

## Stories

David W. Rycroft

*When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.*

Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*

*We need stories to help us make sense of the world.*

Jonathan Bate in *Shakespeare and Ovid*

In the closing minutes of *Hamlet*, Horatio, surrounded by the wreckage of a court where he was a respected outsider, grasps the cup containing the dregs of the poisoned drink prepared for Hamlet by Claudius, proclaiming:

I am more an antique Roman than a Dane:  
Here's yet some liquor left.

(*Hamlet*, V ii 293-4)

With surprising violence for a man at the point of death, Hamlet prizes the cup from his friend's hand:

Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll have't.  
O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story.

(*Hamlet*, V ii 295-301)

Living on in the world may be painful, but telling Hamlet's story 'aright' is important enough for Horatio to be asked by his dying friend to forgo the 'felicity' of heaven till the task is completed. Horatio is not intimidated by Fortinbras who has announced his claim to the Danish throne, and takes up his friend's last request authoritatively:

... give order that these bodies  
High on a stage be placed to the view;  
And let me speak to the yet unknowing world  
How these things came about. So shall you hear

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts;  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;  
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. All this can I  
Truly deliver.

(*Hamlet*, V ii 370-9)

Horatio is eager that the story should be told promptly, Even when men's minds are wild, lest more mischance  
On plots and errors happen.

(*Hamlet*, V ii 387-8)

And yet, though willing to observe the formalities and accede to Horatio's request, Fortinbras seems more concerned about 'embracing his fortune' than listening to stories. The soldier in him can remark that such carnage 'becomes a field'. But he does not sound like a man who is likely to learn lessons from the situation he has stumbled upon. He cannot even rise to the occasion verbally, announcing lamely, and rather obviously, that the scene 'shows much amiss'.

Hamlet, in contrast, would have had much to say, but death prevents him. His last words are telling: 'The rest is silence.' He has been defined by his ability with language, but his eloquence has not provided the answers he needed. Now, the story will have to be told by somebody else. Drawing inferences from events has been second nature to Hamlet. When he encounters Fortinbras's army crossing Denmark to defend a territorial claim in Poland, he feels the experience has been set up by Fate specifically to teach him a painful lesson:

... to my shame I see

The imminent death of twenty thousand men  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds

(*Hamlet*, IV iv 60-3, Q2 only)

He regards his own inaction as morally reprehensible.

But he has consistently championed reason, and admires and loves Horatio because he is not a slave to the passions:

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To fust in us unused.

(*Hamlet*, IV iv 27-30, Q2 only)

'Looking before and after' is an indispensable part of what it is to be rational. Without the ability to recall the past and imagine the future man is 'a beast, no more'. Horatio's 'antique Romans' knew this very well. Myths were interwoven with daily life. Public spectacles referred back to celebrated historical figures. Gladiators were sometimes dressed as great heroes of the past, or as characters in ancient myths, and the victories of the crowd's current favorites were recorded on the walls of Pompeii. And Hamlet's story has become part of the fabric of our own attempts to understand the world we live in.

Hamlet's imagination seems to move easily between the present and the past. When he gives his memorable advice to the Players, for a few minutes he sounds surprisingly 'contemporary'. But both the speech he requests from the Player King, and the play he subsequently asks to be performed, *The Murder of Gonzago*, look backwards to an earlier dramatic style, and singularly fail to illustrate the 'modern' style of playing he so eloquently advocates to the players. Indeed, 'an antique Roman' would not, perhaps, have felt out of place as a spectator at these players' performances. So when Hamlet requests the Player King to recite a speech describing the fall of Troy, he must have an agenda. There is a suggestion in *Shakespeare in Love*<sup>1</sup> that Will Shakespeare, the struggling newcomer, may have envied Christopher Marlowe's success. Marlowe's first play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, deals with the same events as those the Player King relates in his speech, and scholars have looked for similarities between the two<sup>2</sup>. But Hamlet makes it clear he is not quoting from a popular play—his text was 'caviar to the general' and has not been performed 'above once'. Hamlet admires the power of the rhetoric, and the speech may possibly have been Shakespeare's own work. In any event, Hamlet is very specific about the part of the scene he wants to hear:

One speech in't I chiefly loved; 'twas Æneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter.

(*Hamlet*, II ii 433-5)

It is obviously not the kind of speech which Shakespeare gives the actor playing Hamlet. There is no psychological analysis, no self-doubt, nor any change of mood or tone. But nonetheless Hamlet has memorized it. After a false start, he manages to give a rousing rendering of a shockingly bloodthirsty few lines: 'head to foot / Now he is total gules, horribly tricked / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons... o'er-sized with coagulate gore... the hellish Pyrrhus / Old grandsire Priam seeks.'

Hamlet's delivery impresses Polonius:

'Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion.

(*Hamlet*, II ii 469-70)

But critics since Dr. Johnson have been puzzled by the speech, regarding it as little more than bombast and judging it totally without merit. Polonius, too, finds the speech too long. However, Hamlet is strongly engaged. He brushes the objections aside and asks the Player King to come to Hecuba:

PLAYER:

But who, O who, had seen the mobled queen—

HAMLET:

'The mobled queen'?

POLONIUS:

That's good! 'mobled queen' is good.

PLAYER:

—Run barefoot up and down, threatening the flames  
With bisson rheum; a clout upon that head  
Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,  
About her lank and all o'erteemed loins,  
A blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up—  
Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steep'd  
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced.  
But if the gods themselves did see her then,  
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport  
In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,  
The instant burst of clamour that she made  
Unless things mortal move them not at all  
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven  
And passion in the gods.

(*Hamlet*, II ii 505-21)

By this time, Polonius, embarrassed by the degree of emotion shown by the Player King, has had enough. Something different has been happening to Hamlet. The part of the speech where he began to quote describes the moment when the ‘hellish Pyrrhus’ is about to strike down the ‘old grandsire’, Priam. We can assume that Hamlet sees a parallel between this and the brutal murder of his own father. He may also be contemplating, perhaps with unease, what it means to slay someone in a fury of revenge: his father has laid this duty upon him. But the story has a life of its own. In the end it is the image of Hecuba, whose grief and despair provides such a reproach to his mother, who appears to have forgotten her first husband ‘within a month, a little month’. And it is for Hecuba, not Priam, that the Player King weeps:

Look whether he has not turned his colour, and has tears in’s eyes. Prithee, no more!

(*Hamlet* II ii 522–3)

For Polonius it is too much to take. But for Hamlet it is a story which engenders the next soliloquy,

What’s he to Hecuba or Hecuba to him  
That he should weep for her?

(*Hamlet* II ii 561–2)

And it is a complex story. Hecuba was the loyal wife his own mother has proved not to be. The Player King is moved to tears when contemplating Hecuba’s sufferings. What would he do had he the ‘motive and the cue for passion’ that Hamlet has? Even without the ‘motive and the cue’ the Player’s tears are a bitter reproach to Hamlet. He feels his has failed to respond as a classical hero would have to his father’s murder. Had Hamlet’s focus remained on the story of Pyrrhus and Priam, his own story might have had a different ending.

Although Shakespeare’s favorite classical text is often said to have been Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, it is not Ovid’s version of the story of the Fall of Troy which is uppermost in his mind here. But it is interesting that in his treatment of these events, Ovid, too, pays more attention to the fate of Hecuba than he does to the death of Priam. He describes her suffering as, one by one, her sons are slaughtered. Finally she discovers a further insufferable betrayal. Her youngest son, Polydorus, whom she had entrusted to the King of Thrace, has also been killed, provoking her to slaughter the king in revenge. Finally she escapes retribution by being transformed into an

animal—one of Ovid’s ‘metamorphoses’.

