

Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 281.

The presence of classical sources in Shakespeare's works has been a cogent topic ever since criticism contemporary to the Bard. T.W. Baldwin (*William Shakespeare's small Latin and less Greek*, 1944) first disentangled the matter of Shakespeare's classical knowledge in his detailed reconstruction of grammar schools in the Elizabethan age. Many monographs have followed on the relationship between Shakespeare and single classical authors or genres, until Burrow's *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, which represents an attempt to give both an overview and a new approach to the subject.

Burrow points out two weaknesses in Baldwin's work: an overestimation of the role of grammar schools when he associates Shakespeare with the best grammar school education and the exclusion of alternative, subsequent sources of classical knowledge in the course of Shakespeare's career.

As a matter of fact, Burrow's book revolves around two main ideas: first, that Shakespeare actually does know much of classical literature and that he does «interesting things» with it, the focus being not on the depth of Shakespeare's knowledge, but on «the extent of that learning» (p. 2). Second, that classical «antiquity» – a term no-one, including Shakespeare, would have used before the Romantic Age – has much to do with a sense of oldness and a sense of the past in its relationship with an early modern context. The practical results of such an approach on this subject constitute a helpful vantage point to a broader insight and understanding of Shakespeare's work (p. 2-3).

In the perspective of a «larger narrative about changing understandings of classical antiquity» (p. 3), Burrow claims it is necessary to consider the instrumental use of classical sources, what he terms as «practical humanism» (p. 5), when dealing with a Renaissance context. Burrow displays the records of his research

detecting four main behaviours in Shakespeare as a writer, as far as allusions to classical sources are concerned (pp. 5-6): I. sometimes more or less explicit quotes are just part of the poet's language, while at other times the poet flags them up for special attention. II. Shakespeare also differentiates the status of different characters or triggers implied dialogues between them; III. classical allusions also make Shakespeare stand out as modern in comparison to other contemporary poets or works (pp. 5-8). IV. Burrow also investigates what he calls Shakespeare's «blind spots» (p. 10), such as Shakespeare's lack of interest in Latin metrical complexity, classical epigrams and larger debates about the position of classical literature in English verse: these missing features provide the key to unlock the poet's functional use of classical antiquity in relation to theatre as a means of artistic communication. Additionally, Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek literature constitutes somehow a blind spot in itself: what he knows is probably conveyed by Latin and sometimes itself translated into English (e.g. Greek tragedies); moreover, other sources should not be underestimated, such as dictionaries and mythography handbooks, especially as far as history and mythology are concerned. Finally, painting, architecture and sculpture add up to further blind spots: it is true that the accession of James I coincides with a sort of architectural classicism, especially in the sphere of masques and pageants, but it culminates after the end of Shakespeare's career as a playwright (p. 15). In this sense, the comparison between Shakespeare and Jonson is self-explanatory: neither of them knows more or less about classical literature, they just use their knowledge in different ways, even though the last plays by Shakespeare, with the transformation of his company into the *Kings Men*, possibly remind of some of the classical elements typical of the reign of James I (pp. 15-18).

The first chapter deals with Shakespeare's education. As mentioned before, Burrow stresses the role of secondary sources of learning for the adult Shakespeare and also introduces the issue of Shakespeare's unrecorded and never recovered personal library: unlike other authors,

namely Ben Jonson, we do not have a catalogue of what Shakespeare certainly owned or read, which does not mean he did not own nor read anything. This lack of information does not diminish the importance of the presence of books on stage. An inventory of cases taken from Shakespearian characters illustrates how most of times books appear on stage unnamed and that the classical knowledge they display is more than often *situational*. In other words, books appearing on stage, either identified or not, are used in a performative way both for characters and audience (p. 29).

