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Shakespeare's Sources and Texts

CHRISTINA WOLF & EDWARD WOLF



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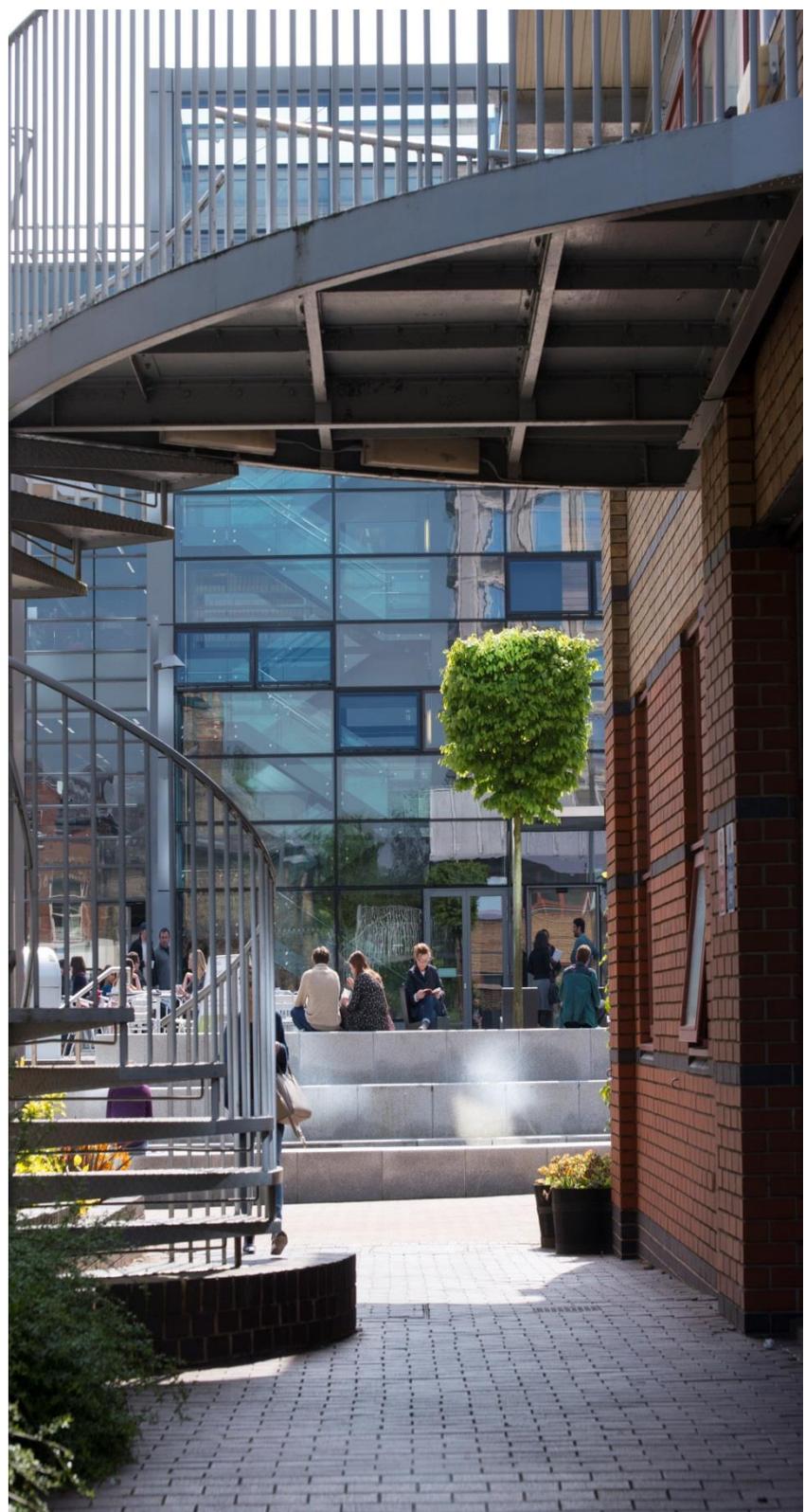
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Foreword

The texts which were highly influential on Shakespeare's work are quite well known and researched. There is a long tradition of scholarship that helps us understand the importance of the books Shakespeare read and how he used them when writing his plays and poems. Firstly, there is a body of research that dates back from the 19th century which informs us about the curriculum of the Elizabethan grammar school, which Shakespeare most likely attended. Secondly, there are reliable records that tell us which texts were published or circulated as manuscripts in the period and to which Shakespeare must have had access.

However, more important than identifying verbal echoes of such texts in the body of Shakespeare's work is to understand how he incorporated concepts and weaved the ideas which he came across in his reading into the fabric of his poetic and dramatic writing. Above all, one of the most striking features of Shakespeare's compositional approach is the way he transformed and diverged from his source materials when crafting his own. While this textual metamorphosis possibly delighted Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, such allusions and references are very likely to be lost to many contemporary audiences and readers in the 21st century.

This publication brings together remarkable manuscripts and rare copies of books that Shakespeare must have read and known and which belong to the University of Leicester Library. Some of these items date back to Shakespeare's own time or before. Others are copies printed in the centuries that followed, which also attests to their enduring importance and appeal.

We hope the illustrations and texts in this publication can help us better understand Shakespeare's ability to draw on the materials available to him and transform them into the plays and poems we know and admire.

The Authors

VENUS AND ADONIS.

