

Shakespeare's Greek Origins

Reviewed by Lyle Jennings Colombo

Shakespeare's Greater Greek: An Exploration of Greek Drama, Epic & History in the Works of Shakespeare. By *Earl Showerman*, *Greater Greek Group*, 2025, 348 pages (paperback \$24.00).

In *Shakespeare's Greater Greek*, Earl Showerman offers a bold reassessment of Shakespeare's literary influences, challenging the long-standing assumption that Greek drama was beyond his reach. Drawing on detailed textual comparisons and a wide classical lens, Showerman builds a case for a playwright whose imagination was shaped by the tragic grandeur of the Greeks; a claim that, if taken seriously, has the potential to reshape how we understand the plays and their origins.

The traditional view that Shakespeare was not directly influenced by Greek drama is not based on textual examination but on the biography of William of Stratford, whose grammar school education would not have included Greek. This position has been maintained for over a century, even by those scholars who have found pronounced textual evidence of Greek influence in the plays. Showerman breaks with academic consensus by setting biography aside and going straight to the texts themselves. Through meticulous comparative analysis, he reveals deep structural, thematic, allegorical, dramaturgical, and even linguistic affinities between Shakespeare's works and classical Greek tragedy. His argument is that eight of the plays—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Winter's*



Tale, Pericles, Much Ado About Nothing, and A Midsummer Night's Dream—bear the unmistakable imprint of the author's direct engagement with the Greek texts. The result is a uniquely provocative and persuasive re-reading of Shakespeare as a playwright deeply steeped in classical Greek sources.

Showerman is particularly persuasive in tracing these classical echoes not just in structure and theme, but in Shakespeare's vocabulary, rhetorical strategies, and even mythological precision. He notes that Shakespeare never misuses a mythological name or place, suggesting that his knowledge of Homer, Hesiod, and the tragedians extended beyond what was available in English or even Latin at the time. Shakespeare's linguistic precision, Showerman argues, belies the assumption that he worked solely from available translations or conversations with learned friends. Only by being steeped in the "most important revenge stories of the classical canon," he writes, could Shakespeare have succeeded in "investing his modern hero with both the greatness and the horror of those who walked the ancient and dramatic road of gods and ghosts."

The most powerful sections of the book are those that systematically catalogue such correspondences with the Greeks. In *Timon of Athens*, for example, Showerman identifies structural echoes of *Oedipus at Colonus*, especially in the fourth act, where the ruined Timon—like Sophocles's blind and broken Oedipus—is visited by a succession of supplicants. John Jowett, in his Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Timon of Athens* (2004), criticizes this scene as "daring" and "untheatrical." Showerman points out that in doing so, he entirely misses the possibility that its radical pattern is actually based on an ancient dramatic tradition. The resemblance extends to motif, theme, and staging: exile in the woods, curses upon city and kin, death offstage, secret burial sites, and the presence of daughters (or female companions) who bear witness. In the final moments of both plays, the figures of Poseidon and Neptune are invoked. While scholars like A.D. Nuttall have acknowledged the Greek "feel" of *Timon*, they stop short of proposing direct influence. Showerman does not hesitate to forge ahead. "Like a typical Sophoclean tragic hero," he writes, "Timon remains stubbornly himself without the

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benefit of self-reflection, and dies, cursing madly and fury-driven in the wilderness.”

Similarly, *Macbeth* is read against Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, especially the *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*. The “poisoned breast” motif, the fatal trammel net, the indelible bloodstain, avian divination, and the sinister personification of the protagonist’s house all find resonances in both works. Yet modern editions of *Macbeth* propose no direct Aeschylean influence on the play. Showerman laments this critical omission, observing that for over a century, commentators have remarked on the uncanny similarities between *Macbeth* and the *Oresteia* only to attribute them to coincidence or natural instinct.

These patterns recur in *The Winter’s Tale* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Showerman reasserts the importance of Euripides’s *Alcestis*. The famous statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale*, in which Hermione appears to be brought back from the dead, closely mirrors Alcestis’s resurrection by Heracles. The queens in both dramas are to have lifelike statues made of them. Both kings comment longingly on the mysterious form before them and each first refuses three times to embrace or unveil it. Both queens are described in the same idealized language, and music and prayerful thanks conclude both dramas.

