

Shakespeare's Canon

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Shakespeare is, in every sense, canonical. Indeed, in some quarters he has been canonised: the British Broadcasting Corporation's "Desert Islands Discs" put his works, synecdochally known simply as "Shakespeare", alongside the Bible – another collection of discrete and disparate books – as something which no self-respecting castaway could do without. But he has been canonical in our sense since the First Folio (very expensive at £1) put him on the shelves of the literate and powerful, and Ben Jonson's claim therein that he was England's Homer and Virgil, maker of the language and the creator of the National Myth.¹ For in a real sense, that is what a canon is about: identity, how a culture thinks itself to be, where the thinking can be constructing, not just descriptive, of what is seen to be. For a canon is constructed, albeit by consent, rather than just grows, like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is inescapably ideological, and thus inevitably has religious or political implications.² Even so, canons in formation have nevertheless to take account of those poets that are already "there", whose fame is a given.

When Heming and Condell in the First Folio classified the "collected works" of Mr William SHAKESPEARE – Jaggard's and Blount's typography gives unprecedented weight to an "author" in English – as "Comedies, Histories & Tragedies" they were not just writing what is in effect the first piece of Shakespeare criticism, but also asserting a relationship between the plays as works (supposedly authorised by "true copies") and older, authorising, examples of those genres. Heming

¹ The familiarity with which we regard Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare" in the Prelims to the 1623 First Folio (Sig A4^{ro}-A4^{vo}) might make us see as merely conventional praise, to be expected in a publisher's puff, his lines

... or, when thy socks were on,
Leave thee alone for the comparison
Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come."

But easy praise is not Jonson's way; and when later he calls – and again it has become a cliché – Shakespeare the "Sweet Swan of Avon" he is making an explicit comparison, not to Shakespeare's disadvantage, with the Swan of Meander, the Swan of Maeonia, and the Swan of Mantua – Pindar, Homer and Virgil. Homer was seen to have given Greece a National Myth, which Virgil explicitly "overgoes" – to use Sidney's word – for the new Rome. (Cf. Propertius, *Elegies* II. Xxxiv.65: *Cedite Romani scriptores, cedite Grai!/ Nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade.*)

² John Guillory in *Cultural Capital, the Problem of Literary Canon Formulation* (1993), argues that canons are formed on the ideological and cultural imperatives of the moment. But once in existence, it could also be suggested, they modify future needs and are themselves then modified as those are or are not met.

and Condell's work is not a complete status-claiming *Opera*, as Ben Jonson's *Workes* of 1616 aimed to be, nor is it a complete collection of the plays, as it ignores some apocrypha while including jointly written plays like *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Pericles*. But in that initial classification into genres it asserts relationships with predecessors in a plasticity of being and understanding.

This essay, though, is concerned less with canonical Shakespeare, and what that status has done to how we read or watch him, than with how Shakespeare himself might have thought about a canon. What for him were the books that, to use A. S. Byatt's phrase, "every writer had to know in order to know who they are"?³ One part of that question is easy: the books that every grammar school boy had beaten into him: Livy, Virgil, Ovid, Horace and so on. But how does a writer of his time, and, for that matter, of his calibre, negotiate – to use a trendy word – their legacy?

Jonathan Bate opened up the huge debt Shakespeare owed Ovid, not least in the idea of metamorphosis.⁴ This idea is at once capable of artistic exploration – how, in Shakespeare's drama, almost uniquely in the period, people change, are contradictory, yet the same – and philosophical, fitting in with much of the diffused Neo-Platonic outlook of the period.⁵ Shakespeare's debt to Virgil is less commonly acknowledged, but Bulman's article in the 1986 *Shakespeare Survey* detailed the significant debt in the Ricardian History plays to the *Georgics*.⁶ I have myself written on the detailed debt to the *Aeneid* in *The Tempest*:⁷ the epic is almost in counterpoint to that play, a genuine intertext in Kristeva's strictest sense, where Virgil's poem helps shape the meaning as well as the narrative detail of the play.⁸ The number of detailed echoes of Virgil in the Ricardian Plays⁹ (but especially in *The Tempest*) raises big questions indeed about what the company expected of the audience(s) – for the company may have been very aware of how differently a play might be watched depending on what you brought to it, or where you saw it – or, indeed, about how it might be read, for in the case of *The*

³ Stuart Gillespie's very useful *Shakespeare's Books* (2006) indicates something of the range of Shakespeare's reading.

