shakespeare and Homer

Such evidence of familiarity with Greek texts has led some critics to surprising conclusions. Naseeb Shaheen, the leading authority on Shakespeare’s biblical allusions, asserts that “Shakespeare used many Homeric details not in Chapman” (564). This is striking in itself, but he goes on to caution, “nor can Shakespeare’s direct use of Homer be ruled out in view of the many dual-language Greek-Latin editions of Homer that were available” (565). Yet most scholars will not allow that Shakespeare read Greek-Latin editions. Shaheen’s book revives the argument that Stratfordian Churton Collins made a century ago: “through the Latin language [Shakespeare] had access to the Greek classics, and of the Greek classics in the Latin versions, he had a remarkably extensive knowledge” (4).

Why is this significant?

Because scholars have consistently noted Shakespeare’s desire to go, when he could, to the original when his imagination was excited. One of the clearest examples of this is his use of both Golding’s English translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the Latin original. Even the Martindales admit that scholars have made the mistake of assuming that “if Shakespeare used the translation, he cannot have also used the original” (3).

The studies undertaken by classicists like the Martindales and Thomson make it clear that Shakespeare was excited by Latin translations of Greek classics. Evidence of Greek dramatic borrowings make at least this admission necessary. If we now suddenly have him reading dual-language editions. . . . Well, when we consider that reading dual-language editions of Latin to English texts was one way many students learned Latin, we see the problem that a Latin-Greek text proposes.



That Shakespeare used Homer for *Troilus and Cressida* is called "tantalizing" by one critic (Barton, *Troilus* 479), and the same commentator also offers parallels between Shakespeare and Homer in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (though she does not directly compare the two). For example, the characters in the play "stress the richness of their encompassing world by listing its components" (*Dream* 252-253). Listing was a favorite technique of Ben Jonson, a devoted Greek scholar, which he demonstrated in *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. But, Barton notes, Jonson's lists are "stifling" and seem to inventory "the dusty corners of some Gothic lumber room," while Shakespeare's are "inexhaustively rich and various [and are made] relevant to the whole" (253). Jonson, a classics scholar—and always looking to imitate the masters—likely drew his obsession with lists from Homer. *The Iliad* provides an endless source of lists, but Shakespeare's lists are closer in effect to Homer's; they provide depth and richness, and contribute to the whole. Barton's analysis indicates that while Jonson merely imitated what he studied, Shakespeare's mind was an alembic, refining and converting what it encountered in the classics.

Foley has demonstrated the unusual but intriguing "potential sexual inversion" present at the end of the *Odyssey* (97). Odysseus regains his throne only with the help of his wife, Penelope. It is largely because of her intelligence, cunning and bravery that Odysseus is ultimately successful. This role reversal (i.e. a heroic Penelope) could cause an awkward or even dangerous marital tension, but Penelope chooses to subordinate herself to her husband, averting the potential inversion. This deflected tension and peaceful resolution, says Foley, perfectly mirrors the relationship between Rosalind and Orlando at the close of *As You Like It*. Other suggestions of Shakespeare's use of Homer center on *A Comedy of Errors* and the *Odyssey*, in this case regarding witchcraft and transformations. Segal notes:

The comparison to the enchantress in the *Odyssey* is particularly apt. A pernicious femme fatale, Circe used her seductive appeal to bewitch men. . . . Nor is this the only reference in the play to Homer's "reunion poem." Like Odysseus, Antipholus has spent years wandering throughout farthest Greece. His love for Luciana is like the siren's song that distracts and lures him from his quest. (301)

He continues, "The twins' long travels have been a voyage of rebirth and discovery. Is this not the very theme of the *Odyssey*?"