The story of the fall of Troy was so well known that Shakespeare would not need to rely on any one source for his account. The important thing is that Shakespeare, and Hamlet, take it for granted that the tragic stories of past will be reflected in the events of the present. Historical events provide points of reference to help in comprehending the challenges we face, rather as a *memento mori*, by offering an image of a past death, reminds all who see it of the inevitability of their own deaths. But understanding and acting are different things. Human societies do not seem to learn how to prevent the past from being reenacted in their own time, but it may be some comfort that individuals can gain a deeper understanding of the present by identifying the parallels with the past. Understanding the cyclic nature of human history is part of the quest of acquiring self-knowledge. As individuals we may grow morally and imaginatively, even if we also learn that individuals do not have the power to prevent the cycle from repeating. *Hamlet* can be seen as conveying the same message. When Hamlet finally revenges his father, the act is premeditated but not planned. For most of the play Hamlet has been exploring his own nature, reflecting on the nature of existence, or forcing those around him down a painful road of learning to know themselves. We respect this honest and uncompromising quest for self-knowledge. Fortinbras and Laertes pursue the duty of revenge for their fathers’ deaths with commendable, if unthinking, zeal, but they do not win our hearts and minds as Hamlet does.

Hamlet likes to freeze the frame while he reconsiders the consequences of the act he is contemplating. In the chapel on the way to his mother’s room he comes across his uncle praying, initially seeing it as a perfect opportunity to kill him, but immediately thinking of the consequences: ‘That would be scanned’ (III iii 75). Elsewhere, Hamlet self-critically calls this ‘thinking too precisely on the event’. There is a similar moment that catches Hamlet’s attention in the Pyrrhus speech. In a line which seems to anticipate another in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton describes a key moment in another celebrated conflict, that of Satan and the Archangel Michael, where the angel’s sword is ‘uplifted, imminent...’ (*Paradise Lost*, Book VI, l. 317):

...for, lo! his sword,

Which was declining on the milky head  
Of reverend Priam, seem'd i' the air to stick:  
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,  
And like a neutral to his will and matter,  
Did nothing.

(*Hamlet*, II ii 480-5)

Uplifted, and 'imminent', which Milton uses its Latin sense of 'about to go down'—a moment of stasis between two actions, a moment when the course of history might have been changed. But the past, of course, cannot be changed—indeed, in Vergil's account, the fall of Troy is a necessary pre-condition for the founding of Rome. The inevitability of fate weighs heavily upon Hamlet, too.

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right

(*Hamlet*, I v 189-90)

But it is not always inevitable that the present repeats the past. The story of Hecuba, with her terrifying loyalty and grief, is significant precisely because it is not repeated in Hamlet's own experience. Hecuba's distress does not prefigure Gertrude's grief, and for that reason, it is that part of the speech that haunts him later. Pyrrhus is forgotten as Hamlet finds in Hecuba's story a precedent which provides the standard against which he can measure his mother's guilt.

For Hamlet, moral realities have to be fleshed out in graphic metaphors. Hamlet habitually visualizes the abstract in concrete terms. In fact, Hamlet's innocent advice to the players, that they should strive to 'hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature' (III ii 21), seems to be a metaphor for what takes place in much of the play. Students are often required to answer the question 'Why does Hamlet delay?' But the key to understanding this question is to ask not why he delays, but to ask what he actually does while delaying. And the answer is there in the advice to the players. He sets up mirrors, where those guilty of moral failings can see an image of themselves which shatters their peace of mind and overturns their comfortable worlds. The mirror he sets up for Ophelia presents her with a brutally cynical image of men, women, and their relationships. This profoundly disturbs her, and, we can assume, makes her vulnerable the mental breakdown which is precipitated when Hamlet kills her father. She loved them both deeply, and the resulting conflict is irresolvable. The

mirror image which he forces Claudius and Gertrude to contemplate is the play within the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which not only presents the image of the murder, but also contains reflections on the nature of fidelity after a partner has died, indirectly rebuking Gertrude for her hypocrisy, disloyalty and lack of self-knowledge. For the rest of the play, neither Claudius nor Gertrude enjoys a moment's peace of mind. Claudius shouts for lights, and in the following bedroom scene, Gertrude is distraught as she sees the black stains on her conscience that cannot ever be removed. Hamlet's story telling, with its distressingly graphic descriptions of Gertrude's love-making, comes complete with physical images as he forces his mother to look at two portraits, one of her former, and one of her current husband, possibly on the pendants the two of them are wearing. Hamlet's father has 'Hyperion's curls' and the 'face of Jove himself'. It is Hamlet who is the story-teller here, for in the 220 lines of the Bedroom Scene, this is the only reference to the classic stories of the past. Instead Hamlet turns to the colloquial language of the street, strikingly different from that of the Player King, and sufficiently extreme to evoke the return of his father's ghost.

A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe  
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;  
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,  
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole  
And put it in his pocket!  
... A king of shreds and patches!

(*Hamlet*, III iv 89-93)

Driving people to see and, he hopes, accept their own guilt by forcing them to face their own true stories is the activity which fills a significant percentage of the play between the Ghost's first appearance and the moment Hamlet finally kills Claudius.

Often the stories of the past and their protagonists were (or are remembered as having been) on a grander scale than the events we live through in the present. Hamlet's father has 'the face of Jove himself'. But this is not always so. In *King Lear*, the horror in Shakespeare's story is so extreme that the spectators can find no precedents. Lear enters howling, carrying the body of Cordelia. Confronted with this, Kent asks, 'Is this the promised end?' Only Armageddon could supply similarly harrowing images. But Edgar sees it rather as an 'image

of that horror' (V iii 264). Lear's suffering itself will become the model for a future event, the end of the world. Despite the differing emphasis, Edgar's question returns to the paradigm of the repetition of pain and suffering in human affairs. Past horrors are repeated, and future horrors are prefigured. Albany's simple words seem to be a request to the gods to end things here: 'Fall and cease!' But nothing ever comes to an end. There is no escape from the cycle. The final words of the play acknowledge that Lear's suffering will become an archetype by which future generations will measure their own sufferings:

We that are young  
Will never see so much, nor live so long.  
(*King Lear*, V iii 301-2)

In *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet's father, in a speech rivaling the Player King's in the power of its language, evokes the particularly unpleasant nature of the murder. Claudius favours poisoning, but pouring 'a leprous distilment' into the ear would presumably only work if it is caustic as well as poisonous—

... swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body,  
And with a sudden vigour doth posset  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;  
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,  
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,  
All my smooth body.

(*Hamlet*, I v 66-73)

There are more horrors to come. Cut off in the 'blossoms' of his sin and denied the last rites, Hamlet's father had been 'doom'd for a certain term to walk the night' until his 'foul crimes... are burnt and purg'd away'. This evocation of Purgatory is Catholic in tone, and Shakespeare's attitude to the old faith has been a source of a good deal of speculation. It has long been suggested that Shakespeare's father was reluctant to give up the old religion. But when Shakespeare was born, Elizabeth had already been on the throne for six years. There is no concrete evidence that Shakespeare himself had specifically Roman Catholic sympathies, though there were still many people alive who had been nurtured in the traditions established in over five hundred years of the teachings of the Roman church, and the vivid imagery of the traditional religion finds its way into

the Ghost's story. For all that, it is hard to imagine what Old Hamlet's 'foul crimes' might have been. Slaughtering Old Fortinbras on the battlefield would scarcely qualify as a 'foul crime', and in view of Hamlet's description of him — 'So excellent a king; that was, to this / Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother / That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly' (*Hamlet* I ii 139-42)—it is hard to imagine him deserving 'a certain term' in Purgatory.

But then, Hamlet tells Ophelia he could accuse himself of such things 'that it were better my mother had not borne me.' It may be the reluctance of Polonius, Laertes and even Fortinbras to face up to the darkness of the human heart, including their own, that makes the repetition of history inevitable. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* is doomed to wander the world retelling his story. And when horrific acts are committed, we turn to the stories of the past in the attempt to make sense of them, only to learn that there is never any closure.

The assassination of Julius Caesar is such an event. Polonius has some dramatic credentials himself—he has taken the role of Julius Caesar in a college production, and is obviously proud of the fact. Hamlet has heard the story before. Polonius is happy to recount it again. 'Brutus killed me in the Capitol', he tells us with some pride. Hamlet jokes that it was a 'brute part of him to kill so capital a calf' unaware that he himself will shortly repeat that historic act by stabbing Polonius through the arras in his mother's bedroom. Cassius understands that the act of the conspirators will be reenacted in story. He invites Brutus to stoop and wash, bathing his arms in Caesar's blood:

How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown?  
(*Julius Caesar*, III i 122-4)

Cassius imagines that it will be celebrated in performance as a victory of freedom over tyranny, but the irony is that neither he nor Brutus can determine how future generations will interpret the assassination. For some it came to symbolize ingratitude, rampant self-interest or insurrection. Their belief that future generations will learn the meaning of democracy and freedom from his act smacks of hubris. All they can be sure of is that it will be repeated, and that future generations will appropriate the

story in an attempt to make sense of their own present.