⁴ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993).

⁵ Francis Meres, a critic of moderate talent, plays with this idea of metamorphosis of the old into new when he remarked that the "As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagorus, so the sweet, wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugared sonnets among his private friends, &c" (1598), and more seriously Spenser's Mutability Cantos explore this cyclical metamorphosis in the nature of things.

⁶ James C. Bulman, "Shakespeare's Georgic Histories", *Shakespeare Survey* 38 (1986), 37-48.

⁷ C.W.R.D. Moseley "XXX"

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966), consulted in Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), 34ff.

⁹ Or of Ovid and Horace in *Titus Andronicus*.

Tempest what we have seems to be a text edited for reading.¹⁰ In *Lucrece*, the debt to Livy, Ovid and Virgil is obvious. Horace, another schoolbook, is in the water too – openly in *Titus*, less so elsewhere.

These books were not just sources, not even just influences, as C. S. Lewis distinguished the terms,¹¹ but constituted a tradition into which the new work, in a different language, was inserted and *was wished* to be seen. The new work self-consciously claimed to be a continuation of, and to interact with, the discourses of the old. Indeed, the new refracts the old into something other, either in revisiting the old books with new eyes, or by reworking them in new ways. And so issues like “Making imaginative space”, or “anxiety of influence”, as Harold Bloom put it,¹² become relevant. You cannot just imitate – though that word itself would deserve discussion: you have to go further.

Shakespeare, like so many of his contemporaries, seems always to hear at his back the authority of Classical culture, and to be aware of the need for a Christian culture, the dwarf, to “overgo” the insights of the giant culture which, despite its achievements is, as Sidney says, “in a full wrong divinity.”¹³ We indeed have the paradox of a Christian culture the vast majority of whose educational materials were pagan and Classical. Without the giant the dwarf cannot see: but the dwarf can see further, as Bernard the Chancellor said.¹⁴ All sorts of issues could come in here: for example, the theory, developed in the Florentine Academy, of what Marsilio Ficino called *prisca theologia*, where the ancients perceived in their own way a Truth as yet to them not vouchsafed by revelation;¹⁵ the creation of a high vernacular literary style which would have the authority, and resource of Latin – what we see as a concern of Dante in *De Volgari Eloquentia*, of Cardinal Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), of La Pléiade, of Thomas Wilson and Thomas Drant¹⁶ – but they would distract

¹⁰ The unusual number of stage directions, possibly added from playhouse practice by Heming and Condell, suggest this. Edward Knight prepared the plays for production, and some may originate with him. On Knight, cf. Grace Ioppolo, *Dramatists and Their Manuscripts in the Age of Shakespeare*, Jonson, Middleton, and Heywood, (2004), 76; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespeare Company 1594–1642*, (2004), 122.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, “The Literary Impact of The Authorised Version” (1950).

¹² *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973).

¹³ *Apologie for Poetrie*, ed. G. Shepherd, revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, (2002), 86.

¹⁴ Quoted in John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, 3.4, (1159).

¹⁵ Cf. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), 14–18 and 433–434; and the discussion in James D. Heiser, *Prisci Theologi and the Hermetic Reformation in the Fifteenth Century* (2011).

¹⁶ For a useful summary, see Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul Rouzer, (eds), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition* (2012), 251ff.

from my argument in this essay. Suffice it now to stress that Christian moderns sit somewhat obliquely to the pagan ancients, always accepting their authority but with a certain irony, a readiness to read other than literally. The ancients wrote wiser than they knew – than they *could* know. There is no reason to think Shakespeare did not share this attitude: they were ripe for “overgoing”. And after all, such obliqueness of vision is both essential and inevitable. Refractions are what keep a literary system going.¹⁷

