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Shakespeare's Reading

Robert S. Miola

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GENERAL EDITORS: PETER HOLLAND AND STANLEY WELLS

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Reading*

ROBERT S. MIOLA

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Illustrations

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Note on Texts and Abbreviations

All references to Shakespeare are to *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and to their accompanying *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). I have referred to sources as conveniently reprinted in the collection of Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957–75) (abbreviated as Bullough); and to early critics and editors of Shakespeare in the collection of Brian Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974–81) (abbreviated as Vickers). Throughout I have silently modernized the spelling and punctuation of quoted texts.

Elizabethan Reading

The temptation has proven irresistible: people have always imagined that Shakespeare's poetry and drama arose not from his reading but from his life. The sonnets, accordingly, recount actual passions and aspirations; the tragedies reflect some personal catastrophe, perhaps the death of Shakespeare's only son Hamnet in 1596 at the age of 11. This desire to see the life behind the art motivates the recent film, *Shakespeare in Love*, wherein Gwyneth Paltrow's captivating Viola de Lesseps inspires the smitten poet to write *Romeo and Juliet*, and then, as she sails out of his life, *Twelfth Night*. Revealing more about their inventors and audiences than about Shakespeare, such delightful fantasies have no basis in fact.¹ No record of Shakespeare's affections survives except, presumably, those pertaining to his wife Anne Hathaway (the issue of a marriage licence and the will) and to his patron, the Earl of Southampton (dedications to several poems). We can only guess at his grief over the death of Hamnet, apparently named for a Stratford neighbour and baker, by the way, not the legendary Danish prince. Shakespeare's personal life, unfortunately, remains largely lost in the 'dark backward and abyss of time' (*The Tempest*, 1. 2. 50).

The surviving work itself, however, gives more reliable witness to its genesis and origins. Shakespeare created much of his art from his reading. At first, the idea of Shakespeare as reader may shock and disturb. We prefer to romanticize him as the 'Bard', i.e. a divinely inspired singer, or as a natural genius, 'Fancy's child' warbling 'native wood-notes wild' (John Milton, *L'Allegro*, 133-4). Such myths only obscure the reality of Shakespeare's work and achievement. To fashion his poems and plays Shakespeare read all sorts of books—classics like

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Plutarch's *Lives*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, medieval works like Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, histories like Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Italian and English prose romances, miscellaneous poems, and plays. G. B. Shaw wryly praised Shakespeare's 'gift of telling a story (provided someone else told it to him first)'.² He freely borrowed characters, plots, and ideas from other writers and just as freely ignored or contradicted them when it suited. He often used several sources simultaneously, collecting varying accounts of a character or incident. Heirs to later ideas about originality, modern readers sometimes confuse this creative method with plagiarism, the stealing of someone else's work. But our notion of plagiarism is foreign to Renaissance poetic theory and practice, which stressed the importance of *imitatio*, the creative imitation of others.³ According to this theory, a poet demonstrated originality not by inventing new stories but by adapting extant, particularly classical, ones. The genius lay not in the invention but in the transformation.

Reading Practices

Like other schoolboys in Stratford-upon-Avon, young William Shakespeare learned to read in an elementary or 'petty' school.⁴ There he practised on a hornbook, a leaf of paper on a wooden tablet covered with a sheet of translucent horn, which featured the alphabet, numbers, and the 'Our Father'. After acquiring the rudiments of literacy from a primer and catechism, students passed on to the grammar school, where the great Dutch scholar Erasmus and the first wave of English humanist reformers had forged for Europe a philological curriculum and a rigorous method of study.⁵ Students like Shakespeare received extensive training in Latin and rhetoric. For ten or eleven years they spent the best part of six days a week reading, translating, and writing Latin, composing poems, essays, and arguments. They learned to value ancient authors—Greek and Roman—as models in the arts and sciences and also as valuable guides to practical problems.