Of course, it is not only the history of the ‘antique Romans’ which is appropriated. In the History Plays, Shakespeare relates mediaeval English history, notably, but not only, Henry V’s victory at Agincourt, to the Elizabethan Age. Laurence Olivier’s film version of *Henry V*, made in the closing days of World War II, then retells the Elizabethan version of the nation’s past to shape and add significance to the 20th century. By the time it was released in 1944, the war was already won, thanks largely to the involvement of the Soviet Union and the United States. There was an unattractive hint of moral triumphalism in Olivier’s powerful rhetoric celebrating the victory as the triumph of the few over the many: ‘We few, we happy few...’ (*Henry V* IV iii 60). But Britain was no longer at centre stage. Olivier’s *Henry V* was designed to remind the nation of the overwhelming odds faced by the nation in its now long past ‘darkest hour’, and suggest that the impending victory must be God’s will. Churchill, too, saw himself in a historic tradition of story-telling, and his wartime speeches contain echoes of Henry V’s St. Crispian Day speech. But the past and its stories can mislead and betray as well as enlighten.

The school history curriculum once ensured that every British schoolboy had some knowledge of the Battle of Agincourt. But would a country boy like Will Shakespeare really have been sufficiently well versed in the classics to have been able to fill his plays with classical allusions? One might equally ask whether a courtier or an aristocrat could have had the necessary degree of familiarity with the Forest of Arden and the rag-tag denizens of rural England which Shakespeare clearly had. And in the 17th century, familiarity with the celebrated stories of classical literature was not confined to university men. Quince in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is one of those who prides himself on his knowledge of the stories of the past.

Marry, our play is, the most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.

(*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I ii 11-12)

Quince’s knowledge of a classic narrative seems more secure than his grasp of literary terms. In the play that the ‘mechanicals’ are rehearsing to celebrate the Duke’s wedding, Bottom is to play Pyramus, but is unsure whether his character is a lover or a tyrant. Bottom

would prefer to play a tyrant—like the ‘eager boy’ in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, who, when asked by Queen Elizabeth whether he liked the play *Romeo and Juliet*, says: ‘I liked it when she stabbed herself, your Majesty’, Bottom has a preference for live action. (The ‘eager boy’ turns out to be the young John Webster, who later wrote two dark and violent tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.) When Bottom is told he is to play a lover, he is rather disappointed:

... my chief humour is for a tyrant: I could play Ercles rarely...

(*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I ii 30-1)

Even if Pyramus is new to him, Bottom has certainly heard of Hercules, and none of the mechanicals feels uncomfortable presenting a classical story. During the rehearsals they interpret the characters in the light of their own experience. The humour does not derive from their ignorance of the material, but rather from their shallow understanding of it. Peter Quince’s eager cast had clearly not been to grammar school.

Boys from families like Shakespeare’s, however, would have most likely attended the local grammar school. John Shakespeare appears to have been a successful local citizen (successful when William was young, at any rate) so he would have sent his son to the ‘Kynges Newe Scole’ in Stratford. The school had been renamed when it received a new charter in 1553, the year that the young King Edward VI died. The curriculum of the Elizabethan Grammar School has been extensively researched<sup>3</sup>, and it can be demonstrated that most of the classical allusions in Shakespeare’s play can be traced to books that were in use in the grammar schools.

One of the most important documents providing information about Tudor education is a list of the statutes drawn up by John Colet (c. 1466-1519), the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, when he was re-endowing the school that had existed at St. Paul’s for more than three hundred years. William Lily, author of a Latin Grammar, the 1540 version of which was authorized for use in schools by Henry VIII, was its first High Master. A reference to a Latin quotation in Act IV Scene ii of *Titus Andronicus*—‘O, ‘tis a verse in Horace; I know it well:/ I read it in the grammar long ago’—could conceivably have been a reference to the Latin Grammar written by the distinguished Dutch scholar, Erasmus, for use at St. Paul’s. It



became a standard text that was widely used for many decades. In a section of his statutes entitled *What Shall Be Taught*, Colet writes:

As touching in this school what shall be taught of the masters and learned of the scholars, it passeth my wit to devise and determine in particular, but in general to speak and somewhat to say my mind: I would they were taught always in good literature both Latin and Greek, and good authors such as have the very Roman eloquence joined with wisdom, specially Christian authors that wrote their wisdom with clean and chaste Latin either in verse or in prose, for my intent is by this school specially to increase knowledge and worshiping of God and Our Lord Christ Jesu and good Christian life and manners in the children.

The seven-year course involved the memorization of Latin grammar, analysis of texts, composition practice, reading and speaking practice. The term 'grammar' was a broad one, involving literary and critical skills alongside language skills. Craig Thompson quotes Bishop Waynflete, who founded Magdalen College, referring to Latin grammar as 'the mother and foundation of all sciences.' Knowledge of the language was essential for anyone hoping to pursue a career in the Church or the professions. Thompson continues:

Drilling boys in grammar and teaching them to read, write, and speak a highly inflected language takes time. All masters had the same goal and most traveled to it by the same familiar routes. All boys had the same constant memorizing, reciting, construing and composing to go through. In addition they had to keep notebooks or commonplace books in which to record, and then learn, idioms, quotations, or figures useful in composition or declamation. Not a little of that wide learning and impressive range of quotation adorning Elizabethan literature comes from these commonplace books.

Thomas Wolsey, who after graduating from Magdalen College, Oxford, returned to his old grammar school, Magdalen College School, as Master, wrote a set of Latin instructions for grammar school teachers, which are found in some editions of Colet's grammar. Although dependent on the work of others, including Erasmus, they effectively dismiss the stereotypical idea of Tudor education as a regime of rote-learning and beatings:

In reading those works, we particularly recommend you to endeavour to make yourselves masters of every passage requiring immediate explanation. As, for instance, supposing you are to give the plan of one of Terence's comedies, you are to preface it with a short account of the author's life, his genius, and his manner of writing. You are next to explain the pleasure and profit that attends the reading of comedies. You are next, in clear but succinct manner, to explain the signification and etymology of the words, to give a summary of the fable and an exact description of the nature of the verse. You are then to construe it in its natural order. Lastly you are carefully to mark out to your pupils every striking elegance of style, every antiquated expression, everything that is new, every greccised expression, everything that is obscure, including etymology, derivation that may arise, whatever is harsh or confused in the arrangement of the sentence. You are to mark every orthography, every figure, every graceful ornament of style, every rhetorical flourish, whatever is proverbial, all passages that ought to be imitated and all that ought not<sup>4</sup>.

Even if some of the techniques recommended would not be employed today, Wolsey's instructions leave us in no doubt of the quality of the education that could be expected in a good grammar school, and the detailed preparation and analytical approach that could be expected of the best teachers.

Contemporary documents suggest that the comedies of Terence and the letters of Cicero were considered the best models for spoken Latin. Pliny provided a model for letter writing. In the later years of grammar school, rhetoric received greater emphasis, with the study of figures of speech and logical structures being pursued with the best classical models. Form was considered as important as meaning, although the neglect of content for style was questioned by a few contemporary scholars, such as Francis Bacon.

Schoolboys would also read Cicero, Virgil, Horace, and, of course, Ovid, which seems to have been one of Will Shakespeare's favorite texts. If he completed his schooling, Shakespeare would have also read extracts from Caesar, Plautus, Martial, Juvenal and Livy. Cicero and Seneca were also part of the curriculum. Thompson adds: 'The histories of Caesar, Sallust and Livy were

studied too, for their moral example was believed relevant to life in Elizabethan England and therefore included in their education.’