### Greek names in Shakespeare

A number of difficulties arise when scholars consider some of the Greek names in Shakespeare. William Jones, searching for a source for "Laertes," demonstrates that the name used by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* would have been known to a reader of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

However, absent in Ovid is the depth of character that one finds in both Shakespeare's and Homer's Laertes. Jones asserts, "Ovid only mentions Laertes, but in the *Odyssey*, he plays a significant part in the action by helping Ulysses gain revenge on Penelope's suitors." Jones continues, "Although Baldwin finds little evidence that Shakespeare had any first-hand knowledge of the *Odyssey*, Shakespeare may well have read a Latin translation" (9). Jones ventures that Shakespeare chose the name, not at random as some have guessed, but to signal that he intends to investigate the relationship of fathers and sons. It is rare to find a scholar who will admit that Shakespeare read the *Odyssey*: according to most critics, a few scattered chapters of Chapman's English *Iliad* were Shakespeare's only exposure to Homer. In fact, one orthodox scholar decides that we must come to the "surprising conclusion" that Homer failed to inspire Shakespeare (Reese 391), a conclusion that, as we have seen, is not supported by the evidence.

Jones notes other similarities between names in the *Odyssey* and *Hamlet*:

A careful check of *Hamlet* and the *Odyssey* reveals even more valid reasons for the use of the name Laertes. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, the prince sits brooding over the wedding feast. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus sits brooding among the wooers of his mother. To each of these sons comes news of a supernatural sort, Horatio's news of the ghost, Athena's visit from Olympus in the form of Mentor. Both supernatural agents demand that their sons take action to restore their fathers to their rightful positions, one to the throne of Ithaka, the other to eternal rest. These sons' responses to the supernatural demands are in both works the cause of the remaining action. (9)

As if that weren't enough, Jones observes that as Zeus makes the opening speech of the *Odyssey*, he meditates on the story of Aegisthus, who married another man's wife, killed the real husband, and was slain in turn by the revenging son, Orestes. Jones adds, "It is not surprising that Shakespeare, probably trained in the analogous thinking of the Renaissance, should have turned to the *Odyssey*. . . ." Realizing, perhaps, how unusual it was to suggest that Shakespeare was intimate enough with the *Odyssey* to actively draw on these parallels, Jones qualifies his thoughts by noting that "Shakespeare might have been only half-conscious of the thought process. . . ." though his conclusion is firm: "Nevertheless, the relationship is there." But Jones goes even further. The relationship, he states: "seems to carry over into another name choice. Laertes' sister also needed a name. Once the first Greek name had been chosen, the natural choice for hers was also a Greek one." Shakespeare, who already, to the reader's amazement, knows the epic in Latin, "naturally" chooses a second Greek name? Jones suggests that Shakespeare may have been aware of the irony of giving the helpless sister the name "Ophelia," which in Greek can mean "help" (9). It seems Shakespeare's

awareness of this could hardly be doubted. But another critic, also wondering why Shakespeare would choose the Greek name "Ophelia"—which he translates both as "help" and as "a source of gain"—finds the answer in the popular identification of Polonius with Lord Burghley. (While Stratfordians can see no particular reason for this second meaning, Oxfordians recognize the reference to Burghley's possible use of his daughter Anne to gain entry into the nobility through her marriage to the Earl of Oxford.)

Other examples abound, including the servant twins in *A Comedy of Errors* named "Dromio," from the Greek verb *dromos*, meaning *running at top speed, swift* (GEL 212); a name that reflects the frantic activity of these characters in the play (Segal 287). Desdemona's name has also drawn attention. German scholar Albert Tresch, writing in the *Germanisch-Romantische Monatsschrift*, is puzzled that Shakespeare chooses to retain, from the tale by Geraldini Cinthio which Shakespeare used for *Othello*, the Greek name "Disdemona," while choosing more culturally appropriate Italian names for the other characters. Tresch suggests that Shakespeare knew that *Desdemona*, in Greek, appropriately means "unfortunate one" (387-88), or "ill-fated woman."