Such training fostered certain habits of reading, thinking, and writing. Students acquired extraordinary sensitivity to language, especially to its sound. The practice of reading aloud and of reciting verse developed acute inner ears that could appreciate sonic effects which are

lost on moderns. The declamatory rhetoric of Seneca's Latin, for example, thrilled Elizabethan auditors, who adopted him as their model for tragedy. Only specialists today read Senecan tragedy, silently, alone, usually in translation and out of obligation. Elizabethans appreciated sound effects such as shifts between verse forms and between verse and prose. For such attuned audiences Shakespeare gave to the witches in *Macbeth* that eerie chant in trochaic tetrameter ('Double, double, toil and trouble, | Fire burn, and cauldron bubble', 4. 1. 10-11) and to Hamlet those searching, blank-verse soliloquies. Elizabethan aural sensitivity led to delight in wordplay of all kinds, repartee, *double entendre*, puns, and quibbles. In the eighteenth century the sober and serious editor, Samuel Johnson, commented disapprovingly:

A quibble is the golden apple for which he [Shakespeare] will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it. (Vickers, v. 68)

Today Shakespeare's quibbles, often cut in production, may seem trivial and tedious; but to contemporaries such wordplay exploited the energies of language and intellect in entertaining display.

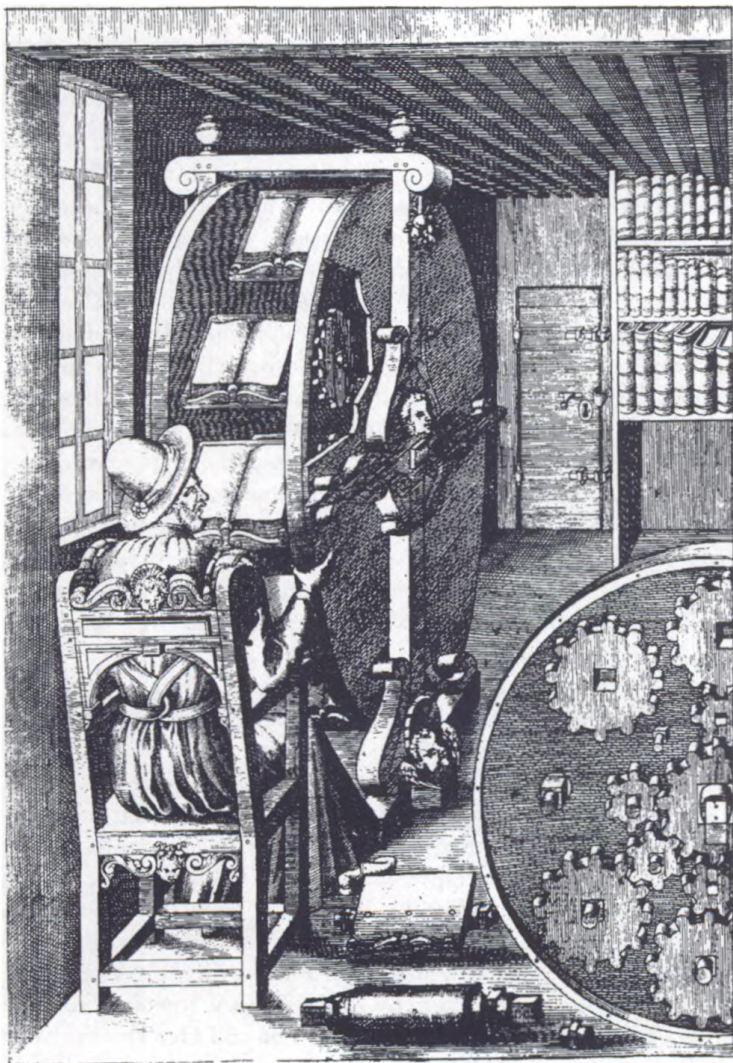
The emphasis on memory in Elizabethan grammar schools also conditioned readers and writers. Students memorized hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Latin lines and constructions. The extensive cultivation of memory created a literary culture of quotation and allusion, wherein the classics and the Bible served as a common repository of significant reference. Niobe stood as an example of grief, Hercules as a type of courage and strength. Shylock alludes to the story of Jacob and Laban's sheep in Genesis (*Merchant of Venice*, 1. 3. 70 ff.); Hamlet, to the tale of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges (2. 2. 403 ff.).⁶ Later, differently trained readers misunderstood this culture and Shakespeare's allusions. Such learning, they concluded, signalled a university education and, hence, an author for the plays other than the man from Stratford, William Shakespeare. In 1944 T. W. Baldwin demolished such arguments by demonstrating (in two thick volumes numbering 1,525 pages) that the great majority of Shakespeare's quotations, allusions, and references derive from the standard books and curriculum of

