

# *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*

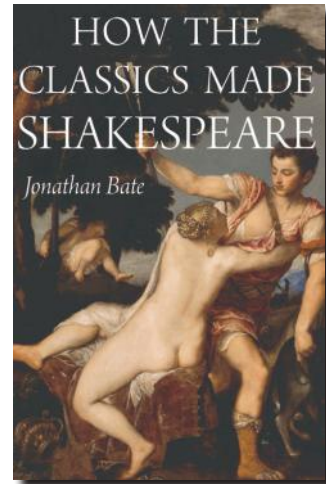
Reviewed by Earl Showerman

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*How the Classics Made Shakespeare. By Jonathan Bate. Princeton University Press 2019, 384 pages (hardcover \$16.93, Kindle \$15.72).*

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**T**he promotional literature accompanying Jonathan Bate's latest contribution to literary studies asserts that "Shakespeare was steeped in the classics. Shaped by his grammar school education in Roman literature, history, and rhetoric, he moved to London, a city that modeled itself on ancient Rome." That Shakespeare employed "the conventions and forms of classical drama, and read deeply in Ovid, Virgil, and Seneca" is hardly breaking news, nor is it surprising that perhaps "more than any other influence, the classics made Shakespeare the writer he became." No sensible reader would argue against the premise that "Shakespeare's supreme valuation of the force of imagination was honed by the classical tradition and designed as a defense of poetry and theater in a hostile world of emergent Puritanism" or how Shakespeare has become "our modern classic...playing much the same role for us as the Greek and Roman classics did for him..." In Bates' concluding words, "He is our singular classic."



*How the Classics Made Shakespeare* grew from a series of Lectures in the Classical Tradition at the Warburg Institute of the University of London in 2013. There are 14 distinct chapters, plus over 70 pages of citations, notes, and an

appendix, “The Elizabethan Virgil.” The central argument Bate develops is that classical authors endowed Shakespeare with a unique way of thinking, with a special intelligence.

His memory, knowledge, and skillfulness were honed by classical ways of thinking: the art of rhetoric, the recourse to mythological exemplars, the desire to improvise within the constraints of literary genre, the ethical and patriotic imperatives, the consciousness of the economy of artistic patronage, the love of debate, the delight in images (7).

So far so good. Predictably, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* has garnered a number of favorable reviews from nationally recognized literary critics, including Elizabeth Winkler, whose article on the Shakespeare authorship in the June *Atlantic* has provoked hostile responses from defenders of tradition. However, there is a glaring deficiency, an inexplicable sin of omission, which belies the “Classic” title, which is the absence of any acknowledgement by Bate of the role Greek drama played in the author’s creative, poetic imagination. Limiting his discourse to the influence of Roman cultural production clearly diminishes the value of Bate’s claim to have explored how Shakespeare “owned” the classical canon.

In *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* (2013), Colin Burrow wrote that Shakespeare “almost certainly never read Sophocles or Euripides (let alone the much more difficult Aeschylus) in Greek,” and that he learned about Greek drama indirectly through North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Bate has previously written that Ovid “taught Shakespeare everything he needed to know about Greek drama,” and, like Burrow, seems not to have considered the work of many scholars over the past century who have written commendably well on this subject.

The other area of Bate’s book that warrants criticism is the claims of prodigious learning in the Latin classics that Shakespeare would have encountered in the King Edward’s Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon, where “he was taught the art of memory and the skills of a writer.”

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**Earl Showerman** graduated from Harvard College and the University of Michigan Medical School, then practiced emergency medicine in Oregon for over thirty years. A longtime patron of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, after retiring from medicine in 2003, he enrolled at Southern Oregon University to study Shakespeare. Over the past decade Earl has presented a series of papers at authorship conferences and published on the topic of Shakespeare’s “Greater Greek.” He is the executive producer of Mignarda’s recording, *My Lord of Oxenford’s Maske*, wrote the chapter on Shakespeare’s medical knowledge in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?*, and is past president of the Shakespeare Fellowship.

Terence introduced him to comedy and scenic structure, Virgil to the heroic idiom, Horace to lyrical, occasional, and satirical poetry, and Tully (Cicero) to thoughtful reflection upon ethics, politics, and public duty. These classic authors, together with the more dangerous figure of Ovid, were formative of his thinking (9).

Bate asserts, without citation, that “dramatization of scenes from classical myth and history was a common schoolroom task” and that Shakespeare would have been read Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, Livy’s *History of Rome*, Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, Tacitus, Suetonius, Lucretius and Juvenal.

This book argues that Shakespeare was almost always Ovidian, more often than is usually supposed Horatian, sometimes Ciceronian, occasionally Tacitean, an interesting mix of Senecan and anti-Senecan, and, I suggest, strikingly anti-Virgilian—insofar as Virgilian meant “epic” or “heroic” (15).

Whatever he means with his ranking of influences, Bate insightfully notes that Shakespeare’s classical fabling “was profoundly *anti-heroic* because it was constantly attuned to the force of sexual desire.” He also notes that, despite Shakespeare’s lack of a university education, very early in his writing career, he would appeal to a wide variety of audiences: to Oxbridge undergraduates (with *Venus and Adonis*), a spectacular tragedy for both public and private audiences (*Titus Andronicus*), a self-consciously classic comedy for the Inns of Court (*The Comedy of Errors*), and a popular chronicle history (*1 Henry VI*). No scholar would disagree with Bate’s assertions about the profound influence of Ovid on Shakespeare.