### Shakespeare's use of Greek dramatic tropes

The style and nuance of the Greek language, as used by its greatest writers, is itself embedded in Shakespeare. When Collins discusses Shakespeare's "probable obligations to the Greek dramatists," he notes

the many curious parallels between his play on words; his studied use of paronomasia, of asyndeton, of onomatopoeia, of elaborate antithesis, of compound epithets, of subtle periphrasis; and above all his metaphors . . . with those so peculiarly characteristic of the Attic dramas. (62)

Indeed, it has been demonstrated that Shakespeare's transformation of Homeric images into symbols, occasionally couched in plot elements paralleled in Homer, cannot be accident, just as the vivid parallels in metaphor cannot be mere coincidence (Werth). Collins admits:

I have not space to illustrate, but it is indeed in the extraordinary analogies in particularity of detail and point, and in relative frequency of employment, presented by his metaphors to the metaphors of the Attic tragedians, that we find the most convincing testimony of his familiarity with their writings. (62)

Despite the fact that Churton Collins was, in Greenwood's words, a "violent" Stratfordian, it seems clear that his commitment as a classics scholar overcame the constraints of the Stratford biography. As he states, details such as these cannot be absorbed

through a translation, which is why those few who will thoughtfully analyze Greek in Shakespeare, such as Collins and Shaheen, are compelled to propose the use of a dual-language translation. Additionally, Shakespeare aptly uses *stichomythia*, the “line by line conversation between two characters in the Greek drama” (PEP 810) that the Greeks used to lend urgency, or “pith and moment,” to dialogue (Shackford 16-17). This was a fairly common device used by Elizabethan poets—especially those who were imitating Seneca’s version of this trope. But here is Shakespeare, the untutored rustic, demonstrating perfect mastery of this sophisticated rhetorical device in *Richard III* and *Hamlet*. That, in *Hamlet*, he uses the device in a play that is clearly modeled on a Greek drama (see below), is at least suggestive.

Thomson highlights similarities between Shakespeare’s and the Greek dramatists’ use of irony. He notes:

Shakespeare works in the Greek way upon the knowledge of his audience in order to produce the effect of tragic irony. . . . The boastful language of Caesar is very like those hubristic utterances which proceed from great persons in Greek tragedy on the verge of their downfall. (27)

Says Thomson, “It cannot be accident.” But he does not suggest what else it might be. Shackford adds, “Shakespeare share[s] with the Greek dramatists an artistic instinct for irony. It is an ever-present element in the subtle effectiveness of his dramas” (5). Noting that Shakespeare uses irony in uncannily the same way as Homer and Sophocles, she surprisingly concludes, “Shakespeare’s irony owed nothing, apparently, to Sophocles or Homer . . . [but rather] to his native endowment of keen perceptive powers” (6).

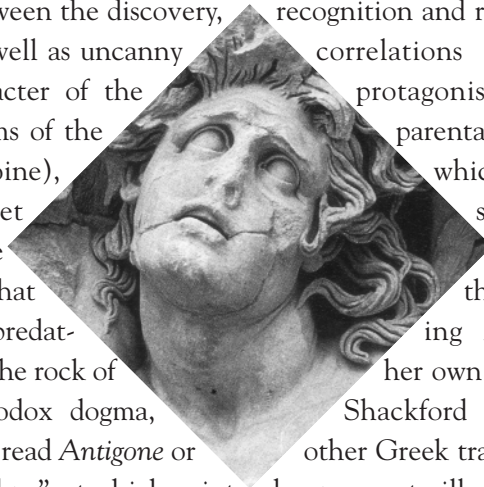
We doubt such nuances can be absorbed by reading a polyglot, or the result of heightened perception. Doubters of Shakespeare’s Greek learning have tried to explain away Greek lines and plots found in Shakespeare, but none has ever effectively responded to the observation made by Collins, Shackford and others that the essence, the nuance, of Greek dramatic style permeates all of Shakespeare’s writing. This is surely the reason why some of the most acute critics insist that Shakespeare resorted to, at the very least, a Greek-Latin edition. Besides the rudimentary Greek that such a reading requires, this is how all students of Greek ultimately gain fluency. But this, of course, cannot be allowed for William of Stratford.