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an Elizabethan grammar school. Shakespeare can be inaccurate and imprecise, of course, and pernickety types, beginning in 1767 with the Cambridge don Richard Farmer, have always enjoyed pouncing on his errors of recollection.⁷ But the Elizabethan exercise of memory added depth and scope to writing and enabled readers to perceive significant connections with the past.

A reading practice centred on memorization naturally fostered the impulse to collect. Readers routinely kept commonplace books into which they copied striking thoughts or expressions.⁸ Erasmus gathered proverbs and wrote voluminous commentary. Enterprising authors like William Baldwin published *sententiae*, or 'wise sayings'; his popular *Treatise of Moral Philosophy* arranged snippets from Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Seneca, and other ancients under rubrics like 'Of Patience', 'Of Gluttony', and 'Of Death Not to be Feared'. Some picked fruits, others picked flowers. Octavianus Mirandula displayed poetical posies from various Latin authors in his 1566 collection, *Illustrium poetarum flores* ('Flowers of the famous poets'). Writers such as Thomas North, William Painter, and George Pettie served up in English anthologies hundreds of classical and contemporary stories. Nobody seemed to mind much the fragmentation, the wrenching of text out of context. Like readers today who surf the internet, clicking on hot links, superimposing image on image, Elizabethans moved rapidly, eclectically, and associatively from text to text looking for connections, following impulses, working and playing. Their reading machine was not the computer but the 'reading wheel', an upright mini-ferris wheel with books arranged on consecutive stations to enable simultaneous, synchronic reading and search operations [Fig. 1]. The contraption could not have enjoyed wide use but, nevertheless, stands as a metaphor for a kind of reading that subsists on the cross-reference. Editions of classical authors routinely glossed passages with citations of parallels from other works. Elizabethan readers generally valued abundance, or *copia*, over accuracy, individual texts and pieces of texts over contexts, multiplicity over coherence. They read analogically, i.e. across texts, as well as logically.

The impulse to read analogically and collect parallels everywhere shows itself in Shakespeare's work. Menenius' fable of the belly in *Coriolanus* (1. 1. 94 ff.), for example, draws from five separate accounts—those of Plutarch, Livy, Sidney, Camden, and Averell. Jaques' tale of