Hard fauour'd tyrant, ugly, meagre, leane,
Hatefull diuorce of loue, (thus chides the death)
Grim-grinning ghost, earths-worme what dost thou
To stifle beautie, and to steale his breath? (meane?)
VVho when he liu'd, his breath and beautie set
Glosse on the rose, smell to the violet.

If he be dead, ô no, it cannot be,
Seeing his beautie, thou shouldst strike at it,
Oh yes, it may, thou hast no eyes to see,
But hatefully at randon doest thou hit,
Thy marke is feeble age, but thy false dart,
Mistakes that aime, and cleaues an infants hart.

Hadst thou but bid beware, then he had spoke,
And hearing him, thy power had lost his power,
The destinies will curse thee for this stroke,
They bid thee crop a weed, thou pluckst a flower,
Loues golden arrow at him should haue fled,
And not deaths ebon dart to strike him dead.

Doest thou drink tears, that thou prouok'st such wee-
VVhat may a heauie grone aduantage thee? (ping,
VVhy hast thou cast into eternall sleeping,
Those eyes that taught all other eyes to see?
Now nature cares not for thy mortall vigour,
Since her best worke is ruin'd with thy rigour.

Here

1 'Small Latin and Less Greek'

Ben Jonson's comment on the preface to the First Folio is often read as contemporary evidence that Shakespeare had little knowledge of the classics. However, this is far from the truth. Perhaps his classical knowledge cannot be compared to Jonson's, but it was arguably superior to the one generally possessed by well educated 21st century readers. Early Modern grammar school instruction put a strong emphasis on classical education. From a tender age, pupils were taught to read Latin and expected to memorize hundreds of lines from classic Roman writers as well as copy their rhetorical patterns and sentence structures.

High value was given to abundance, or *copia*, and students were also expected to literally copy extracts of classic texts into their 'commonplace books'. These notes would then serve as a repository of references and allusions to be used when later composing their own arguments in writing and debates. Such habits of mind and reading behaviour persisted and shaped Shakespeare's approach to reading and writing throughout his career as a poet and playwright.

1. A page of 'Venus and Adonis', Shakespeare's most famous long poem, inspired by a tale in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, 1594. Image courtesy: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Ovid and Virgil

The influence of Ovid on Shakespeare has been extensively recognised and discussed. The 1st century AD Roman poet's impact on the 16th century English dramatist is most visible in the long poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Yet traces of his influence can be found in almost every play and sonnet.

Shakespeare would have first encountered Ovid at school and practised his translating and writing skills by reading the *Metamorphosis* as well as less known Ovidian texts, such as the *Heroids*. This was the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the Latin poet to whom he kept coming back over and over again during his writing career. The plays where Ovid's influence is perhaps most obvious are *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the cross-dressing comedies, and the later romances *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*. However, change is also evident in plays that move from revenge and the threat of death towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and the promise of a new life, as it happens in *The Tempest* and in most of the comedies.

We can argue that all Shakespeare's plays have plots where characters – in one way or another – go through significant physical and psychological transformations.



2. Frontispiece of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the title is flanked by Love and Wisdom, translated into English by George Sandys, 1632.



However, Ovid was not the only Roman poet to have captured Shakespeare's imagination. Although Virgil's influence is less evident than Ovid's, he has also left traces in the poems and plays, particularly in the classical references we find in *Henry V*. Virgil's *Aeneid* can also be traced in the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, in the plot of *Titus Andronicus*, and in the plot reversal of *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

Above all, it was mostly from Virgil that Shakespeare took the concept of how characters can be psychologically affected by storytelling. Some of his characters, such as Othello and Richard II, are capable of infusing their own narratives with remarkable emotional force.

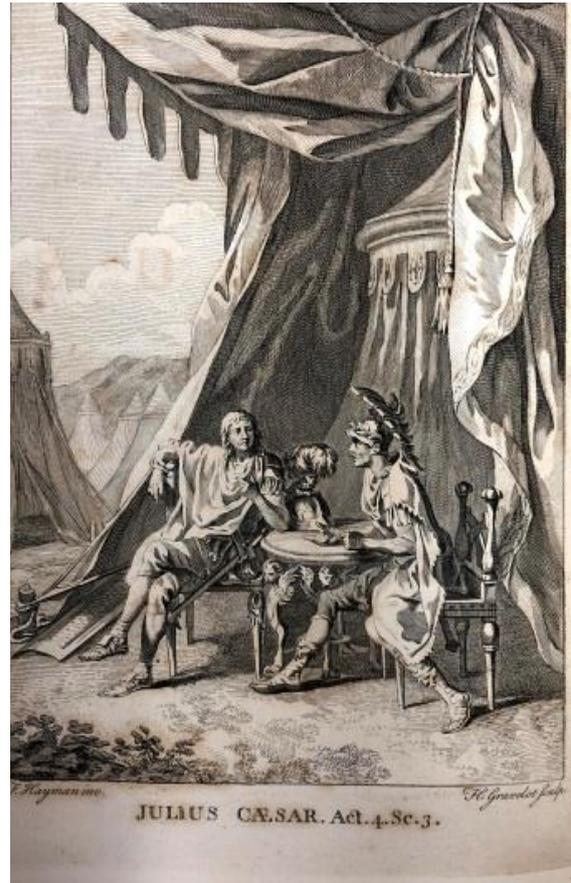
3. Death of Dido: etching with engraving in 'The works of Virgil', translated into English by John Dryden, 1819.