Before he read Plutarch, he read Ovid, the author of whose work he found the things that made him a poet and a dramatist: magic, myth, metamorphosis, rendered with playfulness, verbal dexterity, and generic promiscuity. . . . Ovidian strangeness and wonder weave a golden thread that runs all the way through his career. . . . Ovid was the master who taught Shakespeare that what makes great literary art is extreme human passion (11).

Then there are his several references to Richard Roe’s allegedly “error-ridden” *Shakespeare Guide to Italy*—but Bate never presents a single instance of evidence of those notorious “errors.” Worse are his pedagogical assertions regarding the comprehensiveness of English grammar school classical education.

The opening lines of Mantuan’s first eclogue were among Shakespeare’s first encounters with poetry. Later in his education, Mantuan

would also have been used as the starting point for his instruction in poetic scansion, and the art of prosodic composition (85).

An inventory of the 16<sup>th</sup> century curricula of four English grammar schools, St. Bees, Rotherham, Zouch, and Harrow, listed in Steven Steinberg's book, *I Come to Bury Shakspeare* (2013), demonstrates only one edition of Mantuan between the four schools. Further, only two of the four had editions of Ovid, Terence, and Horace. While three of the four schools had editions of Cicero and Virgil's *Aeneid*, only one in four had an edition of Plautus, Juvenal, or Livy. The commonplace fantasy that Shakespeare's grammar school education was the equivalent of a present-day graduate degree in classics is based on circular argument, not documentary evidence. Shakespearean echoes of classical authors cannot be explained by grammar school curricula.

Bate does comment extensively on Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, William Webbe's *A Discourse of English Poetry*, and Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia* ("Meres liked to think in eights"), but he fails to acknowledge the Earl of Oxford's literary and dramatic patronage even once. According to Bate, *An Ethiopian History* by Heliodorus was translated into English "when Shakespeare was a child," and was "sometimes considered the first 'novel,' it exercised a huge influence on Renaissance adventure-writing in both verse and prose." He nowhere mentions that Thomas Underdown was the translator and the volume was dedicated to the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

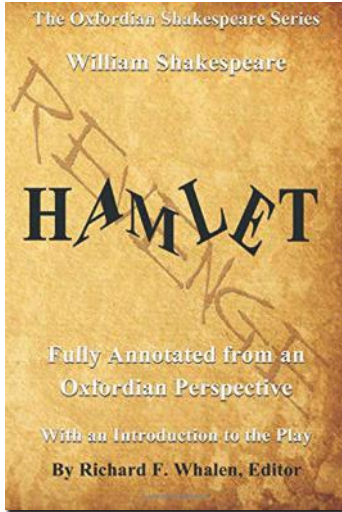
The most valuable lesson I gained from Bate's book was his development of the importance of Horace, who was "to the Elizabethans what Shakespeare became to the English in later generations: a collection of memorable phrases and quotations..." Bate even goes so far as to praise the literary achievements of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547). Surrey not only translated two books of Virgil's *Aeneid* using blank verse, but also Horace's "Ode to Licinius," which was published in 1557 in a popular collection, *Tottel's Miscellany*. Surrey and Thomas Wyatt became known as the "Fathers of the English Sonnet." Although Bate is loath to mention it, Surrey was also the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford's uncle.

Although he devotes an entire chapter to "The Labours of Hercules," Bate makes not one mention that the final scenes of *The Winter's Tale* and *Much Ado about Nothing* were influenced by Euripides' tragicomedy, *The Alceste*, where Hercules recovers the queen from Death. Bate himself has written on this theory in other publications, and many contemporary scholars have proposed as much. Although Bate is very impressed by the influence of Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, he overlooks the widely recognized mocking reference to John Studley's translation of Seneca's tragedy in Bottom's doggerel poem following his claim, "I could play 'ercles rarely."

Overall, Jonathan Bate's highly acclaimed book, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, is a worthy read for scholars interested in the inspiration and literary heritage Shakespeare gained from the Latin canon, and especially how Shakespeare "wrote against the ancients" and feminized the masculine Roman culture. However, this is only half the story of the classical inheritance. Bate's intentional, complete neglect of any reference to the influence of Greek drama on Shakespeare is his most glaring failure. His claims that grammar school curricula were robust in Latin titles is based on textual evidence Shakespeare knew the classical sources, not from a review of Elizabethan school book inventories, which tells a very different story. Perhaps Professor Bate wants his readers to take seriously the notion that reading Cicero was not a requirement, that "this was an influence transmitted by osmosis as well as by education." Now let that one sink in, my fellow skeptics.

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Edited by Richard F. Whalen with Jack Shuttleworth, chairman emeritus of the English department at the U.S. Air Force Academy, *Hamlet* is the latest of four plays so far in the Oxfordian Shakespeare Series, following the second edition of *Macbeth*, also edited by Whalen, general editor and publisher of the series; *Othello*, edited by Ren Draya of Blackburn University and by Whalen; and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, edited by Michael Delahoyde of Washington State University.

All four plays are available at Amazon.com.