Shakespeare would have attended the school in Stratford from the age of seven, and at ten would have graduated from the classes supervised by Ushers to study with the Masters. Typically, the Tudor schoolboy spent eight to ten hours a day and six days a week in school. The school day began at 6.00 am in summer and an hour later in winter. Some schoolmasters even required students to return in the evening. There were no physical activities and no long summer holiday. Discipline involved frequent beatings. It is hard for people in England today to understand how the boys could endure this system, but then, children of a similar age in Japan may have to spend many hours a week attending cram schools in the evenings and on Saturdays. Children are great conformists, and Will Shakespeare and his friends would have known no other system. That is not to say the boys were docile. The records show that fighting, using bad language, cutting classes and stealing were part of everyday school life. Then as now, some teachers were unpopular. It has been noted in an Internet paper written by Ted Nellen<sup>5</sup> in 1986, a modern-day school-teacher in Stratford-upon-Avon, that schoolmasters are not presented very sympathetically in Shakespeare’s plays. We can only hope that the model for Holofernes in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was not one of Shakespeare’s own masters.

But the grammar schools offered not only dry pedantry, rote learning and empty translations exercises. Praise as well as punishment was employed. A contemporary painting shows a grammar schoolboy being rewarded after an examination with an apple. Many schoolmasters are recalled in later life with respect. The age had its Tom Arnolds as well as its Wackford Squeers. Given the deep emotional engagement which Shakespeare and contemporary poets and playwrights clearly had with classical myths and legends, it is reasonable to assume that the legacy of their education was generally positive. Peter Mack<sup>6</sup> offers insights not only into the content of the curriculum but also into the way rhetorical skills were taught — ‘invention’, ‘disposition’, ‘style’, ‘memory’ and ‘delivery’. These skills required some depth of emotional identification with the subjects of the

schoolboys text. The emotions, especially the capacity to weep, were closely identified with women. One of Ovid’s texts that was used in schools is *Heroïdes*, a collection of letters written in verse and purporting to come from various female heroines from Greek and Roman mythology, complaining about ill-treatment by their lovers. The selected women include Dido and Ariadne. In *Titus Andronicus*, Dido is mentioned by Marcus when inviting Lucius to speak to the people as Aeneas did to ‘lovesick Dido’s sad attending ear’. Ariadne figures in an informative speech in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where Julia, dressed as Sebastian, assumes his identity to talk of a cross-dressing experience he had had as part of a Pentecost pageant:

And at that time I made her weep agood,  
For I did play a lamentable part.  
Madam, ’twas Ariadne, passioning  
For Theseus’ perjury and unjust flight;  
Which I so acted with my tears  
That my poor mistress, movèd therewithal,  
Wept bitterly; and would I might be dead  
If I in thought felt not her very sorrow<sup>7</sup>.

(*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV iv 171–8)

This suggests that boys taking female roles were expected on occasions to express women’s emotions as a form of educational exercise. It is as if by learning to recite a women’s suffering, the schoolboy studied the ‘grammar of emotion’. Not that being required to play female roles was always welcome. There is a touching moment in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Flute is told he must play the role of Thisbe. Flute is clearly less than pleased:

Nay, faith, let not me play a woman; I have a beard coming.

(*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I ii 43)

The actor playing Flute might have been a boy actor who had played female roles but whose voice had recently broken. Flute’s reluctance to cross-dress might have amused an audience who had seen him playing, say, Juliet in the previous season. Cross-dressing is a recurrent motif in Shakespeare, and scholars have sought to explain it with reference to Shakespeare’s personal life or more general reflections on Renaissance sexuality. But maybe his use of this device in a number of plays simply reflects the habits (and possibly the emotional impact) of



one aspect of the Tudor educational culture.

There is evidence that schoolboys in some schools were regular participants in plays and pageants. During Elizabeth's coronation procession, which was held on 14th January, 1559, the young queen was met along the route by a varied series of dramatic and musical presentations, many of them involving children. Carol Rutter in her stimulating and remarkable recent book, *Shakespeare and Child's Play*, gives us a graphic account of this event in her opening chapter<sup>8</sup>. Orations were delivered in English and Latin, masques with children dressed as personifications of virtues and vices, and dramatized stories from the Bible, notably that of Deborah governing Israel. We know nothing of who the children were, nor do we know whether boys played the female characters, or whether it was grammar school pupils who gave the Latin orations, but as groups of boys met her outside famous schools such as St. Paul's and Christ's Hospital, we can assume the scholars were involved. We know some schools included dramatic activities in their curriculum. Nicholas Udall's comedy, *Ralph Roister Doister*, is thought to have been written as a school play. The statutes of Westminster School required that a comedy or tragedy in Latin should be put on during the Christmas festivities. In Ben Jonson's *Staple of News*, a character called Censure complains:

I would have ne'er a cunning Schoole-Master in England [...] that is [...] a Poet, or that had any acquaintance with a Poet. They make all their schollers Play-boyes! Is't not a fine sight, to see all our children made Enterluders? Doe wee pay our money for this? wee send them to learne their Grammar, and their Terence ...

So it seems likely that the young Will Shakespeare would have watched and possibly taken part in performances at school. Reading or performing scenes from classical drama would shape the predominant habits mind of the period, which would be to see the present as prefigured in the past and to draw Christian morals from pre-Christian stories. Assigning meaning to emblems and identifying parallels between different periods was a way to demonstrate the pattern of the creation and gave reassuring proof of God's involvement in history. As a system, it was as much a defining mark of the age as systematic empirical research has been in our own.

Of course, the King's New School in Stratford was not St. Paul's or Westminster, and the schoolmasters may not all have met the high standards set by Thomas Wolsey and John Colet. Contemporary sources suggest that ideal candidates could not always be found. But the masters would have to have been graduates of Oxford or Cambridge Colleges, and would all have required the local Bishop's approval.

Some of the interest in the schoolmasters who may have taught Shakespeare has focused on whether they might have been 'recusants' who secretly continued to practice Roman Catholicism. Stratford schoolmaster John Cottam is known to have had Catholic connections, and there has been speculation that Shakespeare might have been introduced by him as a tutor to a Catholic family in Lancashire<sup>9</sup>. In 2002, Michael Wood revived this theory in a BBC television documentary<sup>10</sup>, citing some new evidence, though much of it remains questionable. The theory depends heavily on one piece of circumstantial evidence: someone called 'William Shakeshafte' was employed at Houghton Hall, coinciding with a time when the young William Shakespeare's whereabouts and activities are unknown. As well as being a staunch Catholic, Shakeshafte's employer, Alexander Houghton, is believed to have had a brother who was interested in plays, and may have provided a link with Lord Strange's Men. It was this company of players, licensed by the Privy Council, which was performing at the Rose Theatre when Shakespeare surfaced in London, and which is thought to have given the first performance of *Richard III*<sup>11</sup>.

The supporters of this theory seem to be excited by the idea that the 'Bard', an iconic national symbol, might have been a Catholic. But the real interest in the theory is the possibility that Shakespeare may have been employed as a tutor, because then it could be presumed that he had distinguished himself at school, possibly reaching a higher level of academic achievement than is generally thought. Long before the Houghton connection was proposed, the great antiquarian, John Aubrey (1626-97) records in his *Lives of Eminent Men*, a tradition that Shakespeare was employed as an usher or schoolmaster before starting his career in London.

In any event, the King's New School is likely to have been a good school. It offered salaries, or endowments,

comparing favorably with some of the best schools in England. Two of its masters, Richard Fox and William Smyth, went on to found Oxford colleges (Corpus Christi and Brasenose).

Study of classical writers is not the only part of the curriculum which may have left its mark on Shakespeare's works. The plays are frequently cited in the Oxford English Dictionary as containing the first known examples of numerous proverbs and aphorisms. In their translation exercises pupils had to render colloquial English sentences, including proverbs and aphorisms, into spoken Latin. The textbooks employed to this end were called *Vulgaria*. Another part of the curriculum used texts called *Colloquia* containing dialogues. One widely used collection of *Colloquia* was compiled by Erasmus<sup>12</sup>. It contained many complex dialogues about the life and concerns of the first part of the 16th century. The subjects of the dialogues include 'The Courtesy of Saluting', 'Family Discourses', 'Of Rash Vows', 'Of Benefice Hunters', 'Of a Soldier's Life', 'Admonitions of a Schoolmaster', 'The Art of Hunting', 'Of Various Plays', 'The Child's Piety', and 'A Maiden and Her Lover'. The *Colloquia* dramatized intellectual and moral issues, and exposure to this kind of text might account for Shakespeare's fondness for the aphorisms and everyday wisdom that he uses in dramatic dialogue and soliloquy.