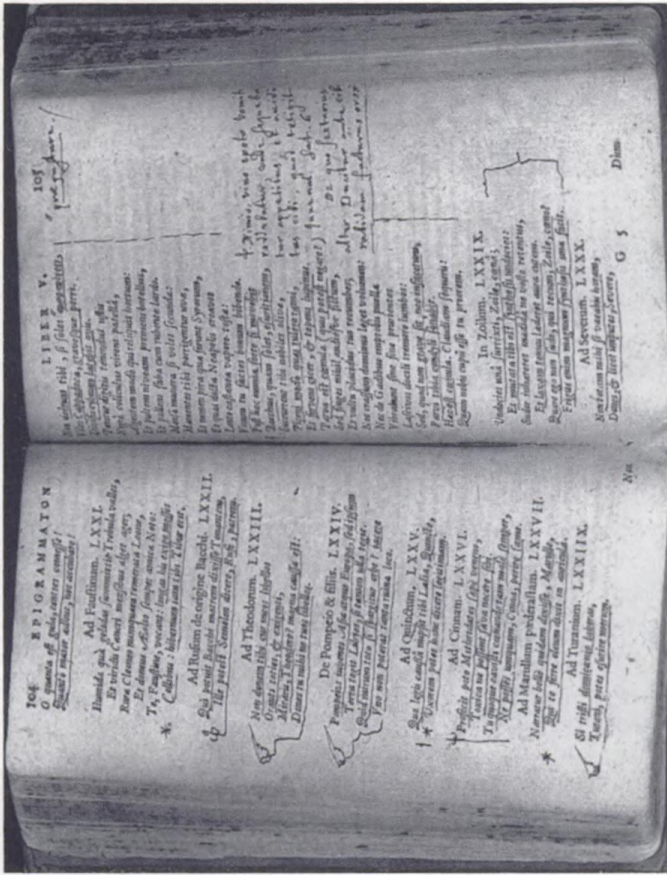


1. The Reading Wheel, from Agostino Ramelli, *The Various Ingenious Machines* (1588), 317. The machine, enabling the consultation of many books simultaneously, suggests the kind of associative and eclectic reading the Elizabethans regularly enjoyed.

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man's seven ages in *As You Like It* (2. 7. 139–66) likewise owes details to many similar schemata. As in small things, so in large. Shakespeare often gathers several competing accounts of incident and action to furnish his plots. The cannibalistic banquets of both Seneca's *Thyestes* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Bk. 6) supply the horrific climax of *Titus Andronicus*, wherein a mother unwittingly eats the remains of her sons. The habit of analogical thinking, moreover, leads always to the mixing of disparate stories and texts. Shakespeare, for example, constructs *Macbeth* out of contemporary history, classical tragedy, and the medieval mystery play. Several different stories in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587) provide the basic plot (assassination and usurpation) and the cast of characters, Duncan, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, and others. Following the powerful example of Senecan protagonists, Shakespeare transforms Holinshed's Macbeth into a bloody, soliloquizing, wilful, and tormented tyrant. Like these Senecan prototypes, Macbeth urges himself to *scelus*, or 'crime'. Finally, the gigantic shadow of Herod from the mystery play further darkens the action and protagonist. Slaughterer of the innocents, Herod serves as a model for the child-killer Macbeth. Collecting parallel stories, thinking analogically across texts, Shakespeare writes plays that combine selectively the plots, characters, and power of their constituents.

Elizabethans also read actively. Grammar-school training in rhetoric required readers to find in texts arguments concerning certain actions and propositions. Students, for example, 'would be trained to find arguments for and against Brutus' act [the murder of Caesar]: there was no question of coming down simple-mindedly on one side'.⁹ Mature readers often carried on a dialogue with a book in the form of marginal notations. Shakespeare's friend and fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, routinely drew asterisks or pointing hands in the margins, underlined noteworthy passages, annotated texts with cross-references and commentary, sometimes disapproving [Fig. 2]. A Cambridge professor and polemicist, Gabriel Harvey, copiously adorned his books with commentary. Though Jonson and Harvey were more educated and bookish than the average reader (and considerably crankier), such active reading characterized the period. In his survey of 7,526 Renaissance books William H. Sherman has discovered marginalia in 1,531, or 20.3 per cent, with the highest concentrations appearing in books of religious debate, law, and medicine.¹⁰ Moreover,



2. One of Ben Jonson's three editions of Martial, *Novæ Editio*, ed. Petrus Scriverius (Leiden, 1619), 104-5. These pages, displaying Jonson's characteristic markings (his asterisks and pointing fingers) and his addition of a Latin cross-reference from Juvenal (*Satire 6*), show an active and engaged early modern reader talking back to his books.

people often read out loud and sometimes met in group sessions for the Bible. These practices made reading a more public, social, and participatory activity than it is today. Latin classics, the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and Foxe's *Acts and Martyrs*, a sensational and popular account of Protestant martyrs, functioned as a required core curriculum, the body of writing that constituted a shared literary and intellectual heritage and provided common ground for discussion.

