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Shakespeare's Sources and Texts

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Contents

Foreword	3
1. ‘Small Latin and Less Greek’	4
Ovid and Virgil	5
Plutarch	7
2. ‘The history of my knowledge’	8
Layamon’s <i>Brut</i>	9
Holinshed and Hall	10
3. ‘I can see you have some religion in you’	12
The Bible	13
Medieval Drama	14
4. ‘Give me the leave to speak my mind’	15
Montaigne	16
Machiavelli	17
5. ‘Words, words, words’	18
The Folios	19
<i>King Lear</i>	20
<i>Richard III</i>	21
Acknowledgements	22
List of Illustrations	22
Selected Bibliography	23

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

VENVS AND ADONIS.

Hard fauourd 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,
Miftakes that aime, and cleaves 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 prouokſt 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

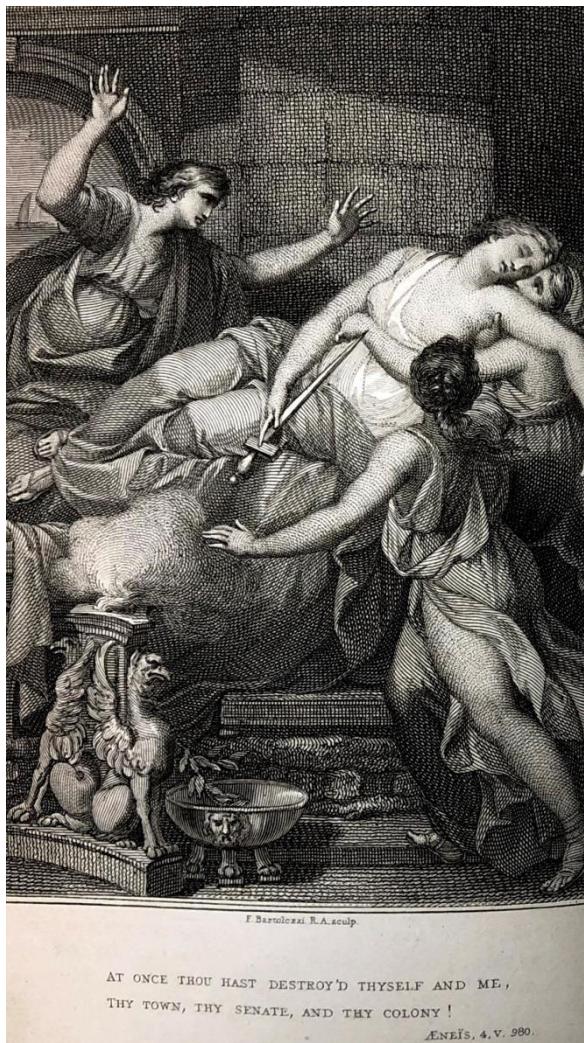
The influence of Ovid on Shakespeare has been extensively recognised and discussed. The 1st century AD Roman poet's impact on the 16th century English dramatist is most visible in the long poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Yet traces of his influence can be found in almost every play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

BRVTE.



Hitherto haue we
spoken of them that
inhabited this land be-
fore the commynge of
Brute, although some
will needs haue it, that
he was the firsle which
inhabited þ same with
his people, descended of
the Troyas, some few
Giants only excepted
whome he vtterly destroyed, and lefte not
one of them alye throught the wholle Isle.

But as we shall not doubte of Brutes hyther
commynge, so maye we assuredly thinke, that he
found the Isle peopled either with the generation
of those, whiche Albion the Gaunt had placed
here, or some other kynde of people, whom he did
subdue, and so reigned as well over them, as o-
uer those whiche he brought with him.

This Brute(as the authour of the Book(which
Geoffrey of Monmouth translated) doth affirme,
was the sonne of Silvius, the sonne of Ascanius 40
that was sonne of Aeneas the Trojan, begotten
of his wyfe Creula, and borne in Troye, before
the Cittie was destroyed.