With this educational background, it is not difficult to understand how a 'country boy' could become a great playwright. It is, after all, *The Menaechmi*, a play by Plautus, which is the source for one of his earliest plays, *The Comedy of Errors*, and Plautus was widely studied in the grammar schools. Polonius is given the following lines in *Hamlet*:

Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light. For the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men.  
(*Hamlet*, II ii 389-90)

That said, the classical grounding should not be overplayed, and does mean that Shakespeare was in any sense a 'scholar'. For the modern reader, with little or no knowledge on the classics, the frequency of allusions to classical stories in the plays is impressive, impressive enough, as mentioned earlier, for some to question whether Shakespeare could possibly have written them, and to propose alternatives, including Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford,

and most recently, Sir Henry Neville, whose name is found on a sheet of paper where somebody appears to have been practicing Shakespeare's signature (something we actually see the man himself doing in *Shakespeare in Love*). Ben Jonson's famous comment, that Shakespeare had 'little Latin and less Greek' is cited to lend support to this view. But to contemporary scholars who had attended the university—Christopher Marlowe was awarded his B.A. by Corpus Christi College, Cambridge at the age of 20—Shakespeare's classical knowledge would not have seemed impressive. Modern research has shown that in fact, Shakespeare alluded to the classics less frequently than many of his literary contemporaries<sup>13</sup>.

Lack of scholarship, or perhaps not possessing the mind of a 16th century academic, may in fact be a positive asset for a playwright. In 1601, a group of Cambridge students staged a play entitled *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus*, part of a series of productions satirizing the London literary scene. In one scene, actors representing Will Kempe and Richard Burbage appear and in their discussion, Kempe says: 'Few of the university pen plays well, they smell too much of the writer Ovid, and that writer Metamorphosis, and talk too much of Prosepina and Jupiter. Why, here's our fellow Shakespeare puts them all down...'<sup>14</sup>

Being an academic was not considered a prerequisite for a playwright any more than it is today. In 1610, John Davies of Hereford published a volume of poems addressed to distinguished friends of his called *The Scourge of Folly*. In one piece he refers to 'our English Terence, Mr. Will. Shake-speare'. Significantly, Terence—Publius Terentius Afer (d. 159 BC)—adapted Greek comedies but wrote in a unique, colloquial Latin style. He died young, leaving only six plays, but his work remained popular throughout the mediaeval period and during the Renaissance. His method of working has some similarity with Shakespeare's, and his work would probably have been familiar to the students at the King's New School in Stratford.

The technique of drawing on earlier plays and stories was identified as Shakespeare's method even before his death. Francis Meres (born a year after Shakespeare in 1565, but outliving him by over thirty years) left us a list of Shakespeare's plays which is an important resource

for establishing their chronology. In *A Comparative Discourse of our English poets with the Greeke, Latin, and Italian poets*, he links poets from Chaucer until those of his own day with various classical authors. In another work, *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury*, first published in 1598, he writes of Shakespeare:

‘As the soule of *Euphorbus* was thought to live in *Pythagoras*: so the sweet wittie soule of *Ovid* lives in mellifluous & honytongued *Shakespeare*, witnes his *Venus* and *Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private frinds, & c.

As *Plautus* and *Seneca* are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so *Shakespeare* among y’English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witnes his *Ge’tleme’ of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love labors lost*, his *Love labours wonne*, his *Midsummer night dreame*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2*. *Richard the 3*. *Henry the 4*. *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

As *Epius Stolo* said, that the Muses would speake with *Plautus* tongue, if they would speak Latin: so I say that the Muses would speak with *Shakespeares* fine filed phrase, if they would speake English.<sup>15</sup>

Early in the 20th century, Andes<sup>16</sup> produced an exhaustive study both of Shakespeare’s sources and of his classical and biblical allusions. His list of sources for the plots of the plays is relatively short and simple. Students learn from the notes of school texts that North’s translation of Plutarch is the source for the Roman plays, and Holinshed and Hall’s Chronicles for the histories. Older plays, either extant or presumed, are the sources for several plays, including *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare also adapts plots from Italian stories and English romances. A number of plays have no known plot sources, including *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Tempest*, and *Titus Andronicus*. Yet all these plays still draw extensively upon classical texts. Andes’ book meticulously identifies every allusion and quotation he can find within the texts of the all of his plays. But, of course, it is the way Shakespeare makes use of all this material that sets him apart.

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* in particular illustrates Shakespeare’s capacity for taking material from a variety of sources and shaping it to suit his needs. Jonathan Bate

in *Shakespeare and Ovid*<sup>17</sup>, shows how Ovid is not just a source of stories, but a model for many aspects of Shakespeare’s dramatic art. He shares with Ovid ‘a method of composition which involves shaping inherited stories in such a way that they are wrought completely anew; a refusal to submit to the decorums of genre, a delight in the juxtaposition of contrasting tones—the tragic and the grotesque, the comic and the pathetic, the cynical and the magnanimous; an interest above all else in human psychology, particularly the psychology of desire in its many varieties; an exploration of the transformations wrought by extremes of emotion; a delight in rhetorical ingenuity, verbal fertility, linguistic play; variety and flexibility as fundamental habits of mind and forms of expression.’<sup>18</sup>

It may be Shakespeare’s facility in writing in a variety of styles dates from the hours spent as a schoolboy with his *Colloquia* and other formal classical models open on the desk in front of him. He certainly knows that using models and alluding to classical sources can become nothing more than an elaborate game devoid of content. As mentioned above, in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Shakespeare gives us a ruthlessly unforgiving portrait of the schoolmaster, Holofernes, who boasts:

This is a gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions: these are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of pia mater, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it.

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, IV ii 65–71)

Holofernes is ridiculed for his pedantry. But as Bate points out, Shakespeare ‘wittily apostrophized his own favourite classical poet’ in the lines assigned to the schoolmaster. Holofernes asserts that ‘for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy... Ovidius Naso was the man: and why indeed ‘Naso’ but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention?’ Holofernes cannot resist making a verbal link between Ovid’s name, Publius Ovidius Naso, and the Italian word for nose, an example of spurious scholarship which is devoid of significance or use.

However, the focus of this paper is on story not on style, and Shakespeare does draw on Ovid as a narrative

source as well as a stylistic model. In fact, of the remaining plays in the list above for which no direct source has been identified, all have links with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

*The Midsummer Night's Dream* entertains us a burlesque of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe which is found in Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The same story is also thought to have inspired *Romeo and Juliet*. Again, what is 'Shakespearean' is not the fact that he alludes to Ovid's original, but the unique way he puts it to work on the stage.

Ovid is, perhaps unexpectedly, one of the influences on *The Tempest*. It has been noted that Prospero's speech, 'Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves' (V i 38 ff.), is adapted from Medea's speech in Book VII of *Metamorphoses* in the translation credited to Arthur Golding which appeared in 1567 ('Ye Ayres and windes: ye Elves of Hilles, of Brookes, of Woods alone, / Of standing Lakes, and of the Night approche ye everychone')<sup>19</sup>.

But the most remarkable use of Ovid, is found in *Titus Andronicus*. Here, as in *Cymbeline*, Ovid's book is physically present on the stage. In *Cymbeline*, it appears to have been Imogen's bedtime reading:

... She hath been reading late,  
The tale of Tereus; here the leaf's turn'd down  
Where Philomel gave up.

(*Cymbeline*, II ii 44-6)

In *Titus Andronicus*, a copy of *Metamorphoses* is also brought on to the stage as a stage prop.

*Titus Andronicus* is thought to be Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, dating from the early 1590s. Though frequently performed in Shakespeare's day, in the 18th century it fell from favour and it was rarely performed in the Victorian era. It was considered to be too bloodthirsty, and lacking the character-driven sophistication of the later tragedies. Many have questioned Shakespeare's authorship, among them Dr. Johnson, who believed that 'The barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience.'<sup>20</sup> T. S. Eliot claimed it was the 'worst play ever written' and J. Dover Wilson called thought it was 'a huge joke'.