Reading materials

A literate English citizen in the late sixteenth century could choose among many and sundry reading materials. People in Elizabethan England still circulated important material in manuscript. Professional copyists, called scribes or scriveners, produced an enormous quantity of private, literary, educational, business, legal, and ecclesiastical documents written on parchment with quill. Manuscripts appeared in various styles of handwriting, practised with the usual idiosyncrasies and individual flourishes. Among these the secretary and italic hands predominated. The workmanlike secretary hand, a series of scratches and squiggles to the untrained eye, functioned as the everyday hand of business, correspondence, and literary composition. The graceful and sloping italic hand, imported from Italy for its simplicity, beauty, and legibility, gradually displaced the secretary hand at the close of the century. The surviving specimens of Shakespeare's handwriting, six autographs and a fragment from a play, *Sir Thomas More*, appear in ordinary English secretary hand.¹¹

Elizabethan readers also had at their disposal various printed materials. The advent of printing, beginning with Gutenberg's Bible, 1455, transformed early modern culture in Europe and in England. Ballads, or rhymed reports of newsworthy events, appeared on broadsides, single sheets of paper. The government used broadsides for proclamations and admonitions. Chapbooks, usually no longer than twenty-four pages, costing between one and three pence, flooded the market with their longer cousins, pamphlets; both were cheap, topical, often sensational. Broadsides and pamphlets reported the latest criminal trial, natural disaster, sex scandal, travel experience, or fantastic occurrence. Shakespeare makes several references to such ephemeral

reading materials. Threatening violence, the blustering Pistol asks rhetorically, 'Fear we broadsides?' (2 *Henry IV*, 2. 4. 179). A sharp conman, Autolycus (*The Winter's Tale*, 4. 3) hawks ballads on broadsides to gullible country bumpkins. Since many broadsides, chap-books, and pamphlets have vanished, we can only guess at their specific importance for Shakespeare and his plays.

English readers also read books. The great Aldine press in Venice, and other Continental presses in Paris, Lyons, Antwerp, Frankfurt, and Basle, produced editions of classical texts and serious political and religious works in Latin.¹² Such books supplied the libraries of the wealthy and the learned. English presses produced some Latin works, but principally English Bibles, Books of Common Prayer, sermons and devotional books, school texts, translations, works of literature and history, and other miscellaneous materials. In 1600 some twenty-two printing houses and fifty-four licensed presses operated in London. There were also secret presses, especially Catholic ones, which published controversial or prohibited materials.

Accustomed to the size and plenitude of modern bookstores, a university student today would wonder at Elizabethan bookstalls, clustered at a few places in London, especially the yard at St Paul's cathedral. There the student would find manuscripts and printed materials, some used. Posted title-pages would advertise new merchandise. A single 'book' might exist in various forms—on unfolded or folded sheets of paper, unbound or bound. Sheets of paper folded once would produce a large folio, with pages measuring about 6 by 4 centimetres (15 by 10 inches), or a small one, 4.5 by 3 centimetres (12 by 8 inches). Sheets of paper folded twice would produce a quarto, with pages measuring approximately half the size of a large folio. The price of a text varied according to its format (folio, quarto, or smaller), state (bound or unbound), and condition of sale (wholesale or retail). An unbound quarto play requiring ten to twelve sheets (eighty to ninety pages) probably cost 5 or 6 old pence wholesale, 7 to 9 pence retail. The latter figure approximates to the average daily wage for a London journeyman of the 1580s; one penny then bought a one-pound loaf of bread. Peter Blayney has estimated that Shakespeare's First Folio, a collection of his works made in 1623 by fellow actors, probably sold wholesale, unbound for 10 shillings and retail, unbound for 15 shillings (12 pence = one shilling). Bindings varied in price according to quality

and decoration; a plain calf binding for a folio cost about 3 or 4 shillings.¹³

Typing at computer screens and printing at a keystroke or mouse-click, a modern student would also marvel at the labour required to print a Renaissance book.¹⁴ A worker called a compositor took copper letters and spaces from cases and placed them in a composing stick to spell out text, usually from manuscript, letter by letter, word by word, and line by line. When the compositor had set several pages of type (*forme*) he locked them in an iron chase; a pressman applied a heavy, sticky ink to the letters and pressed wet paper down to form an impression. A corrector and/or author then or later read the printed sheet for errors and accidents like under- or over-inked letters. This process resulted in variation from copy to copy. Since printers sold uncorrected sheets along with corrected ones, books always differed from each other in small particulars. Sometimes the differences were large. The first issue of Shakespeare's First Folio in November 1623, for example, contained thirty-five plays; later issues of the book that year contained thirty-six plays because the editors added *Troilus and Cressida* to the collection during the print run.