Plutarch

The influence of Roman writers on Shakespeare is not restricted to classic poetry and drama. Shakespeare's Roman history plays are in great debt to Plutarch's *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. This is the source where the plots of popular plays, such as *Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, come from.

Shakespeare would have read Plutarch in Sir Thomas North's translation, first published in 1579. Shakespeare's classic training in reading, thinking, and writing enabled him to move from various sources in search of plots, language, and meaningful connections. His approach to history was not dissimilar from the one adopted by Plutarch himself. In *The Lives*, Plutarch explores the customs, institutions, and the politics of ancient Greece and describes in greater detail those of Rome.

Plutarch's capacity of transporting his readers to far away times and places through the gift of language is also one of the trademarks of Shakespeare's dramatic composition.



4. Illustration of Julius Caesar in Hammer's Oxford edition of Shakespeare's plays, 1744.



BRUTE.



Hitherto haue we spoken of them that inhabited this land before the coming of Brute, although some will needs haue it, that he was the firste which inhabited y^e same with his people, descended of the Trojans, some scw
Giantes onely crep-
ted whome hee utterly destroyed, and left not one of them alyue through the whole Isle. 20

But as we shall not doubt of Brutes hither coming, so maye we assuredly thinke, that he found the Isle peopled either with the generation of those, whiche Albion the Giant had placed here, or some other kynde of people, whom he did subdue, and so reigned as well over them, as ouer those whiche he brought with him.

This Brute (as the author of the Book which Geffrey of Monmouth translated) doth affirme, was the sonne of Silvius, the sonne of Ascanius that was sonne of Aeneas the Troian, begotten of his wyfe Creusa, and borne in Troie, before the Citie was destroyed.

But as other doe take it, the Author of that booke (whatsoeuer he was) and such other as followe him, are deceyued only in this poynt, mistaking the matter in that Postumus the sonne of Aeneas (begot of his wyfe Lavinia, and borne after his fathers deceasse in Italy) was called Ascanius, who had issue a sonne named Julius, the whiche (as these other doe coniecture) was the father of Brute, that noble chieftain and aduenturous leader of those people, which being descended (for the more parte in the fourth generation) from those Troians that escaped with lyfe, when that royall Citie was destroyed by the Grekes, got possession of this moorthe and most famous

To this opinion Giouan Villantine in his vniuersal hystorie speaking and his offspring kings in Italy, se gree, where he hathe these words: Σ sonne of Aeneas by his wife Lavinia with a neece of his mother the same and by hir had a sonne, of whom she uayle, and therfore he was called Br after as he grew in some nature, as in a forest slew his father at vniware vpon for fear of his grandfather Silvius he fled the countrey, and with suche as folloved him, passing thv seas, at lengthe hee arriued in the sayne.

But now wheras by reason of thie tie in the Roman authors themselves the lyne of Aeneas, some forein wri- ther with slender argumente, or el- gantly without any grounded reason ken vpon them to denye that there v Italyan Brutus, lineally coming t the Troian, of whom the race of the tion that possessed this Isle should p- bycause the argumente of the one s that so write, is found insufficient to and the arrogancie of the other being son, is finally to be regarded: and se- ther the one nor the other of these ou- can as yet fynd out any other, either tyme, place or name, that shoulde i- conquer, subdue and gouerne this no- only our Brutus or Bytus. For t heth had of auncient tyme bothe th- as of A, and of J.

And sith also we haue on oure sy- or rather more, and of as good credit speake generally, being likewise fo- ters, which affirme and vndoubtedly recall state of the foresayde Brutus

2 'The history of my knowledge'

Elizabethans and Jacobeans had an understanding of history that was fundamentally different from our current view of History as an academic discipline. For people in Shakespeare's time, more important than historical factual accuracy were the lessons to be learned from the past, the ethical and moral principles embedded in history which, if attended to, would help them understand their present and shape their future.

The distinction between history and stories was still not clear-cut. This explains why Elizabethan and Jacobean readers and audiences did not fret over the factual or fictional existence of legendary kings and heroes. Whether they really existed or not was not the most important issue. What mattered was what they could learn from their lives, actions, and supposed ideas. It was in this spirit that Shakespeare turned to the history books available to him as sources for his plays.

(*Cymbeline*, 3.5)

5. Detail of the page telling the story of Brut, the legendary founder of Britain, in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577.

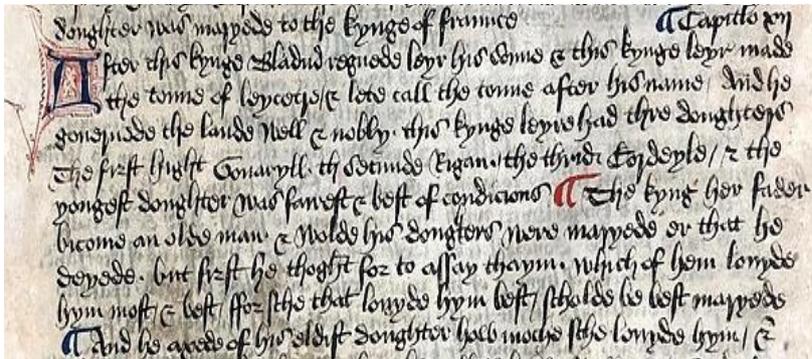
Layamon's *Brut*

In the 12th century, an English monk called Layamon took upon himself the task of writing a history of the British Isles in the form of a poem. The poem is named after the supposed mythical founder of Britain, Brutus of Troy. It is written in Middle English in a loose alliterative style and contains references to two of the most legendary kings in the land: Arthur and Lear.