But as other doe take it, the Authour of that
booke (whatsoeuer he was) and such other as fol-
lowe him, are deceyued only in this poynt, my-
slaking the matter in that Posthumus 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 thes other doe conjecture) was the
father of Brute, that noble chieftain and adven-
turous leader of those people, whiche being descen-
ded (for the more parte in the fourth generation)
from those Troians that escaped with lyfe, when
that roiall Cittie was destroyed by the Greces,
got possession of this worthie and most famous

To this opinion Giovan Villani
tyme in his vniuersal histozie speaking
and his offspiring kings in Italy, se-
gree, where he hathe these wordz: þ
sonne of Aeneas by his wife Lavinia
with a neece of his mother the sam
and by hit had a sonne, of whom she
uyyle, and therfore he was called B
after as he grewe in some stature, a
in a forest slew his father at unware
upon for fear of his grandfather Silu-
muis he fled the country, and with
suche as followed him, passing the
seas, at lengthe he arrived in the
tayne.

But now wheras by reason of the
tie in the Roman authoress themselues
the lyne of Aeneas, some forzein wþ
ther with slender argumemente, or else
gantly without any grounded reson
ken upon them to denye that there vñ
Italian Brutus, lineally coming f
the Trojan, of whom the race of the
tion that possessed this Isle should p
bycause the argumemente of the one s
that so wite, is found insufficent to
and the arrogancie of the other being
son, is finally to be regarded: and sc
ther the one nor the other of these our
can as yet fynd out any other, either
tyme, place or name, that shoulde ii
conquer, subdue and gouerne this no
only our Brutus or Brütus. For i
heth had of auncient tyme bothe th
as of U, and of I.

And sith also we haue on oure sy
or rather more, and of as god credit
speake generally, beynge likwyse so
ters, which affirme and undoubtedl
recall state of the fourfesse 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 Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain, in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577.

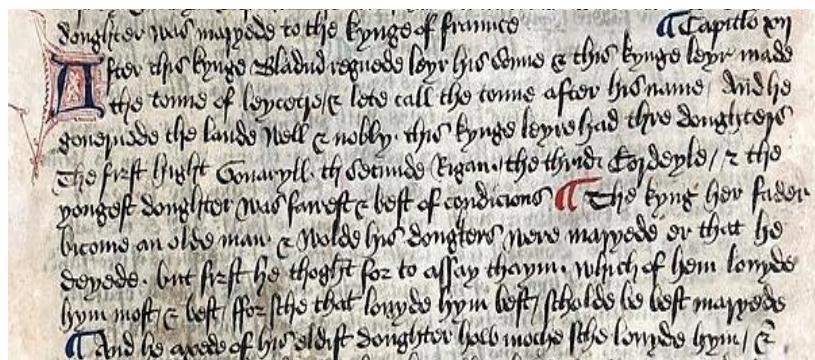
Layamon's Brut

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.

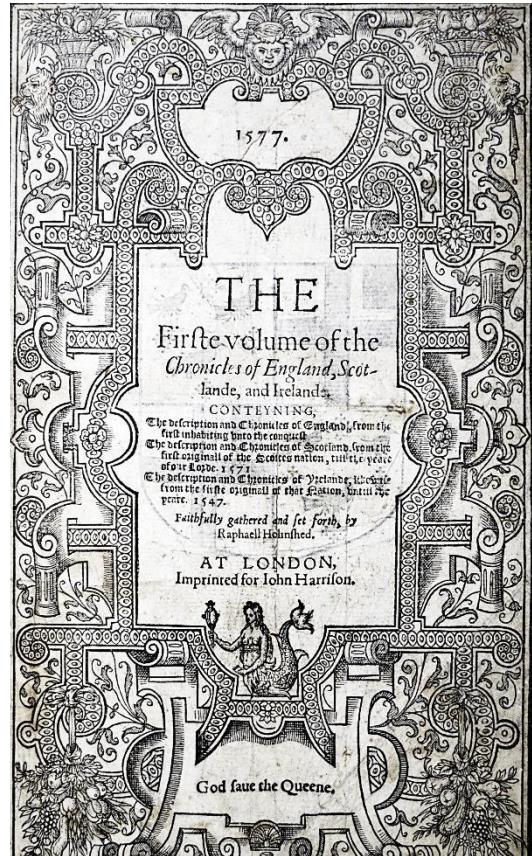


6. Detail of page 11 of Layamon's *Brut: The St Alban's Chronicle*, 15th century. A reference to Goneril, one of Lear's daughters, is seen around the middle of the page.

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.