Generally speaking, grammar school was perceived as a «male puberty rite» (p. 38), during which certain authors or passages, studied not only from a rhetorical point of view, also conveyed sexual education within an exclusively masculine environment. One of the results of this multi-dimensional perspective is a connection between language and eroticism, whose effectiveness varied to an audience with different degrees of education. Not everyone might have caught an erudite allusion, but almost everyone would have laughed at a sexual *double entendre*. Burrow illustrates how Shakespeare's memory of his school days comes out both from proper teaching scenes and stylistic and rhetorical mechanisms, as well as from the situational use the poet makes of them. Burrow quotes some examples of the main exercises typical of grammar school carried out and developed into memorable Shakespearean scenes. Hamlet's famous soliloquy (3,1) is built on the skeleton of a *quaestio*, that is to say, the discussion of a topic from the two opposite points of view of praise and dispraise, a specific feature of debates and disputes typical of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century university studies. Hecuba's speech, recited by Hamlet, corresponds to an exercise of *prosopopoeia*, a task that involves the production of a speech in the person of a particular character under particular circumstances. Along with *ethopoeia* – the ability to evoke a given character's habits – all these rhetorical techniques, cultivated at school, constitute the main tasks required to a playwright. However, Burrow claims that Shakespeare is totally aware of the difference between his use of

classical knowledge and that of fellow poets who have university degrees and boast the title of Masters of Art, and postulates that this is why Shakespeare tends to make fun of his characters' little notion of different elements of classical antiquity, from misquoted authors or poems to proper grammatical issues, in order to «avoid being made fun of himself» (p. 46).

Burrow's point is even more convincing when he explores the other side of the coin, that is to say, Shakespeare's later more conscious and, or, non-ironic use of classical knowledge. In the majority of these cases, Burrow explains, we are dealing with works Shakespeare wrote to be performed, at the Inns of Courts or for the Kings Men, before a public able to detect and appreciate a conscious and active displacement of classical knowledge. Two examples among many are the violation of the classical norm of never representing the inside of a household, as occurs in *Twelfth Night* (pp. 48-49), or the addition of the innovative role of the clever and autonomous female protagonist, as opposed to the Latin identification of women on stage exclusively with the *uxor dotata* and her dowry. More generally, Burrow states a cultural influence of Terence in terms of dramatic strategies to be observed along the more straightforward technical and punctual influence of Plautus: the learned manipulation of classical sources in the construction of the *Comedy of Errors* testifies, in Burrow's analysis, to a Terentian attitude of hybridisation in re-shaping the Plautinian model in order to adapt it to an early modern context (48; 143-51).

In the following chapters Burrow explores Shakespeare's relationship with single authors and genres. Virgil and Ovid are presented in succession and the contiguity of these two sections devoted to them helps a comparative understanding of Shakespeare's situational use of, and his growing maturity towards, the reading of sources.

What Shakespeare learns from Virgil is the power of characters' responses and reactions: two examples among many shed light on this narrative mechanism. Burrow (pp. 57-59) analyses an ekphrastic

evocation of an epic Virgilian theme in the *Rape of Lucrece*, when the heroine interrupts herself while complaining about her rape, by suddenly recalling a painting which depicts the betrayal of the Trojans by Sinon:

*Here, all enraged, such passion her assails,
That patience is quite beaten from her breast.
She tears the senseless Sinon with her nails,
Comparing him to that unhappy guest
Whose deed hath made herself herself detest:
At last she smilingly with this gives o'er;
“Fool, fool!” quoth she, “his wounds will not be sore.”*
(Shakespeare, *Lucrece*, 1562-68)

According to Burrow, the use of the ekphrasis in order to evoke an epic narrative represents one of the main strategies by which Shakespeare indirectly alludes to Virgil. In this case the poet possibly had in mind Aeneas' overwhelming emotional reaction to the vision of the Trojan war, displayed at length on the buildings of Carthago:

*Constitit, et lacrimans, “Quis iam locus” inquit “Achate,
quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?
En Priamus! Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi;
sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
Solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem”.*
(Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, 459-63)

Another example, wittily explored by Burrow (pp. 62-63), is the episode of the stumbling memory of Hamlet when trying to remember Aeneas's speech to Dido, recalling the fall of Troy, or the evocation – or rather, rewriting – of Hecuba's speech. This last example, in particular, reveals a direct knowledge of the Latin text and one of the few explicit and lengthy quotes from Virgil in Shakespeare. In particular, Burrow analyses the sources of the language displayed in this passage, which sounds different from the rest of the play and from Shakespeare's English in general: the epithet 'Hyrceanian' to describe Pyrrhus, in the seventeenth century, was only used to refer to tigers and betrays here a direct provenance from the virgilian text. Similarly,

other syntactic constructions can be reconnected to later vernacular translations. The mixture of these languages by a «humanist Hamlet» functions on both a cultural and a narrative level, testifying to Shakespeare's use and knowledge of Virgil and differentiating the antiquity of the quotation from the novelty of Shakespeare's language.