Elizabethan reading materials present other surprises to the modern eye. The conventions of punctuation vary considerably from page to page and book to book. Since spelling did not become standardized until the eighteenth century and since writers and printers used abbreviations, many forms of the same word coexist. No two of the six surviving Shakespeare autographs are identical; the poet spelled his own last name in at least two different ways, 'Shakspere', and 'Shakespeare', neither of which coincides with our preferred spelling. Moreover, many texts, including law books, chronicles, official documents, proclamations, jest-books, ballads, and elementary schooltexts, appear in a font called blackletter—thick, squat, and antiquarian. Though difficult for moderns to decipher, this font served the children and less-educated readers. And, finally, Elizabethans wrote, published, sold, bought, and read books in Latin, the language of educated discourse.

Renaissance books differ from modern ones, then, in format, construction, punctuation, spelling, typeface, and language. Moreover, a didactic impulse, political and moral, strongly conditions editing, writing, and reading in the period. Sermons, homilies, and devotional

literature comprise a substantial portion of Elizabethan publication. Many literary and historical texts appear with polemical prefaces and notes to protect against misinterpretation and guide the reader in profitable instruction. Fulgentius, Landino, and Pontanus, for example, read Vergil allegorically, providing copious and influential commentary. Editions of the *Aeneid* routinely end with Maphaeus Vegius' conclusion, the thirteenth book that completes the hero's triumphant progress to heaven. Senecan drama, for another example, graphically illustrates the dangers of passion and the evils of tyranny, precisely according to Sidney's prescription, 'tragedy maketh kings fear to be tyrants'.¹⁵ In the hands of Renaissance commentators even a bright and lively scene from comedy, from Plautus or Terence, illustrates any number of rhetorical devices and moral lessons. In what spirit readers took all the edifying lecturing is hard to say. Even if resisted, the sheer bulk and insistence of such commentary lent a seriousness to the act of reading and fostered sensitivity to moral issues. Alfred Harbage observed long ago that Shakespearian drama pervasively reflects moral concern: the lines of almost any page of text 'levy upon the vocabulary of ethics, or relate in some way to standards of conduct, to choices between right and wrong'.¹⁶

Like modern ones, Renaissance readers gathered books into collections.¹⁷ At the beginning of the period, ecclesiastical institutions had substantial holdings in theology, law, medicine, and philosophy. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and plundered church possessions (1538-9), however, most of these books passed into private and university hands. The subsequent expansion of the London book trade made available English and Continental imprints to later collectors like John Dee, John Donne, John Florio, and Ben Jonson. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Thomas Bodley undertook the restoration of the University Library at Oxford and the establishment of a new public collection, furnished with desks, bookcases, cupboards, locks, and chains. Bodley hunted after serious, i.e. Latin, books, notoriously excluding from his library such 'rife-raffe' and 'baggage' as English almanacs, proclamations, and plays. Of nearly 6,000 books in the Bodleian Library in 1605, only thirty-six were in English. Elsewhere, wealthy families built their own more eclectic collections, at first storing books in chests and trunks, and then, as the period went on, in closets (small rooms with one door) and studies. We

don't know how many books a busy playwright like William Shakespeare owned or where he stored and read them. We can, however, trace some of his reading in his work.

Texts and Traditions

'The naming of cats is a difficult matter', says T. S. Eliot; so too, the naming of Shakespeare's books. Only one book with an alleged Shakespeare signature has surfaced, William Lambarde's *Archaionomia* (1568). He left us no library catalogue or probate inventory; he rarely tagged his poems and plays with revealing clues. To be sure, the Ovidian epigraph to *Venus and Adonis* steers us to the right author if not the right work; in *Titus Andronicus* Lavinia turns the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a seminal work for that play; Mercutio mentions Petrarch, a deep presence in *Romeo and Juliet*; a character in *As You Like It* compares Duke Senior's woodland life to that of Robin Hood, thus evoking the underlying legends and folklore; Pericles brings on stage as a chorus John Gower, author of its source, *Confessio Amantis*; the Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* likewise pays tribute to Geoffrey Chaucer. But for the rest, Shakespeare's reading appears transformed in his writing; scholars scour the text for evidence, assemble patterns, draw inferences. Analysis of Shakespeare's reading has largely depended on verbal echo, on Shakespeare's repetition of words and phrases from other writers. Witness Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
 Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
 The winds were love-sick with them. The oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggared all description. She did lie
 In her pavilion—cloth of gold, of tissue—
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-coloured fans whose wind did seem