Archives and Special Collections hold a very rare manuscript copy of Layamon's *Brut*, possibly from the 15th century. Apart from *Brut* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), there are only a few sources which actually refer to the legendary king of the Britons who was believed to be the founder of Leicester.

Historians nowadays mostly dispute that factual existence of Lear and argue that a possible explanation for the connection between the words Leir and Leicester is that the name of the king derives from the Brittonic name of the River Soar.

There is no indication that Shakespeare has ever read or seen a manuscript of *Brut*; his knowledge of it would have been indirect, possibly through Holinshed. Nevertheless, the connection between *Brut* and one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies remains.

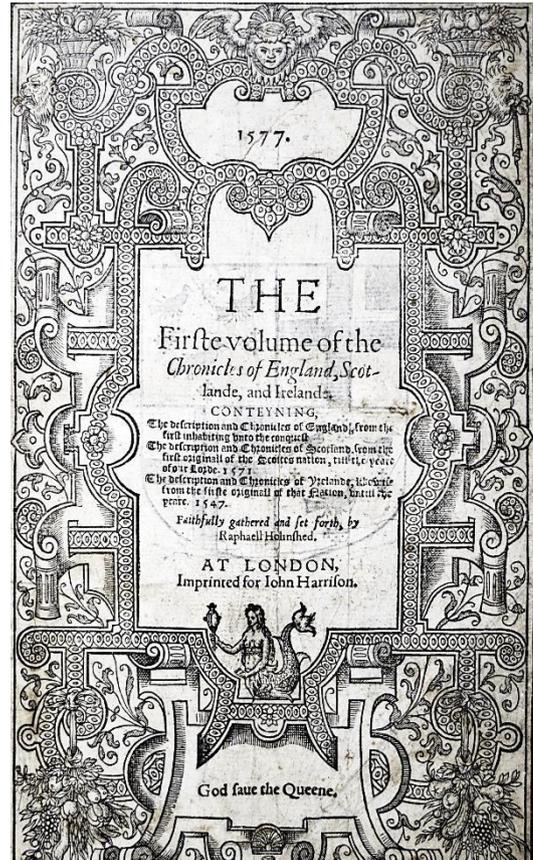


6. Detail of page 11 of Layamon's *Brut: The St Alban's Chronicle*, 15th century. A reference to Goneril, one of Lear's daughters, is seen around the middle of the page.

Holinshed and Hall

It has been said, half in jest and half in truth, that the English are notorious for learning their history from Shakespeare. The question then is, 'Where did Shakespeare learn *his* history from?' The answer is largely 'from Holinshed and Hall'. Raphael Holinshed first published his tomes on the history of England, Scotland and Ireland in 1547. It soon became the most consulted history textbook of the age and the one Shakespeare would have used at school and later on as the main source for his English history plays and some of his greatest tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Lear*.

Holinshed himself drew on a number of sources, not always completely reliable or historical. When sources conflicted, he provided the diverging information and interpretations side by side, letting his readers make the judgement on their reliability and accuracy. Shakespeare adopted an equally flexible approach to Holinshed. His concern when writing English history plays was not that of a historian but of an entertainer who used history in the service of storytelling and drama. This resulted in anachronisms, historical and geographical inaccuracies, additions, omissions, and even large deviations from Holinshed's text.

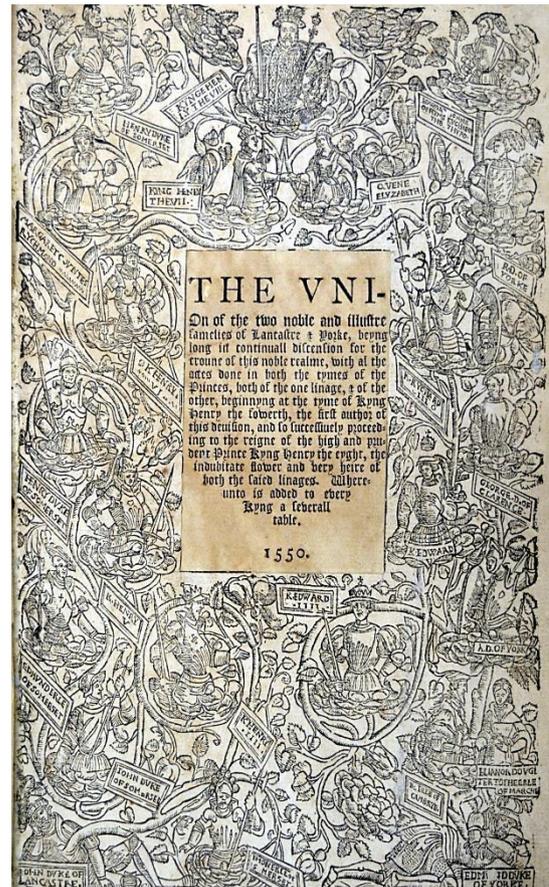


7. Frontispiece of the First Volume of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1577.

Edward Hall's chronicles were also a widely known and circulated history text in Renaissance England. Hall's was much less ambitious than Holinshed's in terms of the scope of his text. He limits his narrative to the period in the English history known as the War of Roses. The War of Roses starts with the reign of Richard II (1377-99) and ends with the defeat of Richard III by the Earl of Richmond (1485), later King Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch.