Just as once we used too rarely to acknowledge Chaucer’s English heritage, still too rarely we talk about the English books that, I suggest, were already constituting a recognisable English canon to which no Jacobethan writer could be neutral. Three or four generations before Shakespeare, nobody could ignore Chaucer, the “well of English undefiled”, “the first that ever illumined our langage with floures of rethorikes eloquence”, “the rose of rethoris alle”.¹⁸ Those phrases are telling, for as Dante knew, it is a language that makes a people conscious of its identity,¹⁹ and those who came after Chaucer look back to him gratefully for what he did in giving English a high, aureate, style fit for handling high and noble subjects and – the aim of all the vernaculars of Europe at this time – able to stand comparison in resource and flexibility with Latin.²⁰ Besides Chaucer, it is Lydgate and Gower to whom Dunbar, Skelton and others explicitly look back as their masters: Henryson’s *Testament* is explicitly in counterfactual dialogue with Chaucer’s *Troilus*. Yet Skelton reveals also an anxiety about the rapid changes in the sounds of the language which makes Chaucer’s solutions not applicable now.²¹ Moreover, in “Jane Scrope’s” weird reading of *Troilus*, where one wonders whether “she” and we have read the same poem, he is aware of how easily readers miss the point.²² Authority is no armour against dull

¹⁷ André Lefevere, “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature”, *Modern Language Studies*, 12/4, (1982), 3-20; reprinted in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. L. Venuti (2000), 217.

¹⁸ I take these remarks from Dunbar, Caxton etc., almost at random from Caroline Spurgeon’s *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357-1900* (1925). Roger Ascham called Chaucer “our English Homer”. And with six folio editions of Chaucer between 1532 and 1602, it seems nobody, and certainly no serious poet in the sixteenth century could, or did, ignore Chaucer. The Great Portrait of Lady Anne Clifford, the pupil of Samuel Daniel, has a copy of Chaucer very visible.

¹⁹ This is a major part of the argument and agenda of *De Volgari Eloquentia*.

²⁰ Chaucer’s position in the literary imagination in the sixteenth century is elegantly discussed by Helen Cooper, “Fame, Chaucer and English Poetry”, 361-80 in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History* (2010).

²¹ “Oure natural tongue is rude/ And hard to be ennewed”; “Gower’s English is old / And of no value told”: *Philip Sparrow*, 774-5; 784-5.

²² *Philip Sparrow*, 685ff.

readers. Caxton, who chose very carefully and politically what he would print, printed the *Canterbury Tales*, and in 1532 Thynne brought out a “Works” – *Opera?* – in Folio, the format itself a massive statement of Chaucer’s importance. Gower too remains a revered figure (Caxton 1483; Berthelette 1532 and 1554). Shakespeare draws heavily on Chaucer (*Troilus and Cressida*, *Lucrece*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*) and also on “old Gower”, who as narrator in *Pericles* holds all the disparate times of the play together. Its plot reworks Gower’s *Apollonius* in Book VIII of *Confessio Amantis*.²³ He could not have done that had not he been sure that his audience would not only recognise the figure of Gower, but even respond to the feel of his verse.²⁴

So we seem to have a handful of English authors to whom significant allusion, at the least, can be fruitful for a wide audience: of course actual usage of the word “canon” in our sense seems some way in the future.²⁵ Certainly, by John Bale’s time, when the world is changing beyond recognition in the upheaval of Reformation, the concept of a national heritage of writers, which Bale deliberately fostered and publicised, is not unthinkable. The desire for a “national heritage” of writers is only to be expected at a time when the notion of an autocephalous *Ecclesia Anglicana*, based (tendentiously) on that awkward phrase in the Magna Carta (1215), “*Anglicana ecclesia libera sit*”, is a useful polemical card.

Bale’s *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum*: an Ur-Protestant canon?

Bale’s witness is important. Once a Carmelite – indeed, last Prior of the Carmelite House in Norwich – he became very close to the levers of power manipulated by Thomas Cromwell. He deliberately attempted to appropriate the traditions of popular drama for Reforming purposes, as part of the ideological remodelling of “Englishness”, and his influence and industry were considerable. One of his most indefatigable works is *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae, ac Scotiae Summarium*.²⁶ His chronological catalogue of British authors and their works, in Latin or English, owed much to John Leland’s *De uiris illustribus*,²⁷ whom Bale

²³ Cf. Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books*, 204.

²⁴ Cf. the verse of the prologue to Act 4 with Gower’s octosyllabics. There is an echo in the diction too.