To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2. 2. 198–212)

Those who come upon the following description of Cleopatra's barge in Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* may well experience the thrill of discovery:

The poop [deck] whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, hautboys, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. (Bullough, v. 274)

North's prose supplies Shakespeare's blank-verse magic, specifically, the gold poop, purple sails, silver oars, music, pavilion (cloth of gold of tissue), the idea of Cleopatra as Venus and the fanning boys as Cupids. Shakespeare, as ever, adapts his source: he creates an erotic fantasy in which Nature itself—the winds and the water—becomes animate and amorous; the boys' innocent fanning, both heating and cooling the queen, here suggests her paradoxical mystery: 'she makes hungry | Where most she satisfies' (2. 2. 243–4). Shakespeare's reading sometimes shows clearly in his writing. We can identify North's Plutarch as a book Shakespeare read, a book that functioned as a source for his play.

The evidence, alas, does not always prove to be so straightforward. Some plays (*Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Tempest*) echo no main source. Other plays, more typically, echo multiple texts simultaneously. Shakespeare fashions *King Lear*, for example, from an old play, a chronicle history, a prose romance, and numerous miscellaneous texts. Any complete list of Shakespeare's reading for any single work must always be open-ended, as readers continually hear echoes of new sources. This open-endedness suggests a fundamental problem with our critical methods: the test of verbal echo turns out to be fraught with uncertainties.¹⁸ First, poetic passages sound variously to various ears; one scholar's echo, signalling indebtedness, is another scholar's coincidence,

signifying nothing. Second, even when readers agree that two lines in Shakespeare sound like two lines, say, in Horace, they must still wonder just what the resemblance means. Did Shakespeare remember the whole text and context or just a few lines? Did he, in the age of collection, commonplace, and anthology, ever read the whole text at all? Did some intermediary recall the original and pass it on to Shakespeare? Third, even in the best of circumstances, when readers agree that a clear pattern of echoes identifies a source text, they must still be open to other influences, literary and cultural. A Shakespearian text registers always a variety of sources—other books read, Shakespeare's own previous writing, the plays of his company and rivals, contemporary literature, recent news and events. Reliance on verbal echo can obscure these rich sources and oversimplify the picture.

Beyond the uncertainties of method, the test of verbal echo has one other important limitation: it can neither recognize nor measure non-verbal evidence. Readers must use a different intuition to evaluate plot and character, for example, the organization of a revenge play like *Titus Andronicus* or *Hamlet*, or the villain as hero in *Richard III* (*Richard III*) and in Falstaff (*1, 2 Henry IV*). Then as now, playwrights did not write plays simply by reading books and adapting language; instead, they imitated rhetoric, image, structure, rhythm, and idea. Sometimes they took the content, sometimes the form—sometimes the wine, in other words, sometimes the bottles. And they manipulated familiar traditions, the rich and capacious treasury of dramatic resources created by writers from antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early Renaissance. Like his fellow playwrights, Shakespeare read traditions as well as texts, shaping and reshaping them with fluency and sophistication.