The events of the 20th century however, have forced us to re-assess the human capacity for barbarism. As A. L. Rowse writes: 'In the civilized Victorian age the play

could not be performed because it could not be believed. Such is the horror of our own age, with the appalling barbarities of prison camps and resistance movements paralleling the play's scenes of torture, mutilation and cannibalism, that it has ceased to seem so improbable.'<sup>21</sup> Who could disagree? It is said that the Viet Cong would cut the hands off children who had accepted gifts of candy from American GIs. For their part, American soldiers raped and massacred about 500 villagers at My Lai. In recent decades, rape and mutilation has become a routine weapon of terror in African civil wars. A modern audience can only claim that the brutality of *Titus* strains its credibility if it has closed its mind to the events of its own time. Perhaps it is not surprising that in the last two or three decades there has been such a revival of interest in the play. Peter Brook's 1955 production with Laurence Olivier and Vivienne Leigh shocked audiences but demanded to be taken seriously. Trevor Nunn (1972) and Deborah Warner (1987) directed the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Jane Howells's ground-breaking production for the BBC Shakespeare series with Trevor Peacock and Eileen Atkins focused attention on the role of Young Lucius, grandson of Titus, bringing him on stage in many scenes where he has no lines. The role of Young Lucius is also the focus of Carol Rutter's chapter 'The Alphabet of Memory in *Titus Andronicus*' in *Shakespeare and Child's Play*<sup>22</sup>, but she does not mention the Howells production. Julie Taymor, in her powerful film version, also places the role of Young Lucius at the centre of her interpretation. Taymor does not seem to acknowledge any debt to the Howells production either, but the film is extensively discussed in Rutter's book.

The gruesome scenes in the play are said to have had members of Peter Brook's audience leaving their seats and rushing to the bathroom. Stylizing the violence (using red ribbons for blood, for example) has been tried, most recently by Ninagawa's 2006 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company. But that solution works better when the violence is not the focus and the theme of a work. The story of *Titus* is adapted by Shakespeare from mythological rather than historical precedents. Shakespeare draws on myths throughout his career, but in *Titus* virtually the entire story is assembled from this kind of material. This is done openly with the relation-

ship with the stories of the past being ‘prominently flaunted’<sup>23</sup>. Unlike the other Roman plays, the story has little or no historical foundation. Instead, Shakespeare combines elements from some of the darkest stories found in Roman drama and fiction. Seneca’s play *Thyestes*, is one possible source. It offers a version of the archetypal revenge story in which parents are made to eat their own children without realizing it. Ovid’s tale of Progne and Philomena is the source of the account of the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, Titus’ daughter. The story of Appius and Virginius, (which was later adapted by John Webster in a tragedy of the same name) gives Shakespeare the precedent for the scene where Titus kills Lavinia. The story is found in *Ab Urbe Condita* (‘On the Founding of Rome’) by Livy (coincidentally also called Titus) and had previously been retold in *The Romance of the Rose*, the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower, and ‘The Physician’s Tale’ in *The Canterbury Tales*. Virginius, with his daughter Virginia’s approval, kills her to save her from dishonour.

What makes *Titus Andronicus* particularly interesting is the way the stories which prefigure some of the most gruesome scenes in the play are accepted and quoted as stories, not as a part of the history of the classical period. As Rutter writes, ‘*Titus Andronicus* is a play which tells itself by telling stories.’<sup>24</sup> In contrast, when Hamlet comments on the story of Hecuba, he refers to it as if Hecuba was a historical figure. Young Lucius may also believe she existed, but his knowledge of her comes from books:

... I have heard my grandsire say full oft,  
Extremity of griefs would make men mad;  
And I have read that Hecuba of Troy  
Ran mad through sorrow: that made me to fear.

(*Titus Andronicus*, IV i 18–21)

Later Titus asks him:

TITUS:

What book is that she tosseth so?

BOY:

Grandsire, ’tis Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*;  
My mother gave it me.

MARCUS:

For love of her that’s gone,  
Maybe she has culled it from among the rest.

(*Titus Andronicus*, IV i 41–5)

Lavinia, maimed and dumb, and so unable to speak or write the names of those who raped her, follows Young Lucius around because the *Metamorphoses* is one of the books he is carrying. She knows that if she can draw her father’s attention to the story of Philomel she can communicate the fact that she was raped before she was mutilated (something those around her do not know.) Turning the pages using her mouth and the stumps of her arms, and forming letters in the sand with a staff, she succeeds in bringing the crime to light. Titus then plans his grotesque revenge, modelling it upon another story, before finally acquiescing to his daughter’s wish that he should help her to die so she can escape the burden of her dishonour.

The stories of the past are invoked early in the play. Titus, returning victorious from his wars with Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, and her three sons as prisoners, bring the bodies of his own sons to the family mausoleum, reminding the people of his family’s sacrifice for Rome:

Romans, of five and twenty valiant sons,  
Half of the number that King Priam had,  
Behold the poor remains, alive and dead . . .

(*Titus Andronicus*, I i 82–4)

Is it modesty that makes him choose a sacrifice greater than his own to characterize his family’s sacrifice? Rigidly observing tradition, Titus demands that Tamora should give up her eldest son, Alarbus, the noblest of the surviving Goths, as a sacrifice on the Andronici family altar. She pleads as a mother that the ‘thrice noble Titus’ should spare her son, but the request is refused. As yet uncorrupted by what becomes an all-consuming desire for vengeance, she pillories the Roman sense of values as ‘irreligious piety’. Following the sacrifice, Demetrius, one of her surviving sons, also alludes to another part of the story of the fall of Troy to provide a model for his mother to follow:

Then, madam, stand resolved, but hope withal  
The self-same gods that arm’d the Queen of Troy  
With opportunity of sharp revenge  
Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent,  
May favor Tamora, the Queen of Goths—  
When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen—  
To quit the bloody wrongs upon her foes.

(*Titus Andronicus*, I i 138–44)



Hecuba in offered in *Hamlet* is a model for the level of grief appropriate in a wife whose husband is slaughtered. But the part of the myth that Demetrius invokes, describing Hecuba's fury of revenge, unleashed when she finds that her last surviving son whom she had entrusted to the King of Thrace, has been killed, is also the part which interested Ovid. It describes the transformation possible in human nature under pressure. This is one of the themes of *Titus Andronicus*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides chapter and verse for the disturbing transformations we observe in the leading characters, both mental and spiritual. That these transformations can occur, modern man cannot doubt. Ordinary citizens living unremarkable lives can become butchers and executioners, and their new work becomes a routine pursued as unquestioningly and efficiently as their previous jobs were. We are not short of examples: guards in Nazi concentration camps, soldiers on the streets of Nanking or My Lai, a Tsutsi family's Hutu neighbours in Ruanda becoming their assassins, children of French-speaking parents in Cambodia betraying their own parents, the grandchildren of elderly writers in China's Cultural Revolution hanging signs round their necks and pillorying them, teenagers in the run-down areas of Western cities stabbing passers-by to death, and bullies in schools everywhere driving classmates to suicide before returning home for their supper. Ordinary people are capable of monstrous cruelty. The puzzling thing is not that cruelty happens, but that we should always be surprised by it, and cling to our belief that it is 'unnatural'. The classic myths tell a different story.

One function of stories ought to be to ensure that future generations have the chance to avoid the mistakes of the past. For this to work, the young must confront the crimes of the older generations without being corrupted by them. One of the most interesting aspects of *Titus Andronicus* is the role of Young Lucius, Titus's grandson, and spectator to the theatre of cruelty. He is given forty lines to speak, which is more than most child roles in Shakespeare, but they are found in Acts IV and V of the play. His entrances are not marked, and in the last scene, it is not until he is summoned by his father to come forward that we have any way of knowing he is on stage. He is called to grieve over the body of his grandsire, of whom he was a special favorite:

Many a time he danced thee on his knee,  
Sung thee asleep, his loving breast thy pillow;  
Many a story hath he told thee,  
And bid thee bear his pretty tales in mind...

(*Titus Andronicus*, V iii 161-4)

This is a novel view of Titus, and not one we immediately recognize. Given his constant wars with the Goths, it is not easy to imagine these scenes of domestic harmony, and we wonder when they took place. The 'tales' which Titus tells includes the account of the deaths of Priam's fifty sons, and of Virginius sacrificing his daughter. 'Pretty tales' indeed!

Young Lucius has a role to play in his grandfather's plans for revenge:

BOY:

My lords, with all the humbleness I may,  
I greet your honours from Andronicus.