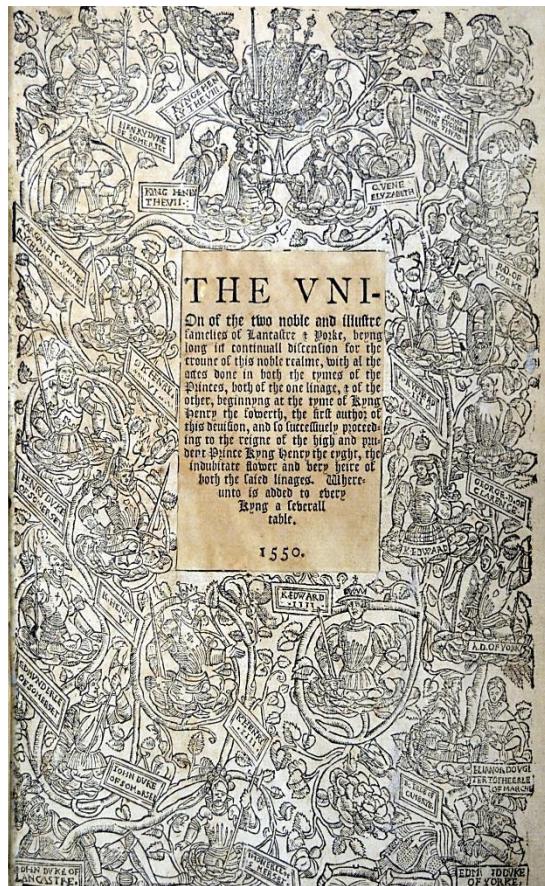


7. Frontispiece of the First Volume of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1577.

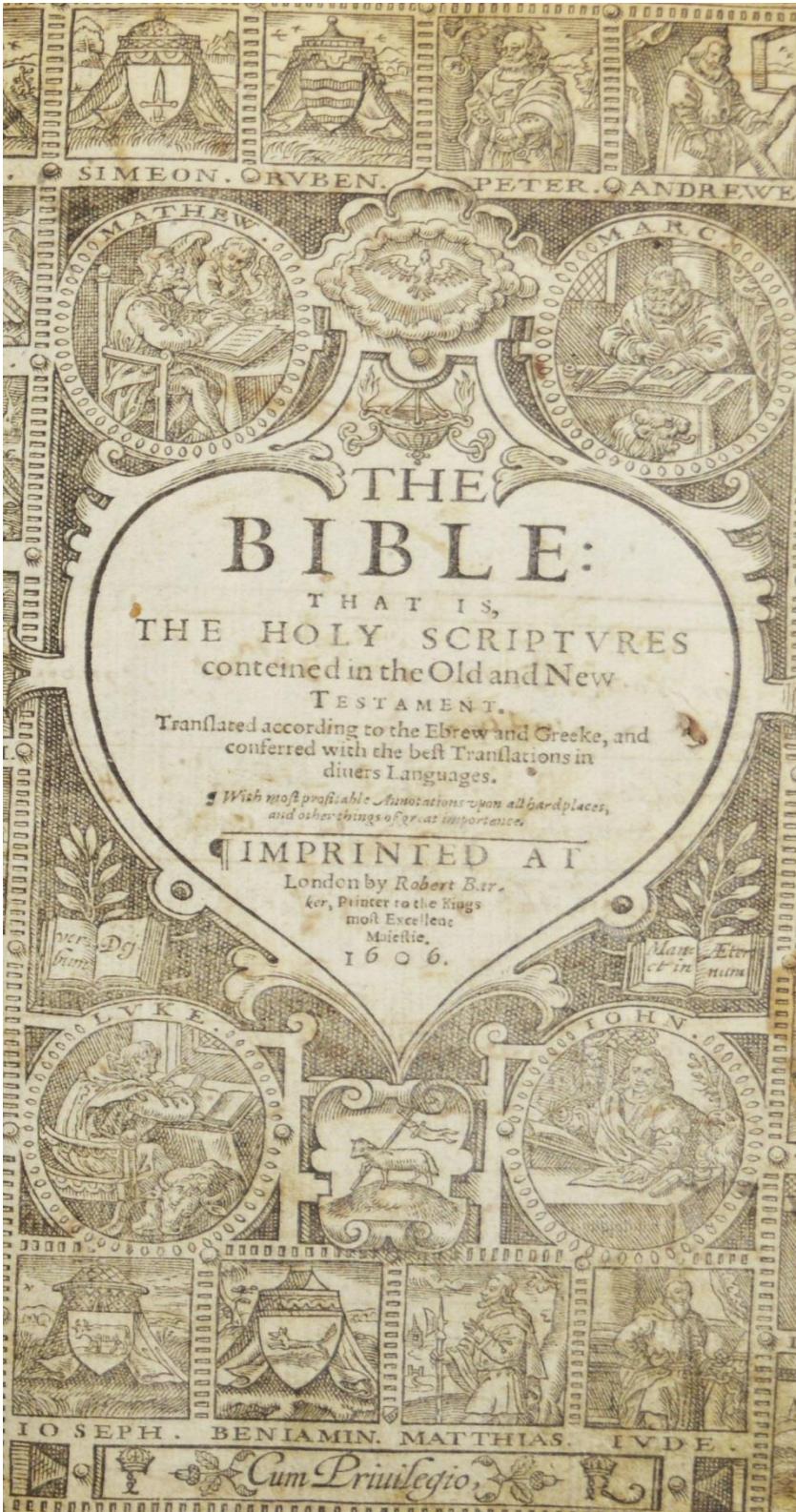
Edward Hall's chronicles were also a widely known and circulated history text in Renaissance England. Hall's was much less ambitious than Holinshed's in terms of the scope of his text. He limits his narrative to the period in the English history known as the War of Roses. The War of Roses starts with 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 vniōn 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 Jacobians. 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 compendyng treatis of the sondry
of Crist called engheridion whiche Erasmus
Roterdame wrote vnto a certen countreyn
& frende of his.