### **Greek dramaturgy in Shakespeare**

By far the most overwhelming amount of material written on Shakespeare’s use of Greek has focused, not on the appearance of specific words or phrases that appear in his plays and sonnets, but on ideas, plots, philosophies and situational parallels that derive ultimately from Greek sources and are woven in, around and behind many—perhaps most—of the works.

A full examination of this would take a book, so a few examples will have to suffice.

Several plots used by Shakespeare have been linked to Greek drama. Emrys Jones argues that two Greek plays, Euripides' *Hecuba* and his *Iphigenia*, provide plots for several of Shakespeare's plays (85-118). Even the Martindales note striking similarities between *Oedipus Coloneus* and *King Lear*, and between Sophocles' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, though they dismiss them as "the result of chance" (43). Sensing (correctly) that this might not persuade the reader, they venture: "perhaps a friend told him about a performance of Euripides," though they admit: "we would obviously like to adduce a specific source" (44). And one truly believes they would, so long as it isn't in Greek. Martha Shackford notes unexplainable similarities between the discovery, recognition and reversal themes in *Oedipus* and *Othello* (29-37), as well as uncanny correlations between *Hamlet* and *Antigone* (i.e. the character of the uncle, the moral problems of the heroine), which lead the writer to conclude that "the Hamlet story might have had some common source before the *Ur-Hamlet* (16). It hardly needs to be said that the *Ur-Hamlet*, or any other such scholarly chimera predating *Hamlet*, has yet to be found. Caught between the rock of her own informed perceptions and the hard place of orthodox dogma, Shackford feels compelled to add: "That Shakespeare never read *Antigone* or other Greek tragedies has been positively asserted by competent judges"; at which point she goes on to illustrate Hamlet's many similarities, both in style and plot, to *Antigone* and other Greek dramas (16-28)!



Thomson notes dramatic parallels in *Macbeth*, such as a "strikingly Greek" murder scene and the death of Duncan, which are reported "in the Greek manner." He argues that the Weird Sisters' predictions and the action that follows are "exactly" the same as the sense we get in *Oedipus Rex*. He reports at length on the "sympathy" of method between *Macbeth* and other plays by Shakespeare and the ancient Greek dramatists (248-249). He finally concludes, "I am content with throwing out the suggestion that, through the medium of North's *Plutarch*, Shakespeare divined the true spirit of Greek tragedy" (250). Shakespeare divined the true spirit of Greek tragedy through the translation of a translation? North himself translated, not the Greek *Plutarch*, but a French translation by Jacques Amyot. This argument is even less convincing when we learn that North himself translated, not from the Greek *Plutarch*, but a French translation by Jacques Amyot. In fact, North often "mistook" Amyot's translation; he "elaborates it in the idiom of Tudor England" so that "In North's version *Plutarch* becomes . . . an Englishman." Furthermore, as Thomson tells us, the French version is itself "full of the color and sentiment of [Amyot's] age" (12).

### Greek philosophy and ethics in Shakespeare

Collins (along with others) has pointed to, as he phrases it, “the perfect correspondence between the attitude of Shakespeare and that of the Greek dramatists.” He states:

Not less Greek is his profound respect for the conventional symbols in which religious conceptions embody themselves, [as well as] his practical resolution of formal theology into the moral law. . . [H]e is Greek in his metaphysic [and] he is equally Greek in his ethic, though in important respects his ethic is tempered with Christian ideals. (62)

Other elements of Shakespeare’s philosophy are rooted firmly in Greek literature. Baker invites us to “consider that Shakespeare does not hold up examples of good men and women for us to dote upon, emulate, or to model our behavior upon, as the old ‘morality plays’ did. Why? Because Shakespeare was a true Platonist.” Shakespeare’s Platonism is accepted.