[Aside] And pray the Roman gods confound you both!

DEMETRIUS:

Gramercy, lovely Lucius: what's the news?

BOY:

[Aside] That you are both decipher'd, that's the news,  
For villains mark'd with rape. —May it please you,

My grandsire, well advised, hath sent by me

The goodliest weapons of his armoury

To gratify your honourable youth,

The hope of Rome; for so he bade me say;

And so I do, and with his gifts present

Your lordships, that, whenever you have need,

You may be armed and appointed well:

And so I leave you both:

[Aside] like bloody villains.

(*Titus Andronicus*, IV ii 4-17)

It is not surprising that Young Lucius is moved to floods of tears by his grandfather's death:

O grandsire, grandsire! even with all my heart

Would I were dead, so you did live again!

O Lord, I cannot speak for weeping...

(*Titus Andronicus*, V iii 171-3)

But given his age, we want to see him as an innocent observer caught up in events without having any responsibility for what happens. When Young Lucius first speaks, it is as a schoolboy, carrying his books, among which is the copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which his Aunt Lavinia is so determined to borrow. There is no



indication in Shakespeare's text that the boy is meant to be on stage in the earlier part of the play, and yet as son of the last surviving Andronici, Lucius, who is finally chosen to be Emperor, and as a clear favorite of his grandfather, it is likely that he would have been a silent presence in the earlier scenes, observing all that happened and perhaps trying to relate it to his books. Taymor, director of the film version discussed exhaustively in Rutter's book<sup>25</sup>, places the boy at the centre of her interpretation. In an interview given before an audience of Columbia University film students on the 25th February, 2000, she says:

'The idea of this child, this 12 year-old boy, watching his family go at it, watching these blood lines, these tribes, these religious rites, these ... this whole event ... what is it that we put children through and what is the legacy they are left with? So I took the young boy who in the original play only has two or three scenes, the scenes where he speaks. The arc of the story is the child's. It's a parallel story to the actual story of the Andronici, and Tamora and her family.'<sup>26</sup>

Taymor places Young Lucius at the centre of the opening and closing scenes of the film, as Howells had before her in the BBC *Titus*. Taymor's scenes are additions to Shakespeare. Her film opens with a chilling scene in which the boy who plays Young Lucius stands at a modern suburban kitchen table, with his head masked in an American brown paper supermarket bag with holes cut out for the eyes, stage-managing a massacre with his toys and assorted kitchen items. Taymor is also dissatisfied with Shakespeare's original ending. In the DVD interview she says that Shakespeare had to satisfy the political requirements of the time, but the ending 'doesn't reflect the soul of the piece'. In the closing moments of the play, the remaining members of the Andronicus family, Titus's brother, Marcus, and son, Lucius, bring on the final evidence of Tamora's viciousness, a little black baby which she had conceived in her adulterous affair with Aaron, the Moor. Aaron is a dry run, so to speak, for Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *Lear*. Although Aaron never renounces evil with a last minute about-face like Edmund's 'Some good I mean to do', he does, in fact, perform one 'good' act which leads to his downfall, torture and death. He refuses to protect himself and Tamora by having the baby killed as its nurse expects

(instead he kills her). In a surprising display of paternal affection, he saves the baby, and in so doing effectively precipitates his own downfall. The baby is subsequently produced on stage. 'Behold, the child,' announces Marcus, '... Now judge what cause has Titus to revenge / These wrongs, unspeakable, past patience.'

That there is a child even younger than Young Lucius on the stage in the closing moments of the play underlines the importance of the role of children in this story. Shakespeare does not tell us the fate of Aaron's baby, nor from the text can we even be sure it is still alive. Taymor uses a healthy, anxious-looking black baby in her film, making it the focus of her moving final scene. In the closing moments of the film, Young Lucius opens the iron cage in which the baby has been carried on to the stage, and tenderly carries him from the grim confines of the Colisseum into the bright sunlight outside. Taymor freezes the last frame as if to say that the possibility of redemption is only that—a possibility. Critics of the scene find it sentimental, some unkindly suggesting a similarity to the ending of *E. T.*

In the BBC version, Howells judges 'the soul of the piece' rather differently, and in her treatment shows that questions can be raised without adding to or rejecting Shakespeare's 'politically correct' ending. Like Taymor, Howells' production places the Young Lucius near the centre of the action. He is more than just an innocent bystander, having him play a role in the rituals of the funeral ceremonies at the Andronici tomb in the first scene of the play. Howells makes him adolescent, a little older and less cute than Taymor's blonde-haired boy, so his involvement in adult affairs is more believable. She sees him as reflective and troubled. He is a studious boy who enjoys reading, a point which she emphasizes by giving him a pair of spectacles. This also suggests his role as a spectator in the theatre of cruelty in which he finds himself. This interpretation follows Shakespeare. It is Young Lucius who has been entrusted with the crucial copy of Ovid, which provides a means of interpreting reality.

The idea that there might be a possibility of a future less violent and cruel than the past is hinted at by Howells, though we are spared Taymor's Hollywood ending. Young Lucius is troubled by many of the things he sees but struggles to be positive nonetheless. Pur-

sued by a distraught Lavinia issuing unnerving and incoherent grunts as she tries with the stumps of her arms to dislodge his precious books from his hands, he initially flees in fear. Marcus tries to reassure him, and Titus reminds him:

She loves thee, boy, too well to do thee harm.

(*Titus Andronicus*, IV i 6)

Young Lucius makes a brave attempt to believe this, trying to relate her behaviour to what he has read of 'Hecuba of Troy', as if that would somehow normalize it, before adding:

I know my noble aunt

Loves me as dear as e'er my mother did,

And would not, but in fury, fright my youth:

Which made me down to throw my books, and fly—

Causeless, perhaps. But pardon me, sweet aunt:

And, madam, if my uncle Marcus go,

I will most willingly attend your ladyship.

(*Titus Andronicus*, IV i 22-8)

Just as the child soldiers forced to kill and maim in African conflicts do not necessarily show symptoms of psychological disturbance until after they have returned to normal society, so Young Lucius struggles to behave decently and show due respect to his 'beloved aunt' despite the horrific spectacle she has become. The horrors that surround him have become the norm.

Expecting to be cared for with love and trying to maintain faith in the basic decency of humanity is the starting point of every child. Few are confronted with the appalling evidence of the true nature of the world which Young Lucius has to deal with. Yet in Howells' interpretation, the boy struggles to look for signs of the redeemability of the adult world. In the banquet scene, when Titus serves up the pie made from the bodies of Tamora's sons as a punishment for their rape and mutilation of his daughter, a spectacular sequence of violent acts is unleashed, graphically illustrating in a few seconds, the capacity of violence to generate violence. Titus starts the process by asking the Emperor Saturninus a leading question:

My lord the emperor, resolve me this:

Was it well done of rash Virginius

To slay his daughter with his own right hand,

Because she was enforced, stain'd, and deflower'd?

(*Titus Andronicus* V iii 35-8)

The Emperor replies that it was, and when asked for his

reason, replies that the girl 'should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows'. There is more than a hint of male chauvinism in his reply, but it satisfies Titus. The story of Virginius has imperial approval. Titus feels gratified:

A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant,

For me, most wretched, to perform the like.

(*Titus Andronicus* V iii 43-4)

Then totally unexpectedly, he immediately kills his daughter, usually by stabbing her as she looks gratefully into his eyes. In Taymor's movie, he appears to break her neck—painless, and more in the style of a judicial killing. Despite endorsing the behaviour of Virginius in the story, Saturninus directly condemns Titus's action as 'unnatural and unkind'. In fairness to him, although he can see that Lavinia has been horribly mutilated, he does not yet know that she has also been raped. In the Roman scale of things, rape is more dishonourable than mere mutilation, it seems. When he learns that Tamora's sons are accused, Saturninus seems genuinely surprised and summons them to be brought. Titus reveals that his guests have already been eating them, and without delay, stabs Tamora to death where she sits. Saturninus springs up and kills Titus. Then Lucius, rushes to his father's defence, killing Saturninus.