Although scholars tend to agree that Hall's influence on Shakespeare is less prominent than that of Holinshed, some passages on the English history tetralogies are drawn from Hall's account and this is especially noticeable in the composition of *Richard III*.

Shakespeare wrote two series of history plays in groups of four. *Henry V* is the last play in the second group (the other three plays are *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part One*, and *Henry IV, Part Two*). The first tetralogy consists of the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*.



8. Frontispiece of Edward's Hall's *The vnion of the two noble and illustrious families of Lancastre and Yorke*, 1550. Hall covers the period of the War of Roses.

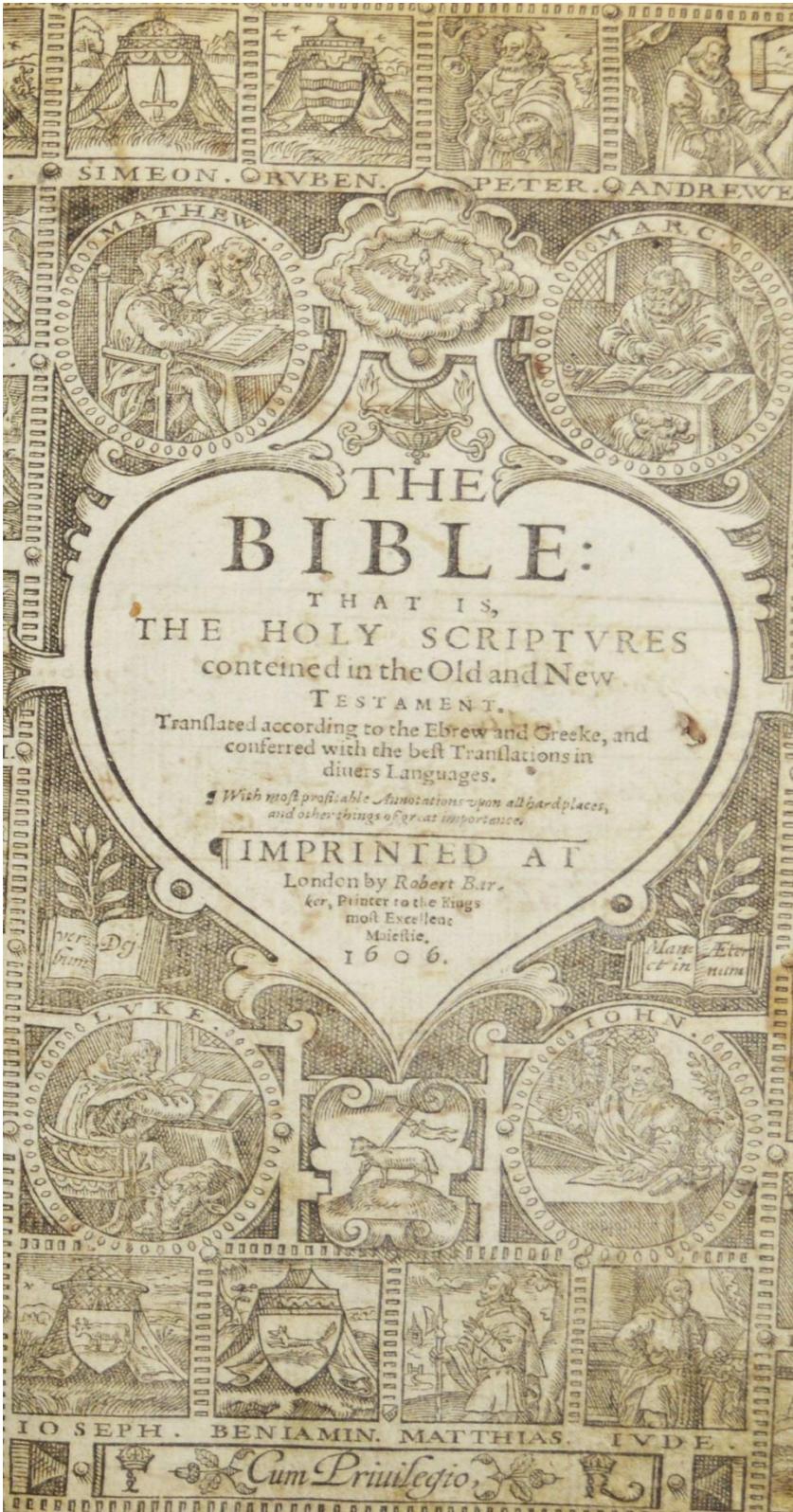
3 'I can see you have some religion in you'

Although scholars may disagree about Shakespeare's spiritual beliefs and the extent to which his plays support or contest religious views and dogmas, it would be difficult to dispute the notion that knowledge of the Bible informs all his work. It has been argued that it is Shakespeare's capacity to infuse the human with the divine and to translate the divine into human that gives his characters depth and significance.

Religion was perhaps the most powerful influence on the lives of Elizabethans and Jacobeans. It permeated everything – from personal relationships, to politics, to the theatre. Above all, with the Reformation, religion and politics were inseparable since the Monarch became also the Head of the Church of England. Religion and politics on the theatre had therefore to be treated with extreme caution.

(Cymbeline, 1.4)

9. Detail of the frontispiece of a much perused copy of the Geneva Bible, 1606.



The Bible

Although it is not necessary to know the Bible to understand and appreciate Shakespeare's plays, an understanding of biblical references allows readers and audiences to increase their appreciation of plot and characters.