²⁵ The concept of a canon (our usage in the context of literature) is somewhere between senses 2 and 4 in *OED*, the one 1588, the other ‘ME’).

²⁶ Ipswich and Wesel for John Overton, 1548, 1549. This listed authors through five centuries. Another edition, almost entirely rewritten and covering fourteen centuries, was printed at Basel, 1557–1559.

²⁷ James P Carley, ed. *De uiris illustribus: On Famous Men*. (2010).

acknowledges and whose work “in dies expectamus” – “we daily expect” (Sig. A i^{ro}). He is clear that famous people, literary or otherwise, are touchstones of a culture’s identity: *Iactat que_que natio, secta, societas, aut quicquid his est simile, illos pre_cipue qui aliquid splendoris earum attulerint nomini. Romani...Camillos et Scipiones, Greci Alexandros, Carolos Galli...* (Sig. A i^{ro}).²⁸ He establishes a cultural pedigree for Britain within (A I^{vo}) a frame of Biblical and post-Biblical temporal and historical models, and Apocalyptic, end of time, implications. The work is certainly not ideologically or politically neutral: its subtext claims that from Antiquity Britain (and more specifically England) had a cultural and intellectual identity of its own, that it has an ecclesiastical identity, supporting the concept of an *Ecclesia Anglicana* distinct from Rome. He has (A ii^{ro}) Bladud, legendary king of Britain, studying at Athens, then bringing Greek philosophers Anaximander and Anaxagoras to Stamford to teach, and *Britannia in tot & tantis rerum turbinibus, litteras semper amavit, atque utraque lingua saepe [Greek and Latin] plurimum floruit.*²⁹ A long entry lists the writings of Brutus in Greek (Sig B iii^{vo}).

The writers in English whom he includes are Chaucer (Dddii^{ro} and ^{vo}), Hardyng (Dddiii^{ro}), Capgrave (Eee [i]^{vo}), Lydgate (Eeeii^{vo}), Pecok (Eee iv^{vo}), Caxton (Ggg [i]^{ro}), Colet (Hhh ii^{ro-vo}) More, Tyndale, Linaker, Iohannes Mandeuyle (Ppi^{vo}) John Rastell, Thomas Elyot (Lll iv^{ro}), Gavin Douglas, Skelton, Barclay (all Sss iii^{vo}), Cranmer, Latimer, and the King himself (Ppp ii^{vo}). There are some writers who are in the autograph MS, who seem not to have made it into the printed version, or only in a truncated form. Skelton has a long entry (MS f.69b), as do Gower (ff. 68b-90) and Lydgate ff.69-79 (pp.228-31 in Poole³⁰). On the other hand, Scogan (“vir facetus”, f.170b) and “Oclyff” (f.142) are dropped. This may reflect the changing taste that did in this very period see Skelton, for example, rapidly losing popularity. Equally, some not in the MS are in the printed book – e.g. John Mandeville, whose popularity was growing and remained high, to judge from the number of English editions for the next two centuries.³¹

²⁸ “Whatever nation, group, society or whatever is like them boasts of those men who have brought to its name something of glory, as the Romans the Camilli and the Scipios, the Greeks Alexander, the French Charlemagne...”

²⁹ “Britain, in all these many and great upheavals always loved letters and often flourished in both languages”.

³⁰ R. L. Poole and Mary Bateman, *Index Britanniae Scriptorum* (1920).

³¹ See my essay, “‘New things to speak of’: Money, Memory and *Mandeville’s Travels* in early modern England”, *Yearbook of English Studies Special Issue: Early Modern Travel Fiction*, ed. N. Das, 41.1

Inevitably, in that bad-tempered century, his tone is often polemical about the obfuscation and deceptions into which British learning fell (Sig Aiii^{ro}, A[iv]^{ro}). The spurious and very Protestant *Plowman's Tale* is included among Chaucer's works, as indeed it was by Thynne in his edition. For Chaucer was too important to be left to the Catholic opposition – and later under Mary there was a significant Catholic attempt to reclaim Chaucer.³² Not only is Wycliffe included, as well he might be, but also “Iohannes Oldcastle” (Zz iii^{vo}), whom few would now call a major writer. The Protestant martyr Ann Askew (Mmm [i]^{ro}) is given high praise. In the “Additio”, he mentions Thomas Sternhold, translator of the psalms (Sss iii^{ro}). Thomas “Wyet” is included for the Penitential Psalms, not for that range of poems for which we now mainly remember him. For part of Bale's agenda is to establish an *ur*-Protestant canon, to claim that a strand of the antipapal was always there, was discernible in literature, and is part of a national heritage.