As suggestive as the preceding material may be, I think that if we wish a better understanding of Shakespeare’s influences, we must go beyond quote-hunting, plot comparison, and other anatomizing tasks. Shakespeare was unlike other writers of his day. When he used a source, he usually wove it into his work so seamlessly that for centuries critics were able to agree with Milton that an unlearned Shakespeare “warble[d] his native wood-notes wild” with scarcely a glance at more than a popular history or a grammar school primer, or echo Leonard Digges (the Younger), who asserted that Shakespeare “doth not borrow/ one phrase from the Greekes, nor Latines imitate,/ Nor once from vulgar Languages Translate. . .”<sup>7</sup>

No respectable critic would agree with that now. But it is easy to see why Shakespeare’s sources were missed by even competent critics. As the Martindales themselves admit, Shakespeare borrows “in a way less exact than Jonson’s, so the model is frequently invisible” (12). Jonathan Bate, a modern critic, seems as fooled by Shakespeare as was Digges three centuries ago. Says he: “. . . Shakespeare’s genius has reanimated the spirits of the fathers of tragedy *without any conscious imitation of them*” (158, emphasis added). Bate observes the Greek dramatic spirit underlying Shakespeare’s works, but because there are not enough specific, easily illustrated classical borrowings (as we find in Jonson), he believes that Shakespeare’s clear imitation of that style is somehow unconscious. Tempting though it may be to bless Shakespeare with a unique literary atavism, it seems rather more likely that the classics inform Shakespeare’s writing because he studied them.

### A certain scholarly schizophrenia

After finding in Shakespeare a plot, quote or name that derived from a Greek source, scholars have often found an English, Latin or foreign translation that could have provided

the material. Although we can find a number of instances, as shown above, where the Greek seems the only logical source, there are many others where it is impossible to tell which source Shakespeare was using. It should be important, then, to go beyond what scholars state dogmatically at the outset—that Shakespeare could not read the Greek classics in their original form—and examine more closely what they have to say once the obligatory statements are out of the way. For example, hear Thomson, toward the end of his book, when his pen is moving freely (keeping in mind that not many pages earlier, he held that any Greek at all was “out of the question”):

However little Greek Shakespeare may have known, he made the most wonderful use of what he did know. . . .

I will venture on a statement that will surprise some readers—I believe Shakespeare learned how to make a tragedy from Plutarch. . . .

[Elements of Shakespeare's work] are in North's [English translation of] Plutarch, but they have been noted, developed, and emphasized by Shakespeare as they would have been by a Greek tragic poet. . . .

[The] conception [of character in *Hamlet*] is Greek, and Shakespeare got nearer to the spirit of Greek tragedy than did Jonson and the schoolmasters. . . .

[In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare] was not consciously following any Greek. But it happens that Aeschylus had also a profound insight into the working of the human imagination under the burden of a crime, and so he depicts it in much the same way as Shakespeare. . . .

[N]o classical student can read [Gloucester's words on the gods in *Lear*] without feeling that they are . . . an extreme expression of that belief in the “jealousy” of the gods which underlies so many of the stories told by the Greek poets. . . .

Thus did Shakespeare penetrate through the Latin to the Greek influence.

These statements, made over several pages (226-254), reveal Thomson's genuine response to what he sees in Shakespeare: a writer so at home in the Greek style that he outdoes those “schoolmasters” who were steeped in Greek learning. But Thomson is not alone. Recall that after Shackford nods to the authorities who claim that Shakespeare had no Greek, she insists: “Shakespeare shares with the Greek dramatists an artistic instinct for irony,” which gives his dramas their “fine edge and significance.” And that Churton Collins, while

emphatically denying Shakespeare any Greek, continues to insist that his metaphors, religious symbolism and style derive from the Greeks, and that only familiarity with Greek “idiom and phraseology” could give him “that timbre in style of which I have given illustrations” (63). The orthodox Kitto, while denying Shakespeare knowledge of Greek, also insists that he treats his material “in much the same way” as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Homer because for him, as for them, progress “is a matter of progressing from the center in one direction or another” (25).