It has been argued that there are parallels between the biblical books and the Shakespearean dramatic genres. For instance, the *Exodus* and the succeeding books of the Pentateuch can be seen as a cycle of national histories that find their dramatic match in the English history tetralogies; *Job* is a tragedy that can be paired to *Lear*; and the *Revelation* is a mask that has its counterpart in *The Tempest*.

The Bible version Christians of Anglican denomination use nowadays is the *Authorized Version*, commonly known as the *King James's Bible*, which was first published in 1611. The version scholars believe Shakespeare would have read, consulted, and be thoroughly familiar with was the so-called Geneva Bible.

Any Tudor home that could afford a copy would have one, and in fact many of them still survive due to its availability in numbers. This was the Bible read individually and to other members of the household. Copies passed from one generation to another, margins were annotated and blank pages often used for domestic notes and to register the births and deaths in the family. These notes attest to the centrality of 'The Book' in the lives of individuals and communities in Renaissance England.

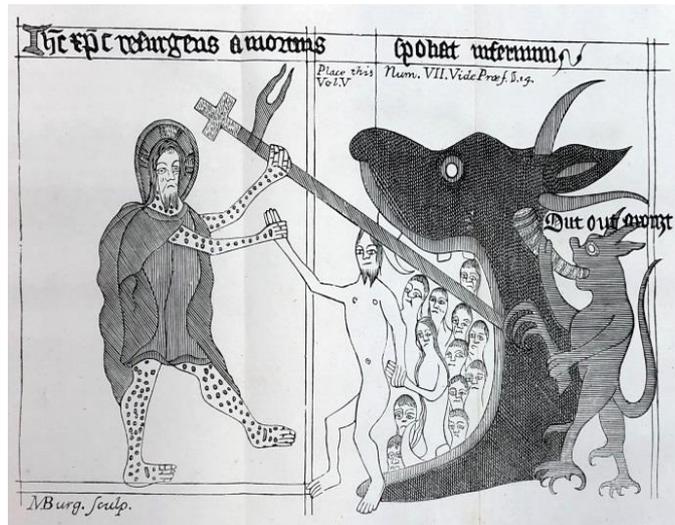
Such an omnipresent and influential book would certainly leave its mark on the writings of any Renaissance poet and playwright and Shakespeare was not an exception. After the Reformation, bringing God on stage became impossible. Yet a number of Shakespeare's characters, such as Lear and Prospero, behave like deities. On the other hand, Evil is represented by malevolent and manipulative characters, such as Iago in *Othello* and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* as well as by those who are diabolical tyrants, such as Richard III and Macbeth.

Medieval Drama

We cannot be sure how much experience with Drama the young Shakespeare had, but we know that up to 1579 – when he was 14 years old – people in England would still be able to go and see some of the immensely popular medieval plays performed annually in the largest towns and cities around the country. It is not too far-fetched to imagine the Shakespeares going to Coventry – just 17 miles from Stratford-upon-Avon - to see one of England’s great cycles of biblical mystery plays.

Mystery and Morality plays were nothing like Classical Greek and Roman Drama. The Aristotelian units of time and space were completely ignored as plots could extend from the Creation to the Day of Judgement; from Egypt to the Promised Land. Kings, shepherds and clowns shared the stage with saints, angels, and demons. Blood and tears mixed with laughter and joy. Lines from the Scriptures mixed with everyday language.

After the banning of all religious drama, audiences would only be able to see such a rich concoction of characters, emotions, and language on the stage of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres. And among the English Renaissance playwrights, the great ‘mixer’ of genres, sources, and dramatic traditions was William Shakespeare.



10. Illustration in William Hone's edition of 'Mystery and Miracle Plays'. The representation of the descent into hell is accompanied by quotes from *Macbeth* and *King Lear* on the opposite page, 1823.

A compendious treatise of the sword
of Christ called encheridion which Erasmus
Roterdame wrote vnto a certen countear
& frende of his. 2

How hast desired of me to fadent stidy singler
belond brother in Christ. That I shold distube for
the compendioshy. & certen craffe of veritions bying
By whose helpe thou mightest attyue hidolete mite
for a frede Cristen man. **T**hou seist that thou arte very
of the passyng of contie. And to compasse in thy mynde by
what maner thou mightest escape Egypt. w all his both
dites and pleasures. And to be prepared happily to the
Capitayne goyses vnto the iorney of vertue. **T**he more
I love the the ioyousse. I am of this thy so holy a purpose
whish I trust ye woulde onr helpe. **H**e that did what saffe
to gyde hit the shall make prosperus and bringe to good
effecte. Not wstondyng yett hane I obeyed the partys
by cause thou arte so grete a frende of myne party. also
by cause thou requerest so charitable thinge. **N**ow therfore
awake pluck vp thy hartie setto thy shuldere lest other
thou shuldest seme to hane desired my Sedes and
Sedotic in wayne or vnto hane satisfied thy mynde
woulde any faute. **B**ut lett vs both indifferently besethe
the denyng sprite of Jhn that he both put holosome thinge
in the mynde of me. which wrote and make the same to

4 'Give me the leave to speak my mind'

Classic and religious writings were central to Shakespeare's works but so were the ideas of continental Renaissance humanists. Humanist education, largely based on Erasmus's teaching methods, fostered the cultivation of a memorial reconstruction of Latin texts but also creative imitation. It was the humanist education Shakespeare likely received at the grammar school in Stratford-upon Avon that nurtured his ability to juxtapose conflicting positions, argue on both sides of a given question, and quote from memory.