Bale's endeavour not only tells us much about his ideology but is also bound to be provisional, like all such projects, an attempt to pick up a handful of water from a running stream.³³ But the book and MS do suggest that the idea of English writers, not just Classical, being “canonical”, “authoritative” – what you will – is already established well before Shakespeare. This attempt at an authoritative catalogue of “books we English should know” had wide circulation, if we can judge from the fact it was reissued, and that he revised it, and that more than a few copies survive. (That gives us no idea of how or whether they were read, of course.)

“Move over, Ovid!”

The first works where Shakespeare's name graces the title page are the two poems printed by Shakespeare's almost exact contemporary Richard Field (1561-24), a very upmarket printer and another Stratford man. To be sure, plays were a rather downmarket form of writing, and putting your name to a play text might not be the

(2011), 5-20. I have argued that a factor in Mandeville's sixteenth century popularity seems to have been his perceived anti-papal stance.

³² See Cooper, *op. cit.*, 369ff.

³³ It is interesting to compare Bale's list with Henry Peacham's, almost a century later. In *The Compleat Gentleman* (first printed 1622) Chapter X “Of Poetry” suggests the books every gentleman (NB!) should have in his press. He acknowledges an English “canon”: prominent are “Sir Jeffrey” Chaucer, Lydgate (to whom he attributes *Peirs* [sic] *Plowman*,) Gower, Skelton – “laureate for what desert I could neuer heare” - Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser, Daniel - and many others now only the province of PhD theses. In contrast to Meres, he does not mention Shakespeare, nor is he added in the 1634 print, eleven years after the success of the First Folio.

publicity an ambitious author wanted. Though within twenty years that status would rise, it is not till 1598 that Shakespeare's name first appears, in very small type, on the title page of the second quarto (1598) of *Richard III* and, in the same year, of *Loves Labours Lost*.³⁴ Nothing is more certain than that the earliest work we possess of Shakespeare is not his earliest. There is a surefootedness and polish in the "early" work which suggests much experience, and after all, in 1593, when *Venus & Adonis* appeared, he was 29. The circulation of, for example, sonnets in MS seems very probable, and there can hardly be a form and discourse more self-conscious and conscious of its predecessors – a minor canon, you might say – than the love sonnet. But I contend that the two narrative poems also show a bullish demand to be judged against an accepted canon. Whatever one thinks Shakespeare was doing – seeking patronage, seeking a job more stable than the chancy business of play-patching – after all he *did* have a wife and children to support – they constitute almost as much of a manifesto as Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) which challenges, and claims succession to, Virgil and Chaucer and Langland and the now neglected Skelton. Spenser's extraordinary *tour de force*, stylistic, metrical and typographical, in the *Calendar* is a refraction (and indeed recreation) of Virgil's *Eclogues*: the "New Poet" has arrived. But in 1593 another challenge was, I think, being mounted.

It is inconceivable that Shakespeare did not discuss the *mise-en-page* of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* with Field. The choice of the upmarket *humanistica* type, the spacious elegance of the layout, both suggest a desire to create objects that would be noticed. And the title page of *Venus & Adonis* makes a massive statement with that unattributed quotation from Ovid. It might be translated "Let the crowd wonder at worthless things: as for me, may golden Apollo refresh me with cups full of the water of the Castalian spring". That claims that what follows is beyond what *hoi polloi* could grasp – of course, it flatters the person who reads the book, doesn't it? ("You and I, dear reader, and other people of taste...") Furthermore, replacing the quotation in context gives it a witty spin: it is from Ovid's *Amores*, (I. xv.35), that record of amours serious and comic by that most imitated of Roman poets – and of course Ovid is one source of both this poem and *Lucrece*. But it is from a curiously significant poem,