Moreover, the use of a Virgilian source in *Hamlet* proves to be even more effective when it is, so to speak, missing: in the play-within-the-play scene, Polonius interrupts the actors just before they declaim the part in which the Virgilian Aeneas recalls his own reaction to Priam's death (Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 559-62). The allusion to this particular scene, by means of an interruption, is overtly functional in the context of Hamlet's intention to discover Claudius's responsibility in the king's death. What Burrow deeply demonstrates is that, again, the use of Virgil in Shakespeare's works shows a strong pragmatic awareness, as it is even more evident in the Jacobean part of his theatrical production, where a Virgilian imperialistic attitude sometimes peeps behind the scenes, as examples from *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline* provide (pp. 71-91).

During the Renaissance, Ovid was possibly the most read among the classical authors and provided both stories and sources for plots and characters; moreover, the mythology of his life became «subject for dramatic representation» (p. 93). Thus, for instance, the themes of ruin and exile, which permeate Ovid's biography, are fundamental elements in Shakespeare's sonnets. In Ovid's *Heroides* Burrow detects the roots of female complaint poetry to which both *Lucrece* and *A Lover's Complaint* can be ascribed, while, on the other hand, the *Metamorphoses* constitute the richest cauldron from which the English poet draws for themes, characters, stylistic and rhetorical devices. Burrow observes how frequently virgilian characters are presented in the shadow of their ovidian «less than simply heroic versions» (p. 99), observing that Ovid often offers an alternative ending to the Virgilian original treatment of the source material: a lesson Shakespeare moulds to his plot finalities. For instance, Lorenzo's reference to Dido in the *Merchant of Venice* (5,I,9-10)

seems to refer to Ovid's *Heroides*, where the queen is presented as the heroine and Aeneas as the betrayer, rather than alluding to the development of the same episode in Book IV of the *Aeneid* (pp. 98-99). Shakespeare's debts to Ovid give the reader the chance to think about the relationship between the former's plays and his verses and to consider how the treatment of Ovid differs in his comedies and tragedies (p. 122). Burrow concludes by observing how, after 1600, references to Ovidian sources change, starting to function as narrative hints: in *Cymbeline* (2,2), for instance, Giacomo alludes to Philomel by intruding into Innogen's bedchamber, albeit in the end not committing the rape; in *A Winter's Tale* (5,3,85-97), the exposure of the statue of Hermione unleashes a complex triangular relationship between stage, audience and readership; eventually, Prospero's last speech in *The Tempest* (5,1,33-51) evokes Ovid's Medea, but results, Burrow notes, as «vocative» instead of «imperative» and the passage concludes with Prospero's renunciation of the act of magic (pp. 118-132).

Burrow then provides an overview of the elements of Greek and Roman comedy that have influenced modern European theatre and concentrates on illustrating the mechanism of innovation in Shakespeare's conflation of different sources: a lesson he successfully learns from Terence's use of *contaminatio*. *The Comedy of Errors* provides the best examples of all the strategies recurring in Shakespeare's comedies, merging elements from *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*: from the representation of household spaces, often violating classical norms, to narrative devices and the enrichment of typical characterizations (pp. 143-151). Finally, Burrow stresses Shakespeare's blurring of genres in his introduction of tragic elements into comedy and vice-versa (pp. 151-161).

Seneca is usually considered as a vague influence on Shakespearean tragedy, despite the fact of being the only classical tragedian surviving in early modern times and despite the more direct influence on other contemporary authors, such as Marlowe. However, Burrow illustrates how much of Senecan tragedy can be perceived behind the

construction of Shakespearian plots, characters and tragic elements. At the time of Shakespeare, Seneca was mainly known as a philosopher, but the epigrammatic nature of *sententiae* present in his tragedies certainly appeals to Shakespeare's interest in poetic drama: Burrow shows how Shakespeare, through his characters, proves to be a critical reader of the Latin tragedian. In *King Lear*, for example, the themes of ingratitude and the limits to the debt deriving from the relationship between fathers and children recall some of the themes of Seneca's *De beneficiis*. In a meditation by Lear on these topics (2,2,452-6), different Senecan sources are conflated, from a direct quote from *Thyeste*, to remote and unsteady memories of Senecan philosophy, with the effect of making Lear almost impersonate an «antique Seneca», in the sense of both old and mad, transforming Senecan passages into Shakespearean passages (p. 200).