Classically trained scholars of the 19th century noted the resemblance to *Alcestis*, but this was problematic for Shakespeare’s biographers, as no English or Latin translations of Euripides’s play had yet appeared in print in England. By the mid-20th century, as Showerman documents, academic consensus had shifted to favor Latin-based sources like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. *Alcestis* was relegated to footnotes or dismissed altogether. A.D. Nutall (in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, Cambridge University Press, 2009), sums up the current scholarly consensus as follows: “That Shakespeare was cut off from Greek poetry and drama is probably a bleak truth that we should accept. . . . He cannot in any serious sense have found his way to Euripides.”

Throughout the book, Showerman highlights examples where notable scholars like Nutall acknowledge marked evidence of Greek influence only to fall back on mystical explanations such as “instinct,” “genius,” “fortuitousness,” “osmosis,” “an eternal undercurrent,” “a subconscious solidarity,” even a “strange, unanalyzed ‘vibration.’” The Greek scholar Gilbert Murray, upon uncovering Shakespeare’s debt to the Greeks over a century ago, suggested a “rather terrifying hypothesis, that the field of tragedy is by nature so limited that these similarities are inevitable.” In trying to explain the mystery of how echoes of the Greeks could turn up in Shakespeare, Colin Burrow (*Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 2013) goes so far as to say that Shakespeare’s inability to read Greek may actually be what accounts for how thoroughly he absorbed the Greek dramas: Instead of

having to “work his way through” the “complex thoughts...buried implicitly in a drama,” the secondary sources would have spelled out the spirit of Greek tragedy “in a direct, clear statement.”

Showerman takes a more pragmatic approach to explaining how evidence of Greek drama found its way into the works of Shakespeare. This erasure of Greek influence is not merely an academic oversight, he insists, but a symptom of a broader reluctance to reconsider Shakespeare's education. Repeatedly, he critiques current scholars such as the Martindales, Michael Silk, and A.D. Nuttall for refusing to consider the possibility that Shakespeare knew Greek. Their conventional retreat to Ovid, Plutarch, and conversations at the Mermaid Tavern is, in his analysis, an unconvincing evasion of harder truths. If *Alcestis* provided the archetypal framework not just for *The Winter's Tale* but also *Much Ado*, with its veiled bride, tomb-side vigil, and resurrection motif, then the implications are profound.

Indeed, Showerman presses these implications further by directly raising the question of authorship. He argues that the Stratford-based Shakespeare biography has inhibited serious exploration of Greek influences because it simply cannot accommodate them. If we instead consider a classically educated author with access to Greek texts, the whole canon opens anew. *Timon* becomes not a puzzling anomaly but a Greek-inflected experiment; *Hamlet*, an intertextual meditation on revenge shaped by the *Oresteia* and *Orestes*; *The Winter's Tale*, not merely a fantasy derived from Greene's *Pandosto*, but a mythopoetic resurrection drama directly shaped by Euripides and Hesiod.

Still, *Shakespeare's Greater Greek* does not rest on biography alone. Its strength lies in comparative textual analysis. Showerman uncovers dramaturgical, thematic, and linguistic patterns with care, citing earlier critics when they agree and challenging them when they back away from their own insightful discoveries. Even readers skeptical of the authorship question will find themselves compelled to reconsider long-held assumptions. By the end of the book, the notion that Greek tragedy had no direct influence on Shakespeare seems not just implausible, but untenable. Showerman's penetrating and thoroughly researched volume has the potential to reshape the field.

Some readers may balk at the challenge this presents to the man from Stratford's authorship; nevertheless, Showerman's scholarship cannot easily be ignored. His call for renewed interest in Greek sources—what Inga-Stina Ewbank called Shakespeare's “eclecticism of inter-textualizing”—is urgent and overdue. (Ewbank herself said she would not “dare insist on the objective validity of my own growing sense that Shakespeare learned from the Aeschylean chorus.”) Showerman heralds the beginnings of what Professor Nic Panagopoulos calls the “Greek turn” in Shakespeare studies, citing a recent colloquium at the University of York on “Greek Texts and the Early

Modern Stage,” and the work of Professor Tanya Pollard. The larger significance of Showerman’s book is that by restoring Shakespeare’s Greek heritage, we may also gain a transformed understanding of the classical inheritance of Early Modern English literature.

At its core, *Shakespeare’s Greater Greek* is an impassioned defense of intertextual scholarship, a reminder that resemblances in plot, character, staging, and poetic gesture deserve serious consideration. It is an erudite and deeply provocative work that deserves the attention of anyone who reveres the Bard. Whether it is read as a textual detective story, a literary polemic, or a fresh framework for understanding Shakespearean tragedy, it has the power to change the way one views the canon, and perhaps the playwright behind it.