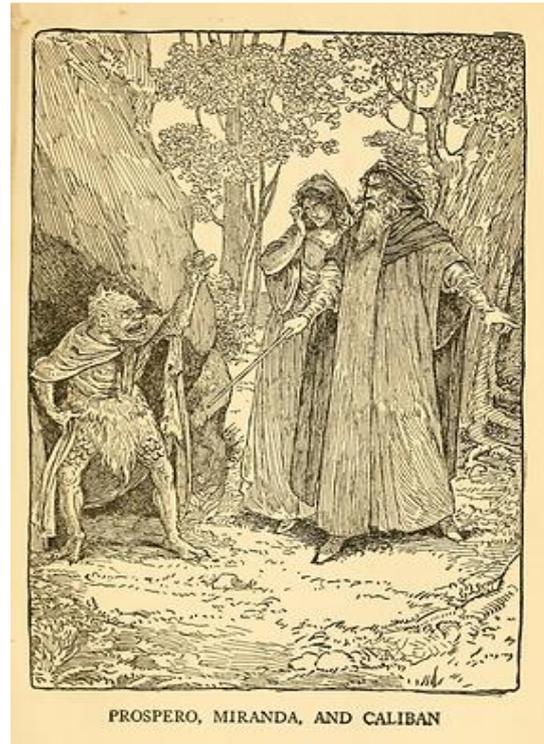
Shakespeare's initial classical education was then complemented by a lifelong habit of eclectic reading that enabled him to creatively imitate and expand on his sources. Among the texts Shakespeare must have read were those written by some of the most influential Humanist thinkers of the Renaissance: the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne and the Italian politician, diplomat, and man of letters, Niccolò Machiavelli.

(As You Like It, 2.7)

Montaigne

Scholars have identified numerous instances in Shakespeare's work where there are clear direct echoes of the words and ideas of the French philosopher and essayist Michael de Montaigne. However, influences of one writer on another are never easy to establish and are very often contested. More important than identifying direct references is to recognize the habits of mind and thinking that unite Montaigne and Shakespeare.

Both share the ability to create works that draw on a wide range of reading and observation, on systematic thinking, and on creative use of quotation and references. Above all, they both believed that there was a profound link between language and identity. Montaigne would demonstrate this in his own heavily autobiographical writing; Shakespeare would embody this concept in the lines he gave to his characters.



12. Engraving in Charles and Mary Lamb's edition of *The Tempest* in *Tales from Shakespeare*, 1918.

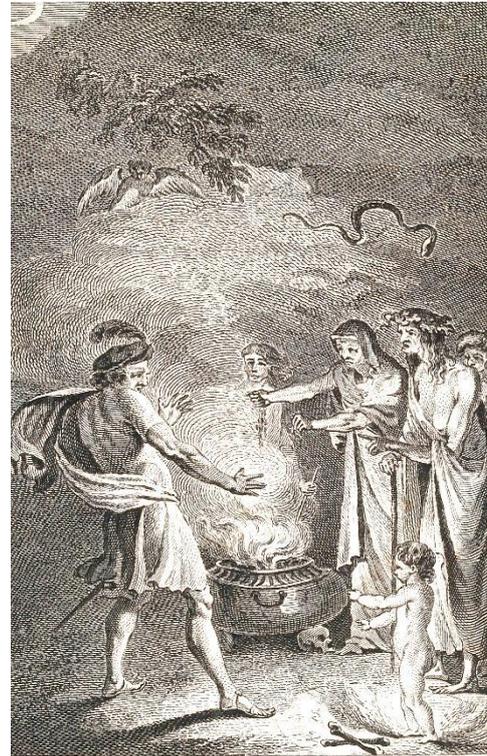
Montaigne's essay 'On the Cannibals' is believed to be one of the sources of inspiration for the creation of Caliban.

Machiavelli

There is so far no way of ascertaining that Shakespeare read Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, published in 1532. Nevertheless, the ideas conveyed by the Italian controversial thinker were certainly hotly debated both in Italy and in England and are likely to have influenced him when writing *Richard III*.

Richard is the dramatic embodiment of the idea that cruel actions are sometimes necessary to achieve and maintain power. The clear conflict between such philosophical and political ideas and the prevailing Christian ethical and moral principles, as well as the notion that monarchs were the representatives of God on Earth, led to the demonization of Machiavelli himself and the inclusion of *The Prince* in the Index – the Vatican's list of forbidden texts – in 1559.

In Protestant England, however, the text circulated in educated circles and was certainly read and debated. What is generally overseen is that one of the most important premises of Machiavellian thought is that systematic cruelty and tyranny will certainly lead to the rulers' demise. Both Richard III and Macbeth failed to understand that. Shakespeare did not.



13. Macbeth, one of Shakespeare's most 'Machiavellian' characters, meets the witches. Illustration in the Bell's edition of the play, 1774.

M^R William Shakespear's
COMEDIES,
HISTORIES
AND
TRAGEDIES.

Published according to the true Original Copies.

Unto which is added, SEVEN

PLAYS,

Never before Printed in Folio:

VIZ.

Pericles Prince of Tyre.
The London Prodigal.
The History of Thomas Lord
Cromwel.