How hast desired of me to fradent fridy singler
belonched brother in Crist? That I shalde distrebe for
the compendously. A certen treatis of vertuous lyding
By whose helpe thou myghtest attayn biderleyng myte
for a true Cristen man. How seist that thou arte very
of the passyng of countre And to compass in thy mynde
what meanes thow myghtest escape Egypt w^t all hi both
vices and pleasures? And to be prepared happily v^t the
Capitayne goyses vnto the iorney of verisure. The more
I lode the the ioyisouſe I am of hiſt thy ſo holi a purpoſe
whiche I tenche ye wonche ouz helpe / he bat did rehiffaffe
to gyde hit he ſhall make proſperis and bringe to good
effeſte. Not w^tſtondyng yett hane I obeyed the partyng of
by cauſe thow arte ſo grecy a feende of myne partyng alſo
bytawſe thow Areqwest ſo charitable thynge Now therfore
awake plint vp thy harte ſetto thy ſhulders leſt other
thow ſhuldest ſeme to hane deſired my ſedys and
ſeruice in wayne or eſte to hane ſatſifid thy mynde
wonne any fute þe lett vs boþt indifferently beſethe
thy deuychyng ſpryte of Iſhū that he boþt put holsome thinge
in the mynde of me which write 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.

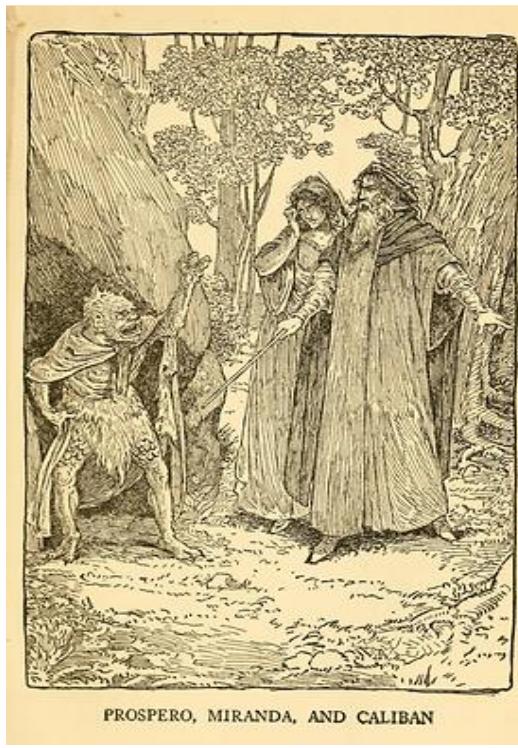
(As You Like It, 2.7)

11. A contemporary English translation of Erasmus’s ‘Handbook of the Christian soldier’. Image courtesy: British Library.

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.