34. "A pleasant conceited comedie called, Loves labors lost. As it was presented before her Highnes this last Christmas. Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere. Imprinted at London: by W. W. [William White] for Cutbert Burby, 1598." I discuss the implications of title pages of some of the plays in "Introducing Mr Shakespeare, or What's in a Title Page?", trans. T. Ozawa, in Ozawa, T. *et al.*, *A Kaleidoscope of Literature: English and American Literatures, and their Surrounding Areas*, (2010), 266-311.

where Ovid replies to a friend's criticism for wasting time on poetry when he should have been engaging in a political, public life. Ovid places himself in the line of great poets from Homer onwards whom later ages will not willingly let die; but he also implies that the public life *could* have been his had he wanted – he has that sort of ability too. Is Shakespeare implying that? And look at the choice of story: in *Metamorphoses* X it is told by Orpheus. Orpheus, archetypal poet/prophet, the law giver, the builder of cities. (It is not relevant to this essay to discuss the careful counterpointing of this story with *Lucrece*. But is just worth noticing that we have two complementary “just so” stories, both dealing with why things are as they are, the very beginnings: this, o best beloved, is why love is full of pain, this, o best beloved, is how Rome – from which we all descend – became a republic.) So the quotation, *and* the story, are a challenge: look at what I, the new Ovid, another Orpheus, have made of what you have all read in Ovid. And it firmly indicates an audience, a public, that if it is *not* learned, thinks it is. In fact that audience is, quite clearly, clever-clever young men: I can think of few first rank poems so gendered in their expected audience.

One could continue by exploring in detail how the Petrarchan conventions of love poetry, of which nobody could be ignorant, are here put into an entirely new configuration by the reversal of roles. Moreover, the poem deliberately takes on a well-established visual, as well as a verbal, tradition with its insistence on the position of bodies and their placing in a landscape or setting. But these matters would distract us from the “graver labour” of *Lucrece*.

This poem is a Janus object, *respice et prospice*: so many of the themes and issues of work still in Shakespeare's future are here present. But nobody, not even Shakespeare, could know that in 1594. A first reader, even only moderately well read, would have seen a witty play of allusion and echo making something startlingly new. He – I do mean “he” – would have certainly recognised the presence of all the topoi and conventions descending from Petrarch, and familiar from countless love songs and sonnets, the *blazon*, the *aubade*, the “farewell to love”, the *baiser*: but was ever blazon like *this* one, in *this* situation, was ever *aubade* so beautiful, so painful, so utterly inappropriate? Was ever the love battle so literal? But the prose Argument would remind him of the story in Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 1, a standard schoolbook, containing the paradigmatic figure of the noble and public spirited Brutus – a Brutus very unlike the cunning politician of Shakespeare's poem. That prose, unlike any other Shakespeare ever wrote, is as near the periods of Livy's Grand Manner as you can get

in English. Then the subject: anyone who wrote about Lucrece had a very strong visual tradition, with all its baggage, to cope with: Cranach, Durer, Botticelli, Titian, etc., etc., and the theorists like Lomazzo whom Sidney quotes³⁵, but also, as Ian Donaldson³⁶ has so ably discussed, a very rich narrative one which challenged comparison: Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Lydgate. In fact, both stories, by almost perverse choice, are about as hackneyed as one can get: Lucrece even appears on something as trivial as Olivia's seal ring, as Malvolio notices.

The choice of form is also highly charged. The often curiously anticlimactic last couplet in *Venus and Adonis*' stanza seems deliberately to echo the feel of what Ovid ironically laments: *sex mihi surgat opus numeris, in quinque residat* (*Amores* 1.27).³⁷ But the choice – and it was a free choice – of *rime royale* for *Lucrece* is important. For this is the Grand Manner, the high style Chaucer established: this is the form of *Troilus and Criseyde*, of Henryson's *Testament* (bound in with Chaucer in sixteenth century editions), of Skelton's *Bouge of Court*, *Garland of Laurel* and *Speke Parrot*. Blank verse has not quite yet become the default high measure in English, and Spenser's experiments for a high style are going in a quite different direction at this very time. To take the *rime royale* form as well as a heroine from Chaucer is to court comparison.³⁸ *Lucrece* looks back to the entire English tradition, as well as that naturalised from Italy.

