

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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