Is it, as some of these scholars seem to feel, that all great writers, without reference to each other and purely by instinct, are drawn to a similar demonstration of truth by some unseen and unnamed power? Or is it rather that great writers learn by reading other writers? In our opinion, one may ascribe a suggestive passage or plot to a non-Greek source, but one cannot reassign the *feel* or *sense* of an entire body of work. As noted above, Shakespeare’s borrowing is often invisible. To discover his sources, it is often necessary to look away from the individual pieces and examine the assembled puzzle.

Greek plots, names, passages, philosophy, dramatic technique and, most important, the Greek “spirit,” enhance and inform Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. Shakespeare’s Warwick reminds us, “There is a history in all men’s lives.” But what of Warwick’s creator? Where is *his* history? Do his works suggest an untutored rustic who left no books, writings, or evidence of literary activity? Or do they suggest one who was given an advanced classical education in both Greek literature and the Greek language? As the authorship debate advances, it will move beyond the opinions of such scholars as the Martindales, who at present can only gush that Shakespeare’s apparent intimacy with the classics is “a miracle we cannot explain” (12). It is no miracle, and the explanation leads us away from the man from Stratford. ————— 🍷





## NOTES

- 1 As Daniel Wright points out with reference to Shakespeare, "Some things even a genius must be taught" ("Scholar").
- 2 They add, "If Shakespeare had read all that is proposed for him, he would not have found time to write many plays" (10). If one has the Stratfordian biography in mind, this is certainly true.
- 3 Emrys Jones, in *The Origins of Shakespeare*, addresses at length the appearance of this phrase. He too cannot explain it, but guesses that Shakespeare misremembered the Latin, or made a calculated distortion of the phrase to serve his dramatic needs (104).
- 4 The critic quoted is Russ McDonald.
- 5 The *Greek Anthology* has a long and fairly complex history. The first comprehensive collection of Greek epigrams, which numbered about 1,000, was compiled by Meleager around 100 B.C. Other collections were assembled over the years and in 900 A.D. the most comprehensive collection was assembled by Constantine Cephalas. None of these collections survives in its original form. We know them only through two later compilations: the *Planudean Anthology* (c. 14th century A.D.) and the *Palatine Anthology* (c. 10th century A.D.) The so-called *Greek Anthology* is an assembly of these collections. The *Anthology* was popular in Europe from the beginning of the sixteenth century, and was published in partial Latin editions in Venice, Florence, Paris, London, Frankfurt, and other major cities. For a detailed study of the history and literature of this fascinating work, see Alan Cameron's *The Greek Anthology: From Meleager to Planudes*. According to Cameron, the only complete modern edition is that by H. Beckby in 4 volumes, published in a second edition in 1967.
- 6 As this was going to press, I came across Martin Green's excellent book, *Wriothesley's Roses*. It contains a thorough study of *Sonnets 153 and 154* in relation to the *Greek Anthology* (pp 69-79), and helpfully reproduces Hutton's comparison chart. His conclusion agrees with the one presented in this article: "In my opinion, [close analysis] shows Shakespeare's recourse to the original text of the epigram. . . ." (72).
- 7 From the commendatory poem by Leonard Digges (1588-1635) prefixed to the 1640 edition of *Shakespeare's Poems* (RES 183-4).

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- GEL    *Greek English Lexicon*. Liddell & Scott, eds. 7th ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995.  
 PEP    *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*. Alex Preminger, ed. Princeton: PUP, 1990.  
 RES    *Readers Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*. Ed. Oscar Campbell. New York: MJF Books, 1966.

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