In the text we only know that after these events have taken place, Marcus Andronicus takes the stage to address the 'sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome', proposing Lucius as emperor. But Young Lucius has observed all that has happened. He is soon to be called forward to weep over the body of his grandfather. What would his reactions to this series of killings have been? Howells usually presents him as an observer, but on this occasion, she cannot imagine him standing by passively. As his father, Lucius, attacks the Emperor, Young Lucius throws himself on his father's shoulders, apparently trying to restrain him. His anguished face seems to suggest that he is desperate to stop the cycle of violence. Saturninus, for all his veniality, has not defended the rape of Lavinia. And his father's behaviour may seem unworthy of a man about to become the emperor himself. Even if the play implies that the terrible wrongs endured by Titus explain and possibly morally justify his actions, Howells suggests that Young Lucius is appalled by this sequence of killings, and in particular, saddened by the

eagerness of his father to be a participant in the action. Taymor comments in her interview that there is a fine line between justice and vengeance, but Howells seems to feel that the distinction has to be observed. Young Lucius was present in the opening scene when his father strongly advocated the sacrifice of Tamora's eldest son. It is this that initiates the sequence of horrific events which form the story of *Titus*. Now Young Lucius seems to be trying to restrain his father from acting once again in a way that will perpetuate the cycle of violence and killing for another generation. Killing the emperor minutes before he himself is to be nominated for the same job would not appear to be the most auspicious beginning for Lucius' rule.

Marcus, ever the optimist, appeals to the people:

O, let me teach you how to knit again  
This scatter'd corn into one mutual sheaf,  
These broken limbs again into one body.

(*Titus Andronicus*, V iii 69–71)

Can Rome really have a new start, and can the traumas of the past really be healed? Moments later a strong 'king' is back on the 'throne' and the play appears to endorse the principles of justice and order. As we have seen, Taymor dismisses Shakespeare's ending as politically correct in terms of the times, offering instead an ending which symbolizes the hope of a new world rather than more of the old. But in dismissing Shakespeare's ending, Taymor may be underestimating his capacity for implying ambivalence even when satisfying the authorities that the play is not seditious. After all, Lucius is a flawed character, and Marcus's optimistic vision of social healing is by no means sure of realization. Rome may indeed again be 'bane unto herself'. Howells seems at ease with this ambivalence. Young Lucius, called forward to weep over his grandfather's body, turns away unable to speak on the grounds that his tears would drown him if he opened his mouth. He has learnt his schoolboy lessons well. His use of this figure would have earned the praise of his rhetoric teacher. But it is Aaron's child that is the real focus of his attention, as it is in Taymor's production. The infant is male. Young Lucius knows what is expected of boys. He had twenty-four uncles and only one aunt. The baby is the issue of the nihilistic, amoral Moor and the wolfish Tamora. But it is just a baby, innocent of its parents' sins. Young Lucius returns to the

place where Aaron's child has been placed. But the baby is not in an iron cage from which it can be freed. It is in a solid box with a lid. The box is coffin-like, and the child inside appears to be dead. Like Taymor's boy, Young Lucius contemplates the baby with an expression of tenderness and pity, as if he understands the guilt of humanity in endlessly corrupting the next generation. Marcus, his great uncle, notices his anguish, and quietly approaching him, gently but firmly closes the box. Some stories, it seems, do not have happy endings.

The final minutes of the play repeat the events of its opening moments—dead bodies, a funeral ritual and the election of a new emperor. Whether this simply gives the play a pleasing symmetry, suggests a new beginning, or leaves us with an ominous hint of more suffering to come, we must decide for ourselves. There is no sequel to this play (at least, none that has survived). All we can say is that Shakespeare has not shirked the duty of the writer to tell the truth. 'Shakespeare's ending to *Titus Andronicus* concentrates on story, memory and the obligations of the survivors to *tell*.'<sup>27</sup>

We are back with Horatio at the end of *Hamlet*, standing by the stage on which the body of his friend is displayed to public view. There is a funeral, and a new king, and a survivor with a story to tell.

---

(The quotations from the plays are taken from the 1997 Folio Edition of the *Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford University Press, 1986.)

#### Notes

- 1 *Shakespeare in Love*, directed by John Madden (Miramax, 1998). The screenplay, written by Marc Norman and refined by Tom Stoppard, contains a dazzling array of textual allusions and authentic references to the Elizabethan theatre, its actors and writers, and to London life in general, even though the story it tells is entirely fictional.
- 2 These are noted on the Marlowe Society website at: <http://www.marlowe-society.org/marlowe/work/dido/interpret/hamlet.html> (December, 2009).
- 3 The following section draws on the useful monograph *Schools in Tudor England* by Craig R. Thompson, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1958. See also T.W. Baldwin's *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, Urbana, 1944. Baldwin's authoritative work is the foundation of later studies, such as that of Mack (see note 4).
- 4 From Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric, Theory and*

- Practice*, Cambridge, 2002. The translation from the Latin appears to have been taken by Mack from a 19th century text.
- 5 See <http://www.tnellen.com/ted/holofernes.html> (December, 2009).
- 6 See note 3 above. For a helpful short introduction to the topic, see Peter Mack's article, "Humanism, Rhetoric and Education" in Donna Hamilton (ed.), *A Concise Companion to English Renaissance Literature*, Oxford, 2006.
- 7 Quoted in *Shakespeare and Child's Play*, by Carol Chillington Rutter, Routledge, 2007. Rutter also suggests that the speech is a perfect example of an exercise in rhetoric.
- 8 Op. cit., pp. 1-6. Shakespeare's plays contain more than fifty roles for children, and a number of recent books and articles suggest an increasing interest in this aspect of Shakespeare's work, and in the actors who played them. See "Elizabethan Play-Boys in the Adult London Companies" by Robert Barte, *Studies in English Literature* Vol. 48, 2008, and *Shakespeare and Childhood*, a collection of essays edited by Kate Chedgzoy, Susanne Greenhalgh and Robert Shaughnessy, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 9 In 1985, E. A. J. Honigmann in *Shakespeare: The Lost Years* proposed the controversial theory that Shakespeare had strong Catholic connections. Speculation about Shakespeare's father goes back much further, to 1757 in fact, a century and a half after his death, when a Catholic pamphlet was found hidden in the rafters of the family house in Henley Street, by then occupied by Thomas Hart, a descendant of William's sister Joan. The most important of several recent books constructing an account of Shakespeare's early life from the very limited records available is Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), in which the evidence for the Catholic connection is carefully reviewed.
- 10 "In Search of Shakespeare", BBC television documentary and book, 2002.
- 11 The British Library Internet site "Treasures in Full: Shakespeare in Quarto" offers a clear and informative survey of the principle companies of players in Shakespeare's day.  
See: <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/companies.html> (December, 2009).
- 12 The text of Erasmus *Colloquia* can be accessed at: <http://smith2.sewanee.edu/erasmus/colloquia/colloquia.html> (December, 2009).
- 13 See "Shakespeare's Knowledge of Italy, the Classics, and the Law" by David Kathman. This article can be read at: <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/italy.html> (December, 2009).
- 14 Quoted in "How We Know That Shakespeare Wrote Shakespeare: The Historical Facts" by Tom Reedy and David Kathman at: <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/howdowe.html> (December, 2009).
- 15 A facsimile of the original may be found in: Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare A Documentary Life* (Oxford, 1975), p. 140, which gives the citation for an original in the Bodleian Library.
- 16 *Shakespeare's Books* by H. R. D. Andes (London 1903) recently reissued as a reprint by the publisher Kessinger.
- 17 *Shakespeare and Ovid* by Jonathan Bate, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- 18 Op. cit., p. 3.
- 19 The passage cited is in Book VII, line 265. A text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be found at: <http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid07.htm> (December, 2009).  
One of the finest recent translations of Ovid is Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid: Twenty-four Passages from the Metamorphoses*, Faber and Faber, 1997.
- 20 Samuel Johnson, *Notes to Shakespeare* (1765), p. 492.
- 21 A. L. Rowse's edition of *Titus Andronicus* was published by the University Press of America in 1987.
- 22 Rutter, op. cit., pp. 34-95.
- 23 Bate, op. cit., p. 173.
- 24 Rutter, op. cit., p. 39.
- 25 Rutter, op. cit., in particular, pp. 69-89.
- 26 An edited version of the interview is included in the double-disc version of the DVD of her film, *Titus*, Clear Blue Sky Productions, 1999.
- 27 Rutter, op. cit., p. 87.