Sir John Oldcastle Lord Cobham.
The Puritan Widow.
A Yorkshire Tragedy.
The Tragedy of Locrine.

5 'Words, words, words'

Originality as a measure of greatness in literature is largely an 18th century Romantic concept. Instead, Renaissance writers, poets and dramatists alike, were expected to use the materials they had at hand and, in doing so, they were expected to try to surpass them. Shakespeare's mastery was in his outstanding capacity to copy, imitate, combine, amplify, contest, and creatively modify the sources he selected and used.

The result of his creative approach led to the production and publication of three long poems which were immensely popular during his lifetime. His 154 sonnets were also published and, we understand, circulated widely among his friends and acquaintances. However, when it comes to his dramatic writing, no text was officially published under his name until seven years after his death when his two of his friends published a collection of 36 plays in the huge volume that we now call the First Folio.

(Hamlet, 2.2)

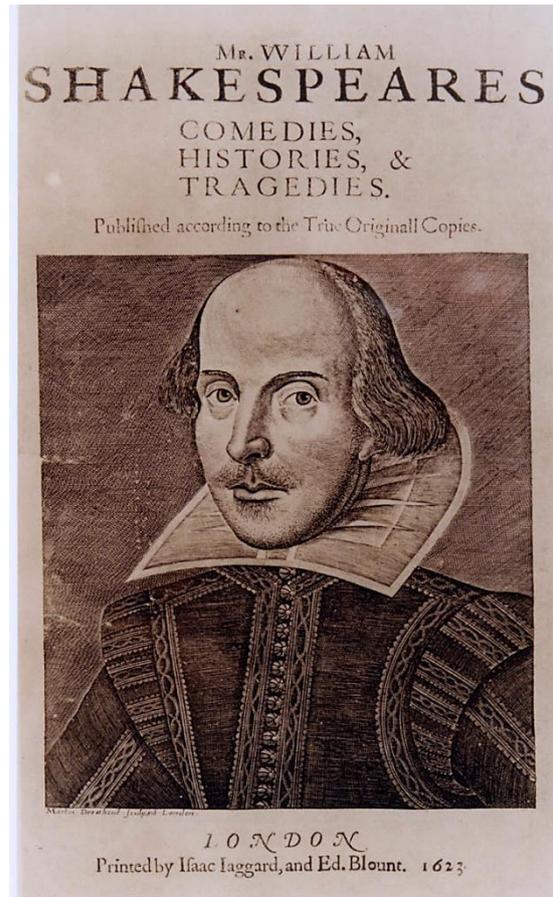
14. Detail of the first page of the Fourth Folio, 1685.

The Folios

Thanks to the work of scholars in different disciplines, we now know quite a lot about the history of the Folio's creation – from compilation to printing – as well as about its reception soon after publication and in the almost 400 years since then.

The University Library holds a facsimile of the First Folio which viewers can compare to an original copy of the fourth edition of the Folio (1685). The Fourth Folio includes the Sonnets and – curiously – seven other plays wrongly attributed to Shakespeare listed in the frontispiece. Of the seven added plays, only *Pericles* is now seriously considered to have any Shakespearian connection.

The Folio and the *King James' Bible* are arguably the two most influential texts in the English language. They have shaped the way we speak, think, and conduct ourselves in the world. Yet it is perhaps mostly through Shakespeare that the ideas, concepts and cultural significance of classic, historical, philosophical, and religious writings from different periods and cultures have reached us.



15. Title page of the First Folio, 1623. Image courtesy: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

King Lear

To create *King Lear*, Shakespeare amplified, compressed, complicated, and brought together a wide range of materials, from historical and literary sources to a contemporary topical story. Shakespeare was also certainly familiar with an older anonymous play titled *King Leir*.

The first account of Lear's story comes from Geoffrey Monmouth, who identifies Leir as the founder of the city of Leicester, which in Old Welsh was called *Cair Lerion* or *Kearleir* (City of Leir).

According to Monmouth's the king was buried in an underground chamber beneath the river near Leicester. It is this association between the mythical king and the River Soar that makes some now doubt the accuracy and historical existence of Lear. William Sommer (1598-1669) suggested that the word *Lear* comes from the Old Brittonic names of the River Soar: *Leir*, *Ligera* or *Ligora*.



16. Bow Bridge over the River Soar at Leicester. Engraving by John Throsby in *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Town of Leicester*, 1791.

Richard III

Shakespeare drew on the chronicles of Holinshed and Hall, and likely on the writings of Polydore Vergil and Thomas More, to craft the character of Richard III. For this reason, some argue that Shakespeare's characterization of Richard is largely a piece of Tudor propaganda. Although the play was almost certainly used for such purpose by interested parties, both Holinshed and Hall report on unfavourable accounts of Richard written before the installation of the Tudor dynasty, such as the one written by the Italian priest Domenic Mancini in 1483.

Above all, it is also important to remember that Shakespeare was not a historian committed to uncovering the truth about King Richard. *Richard III*, the play, is not dramatized history but what we would now call historical fiction. Shakespeare used history to tell a dark tale of ambition, cruelty, and punishment that would attract audiences to the theatre.

The fact that throughout the centuries popular opinion of King Richard III has been shaped more by the play than by historical records is a misfortune that can hardly be imputed on Shakespeare.



17. Richard III's burial at the Grey Friars in John Nichols' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 1815.

Acknowledgements

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