Perhaps a recent cinematic example may clarify the nature of traditions. Everyone remembers the great success of Lucas' original *Star Wars*, a fantastic and innovative adventure story featuring the forces of good against the evil Empire. Fewer recognize that conventions from westerns give the space film much of its impact. The dashing, lone gunslinger becomes Hans Solo; the alien sidekick—Tonto, if you will—gets fur and a new name, Chewbacca. The great western landscape stretches to the universe; the simple homesteaders who get slaughtered live on a desolate planet; the boy who grows to

manhood and revenge is reborn as Luke Skywalker. The traditional bar scene becomes spectacularly (and comically) intergalactic; fights with knives, guns, and horses turn into battles with lightswords, laser pistols, and spaceships; the comical townspeople find new life as robots. The villainous gunman, gang, or greedy landowner becomes Darth Vader (the villain always wears black) and the omnivorous Empire. Characters, scenes, and situations from westerns, creatively transformed, shape the entire film and evoke our responses. There may be no direct quotations of individual westerns in the space film, no verbal echoes of this or that dialogue, no direct imitations of any particular scene. And neither the writer nor the viewers need ever name the original films that shaped the genre—*High Noon*, *Shane*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, and many others—to appreciate their force in *Star Wars*. These films created traditions that have become part of a powerful cinematic vocabulary employed in countless adaptations. Later writers use this vocabulary, and later audiences respond to it, even if they are completely unfamiliar with the originating texts.

Recent scholars of Shakespeare's reading have called increasing attention to his creative use of traditions. Accordingly, this introduction to Shakespeare's reading will explore his use of both texts, the books-on-the-desk, and traditions, those inherited strategies and expectations about character and action. The discussion proceeds generically, beginning with Shakespeare's non-dramatic works, then moving through the Histories, Comedies, Tragedies, and Romances. Organizing the discussion this way, we can sample significant source texts and begin to understand Shakespeare's habits of appropriation. The aim is not a comprehensive account of any single text, tradition, or Shakespearian work, but an overview.

Shakespeare's texts range from the classical (Ovid, Plautus, Plutarch), to the medieval (Chaucer), and the contemporary (Holinshed, Fiorentino, *King Leir*, and Greene). They include poetry (Ovid, Chaucer), prose (Holinshed, Fiorentino, Greene) and drama (Plautus, *King Leir*). Shakespeare, as we shall see, reads widely and eclectically, always combining these texts with others. The principal source texts and Shakespearian works appear in Table 1 (see next page).

Table 1. Principal source texts for Shakespeare's works.


Text	Shakespeare
	<i>Poems:</i>
Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>	<i>Venus and Adonis, Sonnets</i>
Ovid, <i>Fasti</i>	<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i>
	<i>Histories:</i>
Holinshed, <i>Chronicles</i>	<i>Richard II, Henry V</i>
	<i>Comedies:</i>
Plautus, <i>Menaechmi</i>	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>
Fiorentino, <i>Il Pecorone</i>	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
	<i>Tragedies:</i>
Plutarch, <i>Lives</i>	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
Anon., <i>King Leir</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
	<i>Romances:</i>
Greene, <i>Pandosto</i>	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>
Chaucer, <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>

Table 2. Principal traditions behind Shakespeare's works.

Tradition	Shakespeare
	<i>Poems:</i>
Italian Love Poetry (Petrarch)	Sonnets, <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
	<i>Histories:</i>
The Vice Figure	<i>Richard III, 1 Henry IV</i>
	<i>Comedies:</i>
A Classical Conflict: Fathers vs. Lovers	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream, All's Well That Ends Well, Othello</i>
	<i>Tragedies:</i>
Senecan Revenge	<i>Titus Andronicus, Hamlet</i>
	<i>Romances:</i>
The Pastoral Genre	<i>As You Like It, The Tempest</i>

The Principal traditions and Shakespearian works appear in Table 2. These traditions represent various types and modes of influence. Italian love poetry originates in the Renaissance and primarily shapes rhetoric. The Vice figure is a character who swaggers through medi-

eval morality plays and onto Shakespeare's stages. The conflict between fathers and young lovers motivates much classical comedy and forms a flexible and popular configuration for later playwrights. The ancient dramatist Seneca provides a model for revenge action. Finally, the pastoral genre, which sings of shepherds and the simple, natural life, originates in classical poetry and develops through the centuries to encompass rhetoric, character, configuration, and action. To create his art Shakespeare read these traditions as well as specific texts.¹⁹



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Robert S. Miola is Gerard Manley Hopkins Professor of English, Loyola College, Baltimore, Maryland.

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