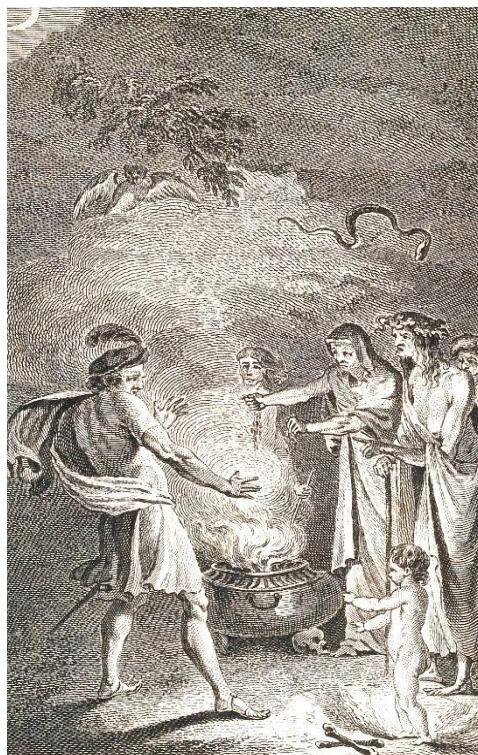
Montaigne's essay 'On the Cannibals' is believed to be one of the sources of inspiration for the creation of Caliban.

Machiavelli

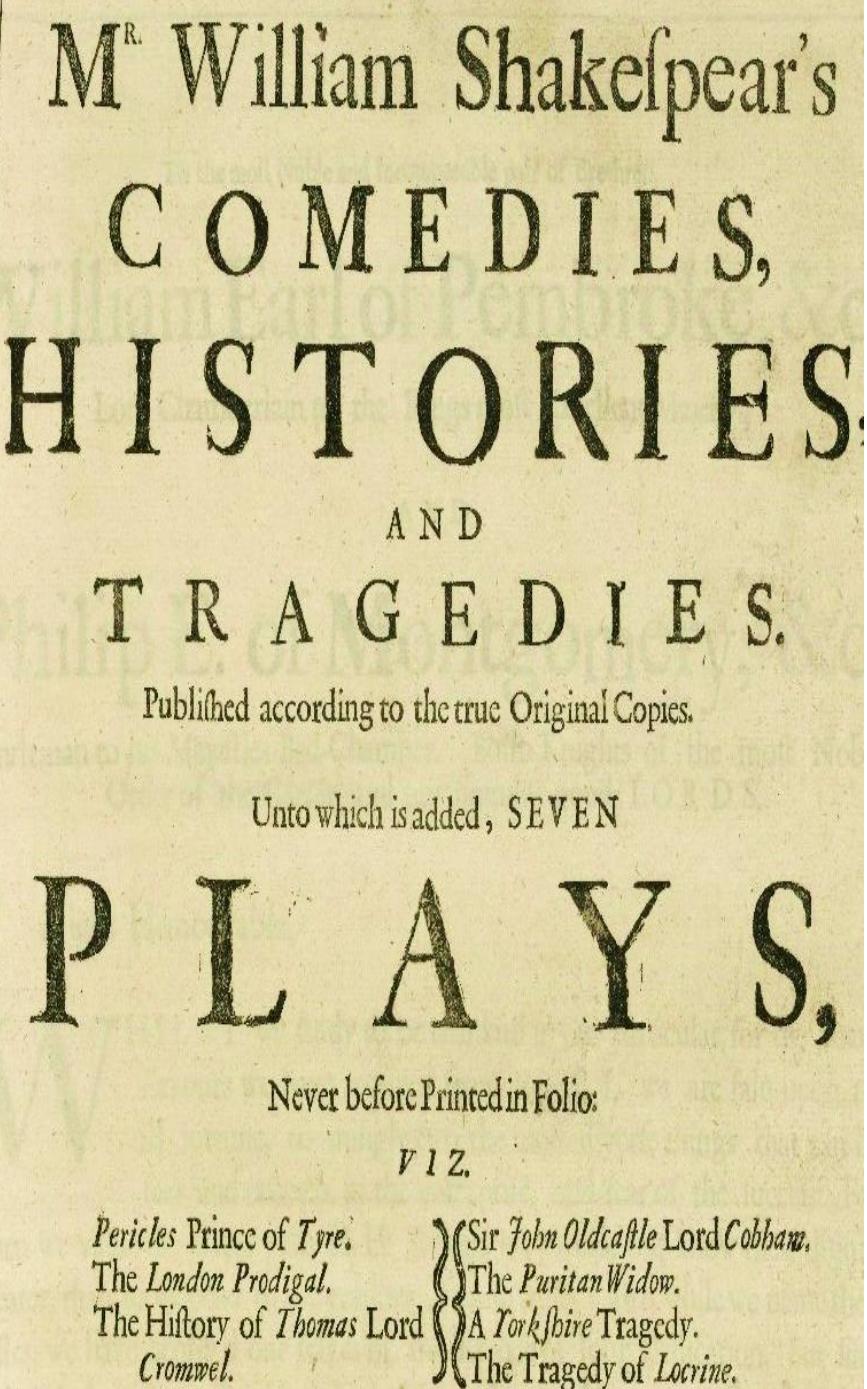
There is so far no way of ascertaining that Shakespeare read Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, published in 1532. Nevertheless, the ideas conveyed by the Italian controversial thinker were certainly hotly debated both in Italy and in England and are likely to have influenced him when writing *Richard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