Burrow's empirical assumption, carried out by means of reasonable conjectures, is strongly convincing, however his determined statement that Seneca's *Phaedra* would have been Shakespeare's greatest influence has been received rather sceptically by critics of his volume.

A somehow specular mechanism is valid for Plutarch: the diffusion of his *Parallel Lives* during the Renaissance is well documented, and evidence that Shakespeare read the *Lives* can be grasped by the details of Theseus' life in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Burrow conducts a deep analysis of the attitude Shakespeare shows towards Plutarch, who proves to be a good theatrical source and teaches Shakespeare how poets can be historians: anecdotes can reveal characters more than the narrative rigidity of authoritative historiography. Taking *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* as laboratories of investigation, Burrow explores how Shakespeare seems to react more to Plutarch's Roman characters, who are depicted from the point of view of a Greek ethnographer. According to Burrow, somehow Shakespeare learns in particular about Greek tragedy and its values from Plutarch, rather than directly from the original sources, which he probably never read (p. 237). Moreover, the way in which Plutarch presents certain personalities forces Shakespeare to reason when shaping his own

characters. Likewise, the reader is prompted to think about how and what Shakespeare does and not, again, just what Shakespeare knows.

Colin Burrow's volume is amongst the latest publications by Oxford Shakespeare Topics, a book series of Oxford University Press which provides short books on Shakespeare's criticism and scholarship, aiming thus at a composite public of students, teachers and scholars. Its clear and entertaining language suits graduate students who might have diverse degrees of familiarity with classical literature: Burrow always contextualizes the authors he writes about, cross-referencing with an extensive bibliography and a practical analytical index. Burrow is also very attentive in supplying dates and editions of classical works, translations and editions presumably available to Shakespeare, testifying to the general discussion and diffusion of classical antiquity in Renaissance England and Europe. I think these valuable characteristics would also prove helpful and enlightening to teachers who want to approach Shakespeare in an interdisciplinary and engaging way at every level of education.

As the title of the book already clarifies, Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity is not, or not only, a history of the chronological influence and presence of classical sources in Shakespeare's works, rather than the suggestion of a new approach and perspective on the subject almost in the light of cultural studies. Furthermore, the author supplies interesting and innovative acute remarks: for this reason I personally appreciate the author's ability to spot connections not only between classical authors and Shakespeare's works, but also between the latter and the environment of grammar schools.

One of the few criticisms that can be pointed out, and that has been already stressed in the immediate reception of the book soon after its publication, is Burrow's sometimes too strong trust in his reasonable, but yet still suppository conjectures, to which he makes correspond

strong and definite conclusions¹. However, more than, or along with, Burrow's personal opinions, his way of proceeding through sources, context and textual references is an important contribute to such a lively debated subject, allowing the reader to approach Shakespeare and his classical knowledge from an innovative and at times positively disruptive perspective. I think that the strongest merits of Burrow's book lie in the fact that it is easy to browse and entertaining to read. Most importantly, from a methodological point of view, I personally appreciate Burrow's constant references to precise Shakespearean passages in the light not only of comparative studies, but also of stylistics and pragmatics.

Considering that a rich and still flourishing literature is available, as far as a more in-depth analysis on specific philological or comparative matters is concerned (among others, cf. C. Martindale, L. Barkin, L. Enterline, J. Bate), it is for reasons of clarity and accuracy that *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* is the perfect starting point for finding orientation in every research on the subject of Shakespearean materials and their relation to classical sources, in terms of both notions and methodologies.

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¹ See Geoffrey Miles's review in *The Review of English Studies*, 65, 2014, pp. 928-30 and Michael Silk in *Times Literary Review*, February 14, 2014, to which an epistolary debate between Silk and Burrow followed: <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1389208.ece>.