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.

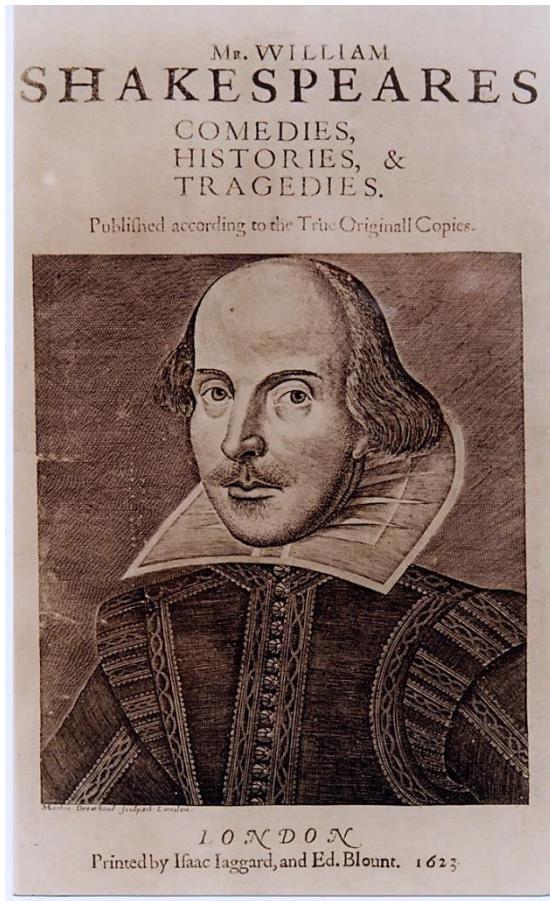
(*Hamlet*, 2.2)

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.

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List of Illustrations

1. William Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, 1594. CC-BY-NC-ND Image courtesy: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. 83000070
2. Frontispiece of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Translated into English by George Sandys, 1632. SCT 01174
3. Death of Dido in *The Works of Virgil*, translated into English by John Dryden, 1819. SCM 02341
4. Illustration of Julius Caesar from Hammer's Oxford edition of Shakespeare's plays, 1744. SCT 00158
5. Detail of the page telling the story of Brut, in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577. SCM 09713
6. Detail of a page in Layamon's *Brut: The St Alban's Chronicle*, 15th century. MS47
7. Frontispiece of the First Volume of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1577. SCM 09713
8. Frontispiece of Edward's Hall's *The vnion of the two noble and illustrious families of Lancastre and Yorke*, 1550. SCM 09683
9. Detail of the frontispiece of copy of the 'Geneva Bible', 1606. SCM 06926
10. Illustration of 'The Descent to Hell' in William Hone's edition of Mystery and Miracle Plays, 1823. SCM 00531
11. The first page of a contemporary English translation of Erasmus's 'Handbook of the Christian soldier'. Image courtesy: British Library. MS 89149
12. Engraving in Charles and Mary Lamb's edition of *The Tempest* in *Tales from Shakespeare*, 1918. SCS 04693
13. Macbeth meets the witches. Illustration in the Bell's edition of the play, 1774. SCT01177
14. Detail of the first page of Shakespeare's Fourth Folio, 1685. SCT 00394
15. Title page of Shakespeare's First Folio. 1623. CC-BY-NC-ND Image courtesy: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. 83000011
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. SMC 08037
17. Richard III's burial at the Grey Friars in John Nichols's *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 1815. SCD 00498

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