But there is also a huge debt to Virgil, and not just thematically. The picture of the Fall of Troy Lucrece contemplates imports in little into this poem the whole story of Troy and its fall, the foundation myth for the whole of Western Europe.³⁹ It underlines the Virgilian stress on the link between sexual passion and political change. But the ekphrasis must echo, to anyone of even minimal education, the great ekphrasis which Aeneas sees in *Aeneid* 1 on the doors of Juno's temple, the Fall of Troy and his

³⁵ Sidney, *op.cit.* “[The painter] painteth not Lucrece whom he never saw, but the outward beauty of such a virtue.” (87).

³⁶ Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformation* (1982).

³⁷ “My verse sets out with six feet, but falls back with five.”

³⁸ See for a more detailed study *Shakespeare's Chaucer: A Study in Literary Origins*. by Ann Thompson (1978) and E. T. Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare reading Chaucer* (1985).

³⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* of about 1135 was the standard account of British History right to the end of the sixteenth century, despite the challenge to its hitherto unquestioned authority by Polydore Vergil.

own history.⁴⁰ It demands comparison; and Shakespeare is trumping Virgil's ace in having Achilles appear in a mere visual synecdoche⁴¹ – which, incidentally suggests the sophistication of Shakespeare's visual education and make you wonder where he could have seen such techniques. The poem picks up Virgil's great theme of private passion and political power, the need for a ruler – and will young Southampton, the dedicatee of the poem and possible patron of the author, be one? – to master his *furor*, his passion, as Tarquin so deliberately does not. So, if in *Venus & Adonis* we have a sort of “move over, Ovid”, here the stakes are raised: it's “Move over Chaucer and Co., move over Virgil”. This is a poem which is bursting with self-confidence. And indeed, it is not unattractive to see in the progress, now fulfilled, to some “graver labour” from the extraordinary variation on pastoral that is *Venus & Adonis* a hint of the move from pastoral to national and political epic that Virgil made and which Spenser explicitly promised in the last eclogue of the *Shepherd's Calendar*, his own homage to the maturing of the Virgilian National Poet. For *Lucrece* is nothing if not political in implication, epic in tone, and tragic in subject.

And what about Shakespeare's contemporaries? I think there is a side swipe at Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, which is also a clever take on Ovid – and which also echoes features in Catullus 64. Marlowe must have completed his poem by 1593, though it was not printed until 1598. Circulation in MS is usual, in a small society. It too is a clever poem for clever-clever young men, like *Venus & Adonis*: and it is in appallingly bad taste and some women to whom I have taught it find it offensive. I can see why. But: anything you can do I can do better... and *Venus & Adonis* takes the biscuit for hilarious bad taste where in the very central stanza of that chiasmatically organised poem, the Queen of Love and Beauty is placed in a fearfully inelegant and undignified position.

“The boar!” quoth she; whereat a sudden pale,
Like lawn being spread upon the blushing rose,
Usurps her cheek; she trembles at his tale,
And on his neck her yoking arms she throws:

⁴⁰ *Aeneid* 1, ll., 456-493. The ekphrasis is one the great set pieces in *Aeneid* I, where Vergil as in the later Shield of Aeneas passage, deliberately takes on Homer's ekphrases.

⁴¹ Lines 1423-6.

She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck,
He on her belly falls, she on her back.

Now is she in the very lists of love,
Her champion mounted for the hot encounter:
All is imaginary she doth prove,
He will not manage her, although he mount her;
That worse than Tantalus' is her annoy,
To clip Elysium and to lack her joy.⁴²

Undergraduate humour: but cleverer than Marlowe, where Hero merely falls out of bed. And finally, Lucrece's long "Tragedy Queen's" Complaint: how could it not recall Samuel Daniel's graceful and pathetic *Complaint of Rosamund* (printed 1592), also in *rime royale*? Daniel's reputation stood high: an innovator in verse, a seriously learned man, he was tutor and, allowing for the differences in rank, friend to Lady Anne Clifford and in the circle of the Derby clan. The Derby family included Ferdinando Lord Strange, who as Lord Chancellor briefly was the patron of the company with which Shakespeare came to work most. Again, anything he can do, I can do better... And Southampton, just coming up to his majority at 21, perhaps to be betrothed to Burleigh's granddaughter, about to inherit the largest fortune in England... there could be worse patrons and he is bound to engage in major affairs of state, is he not?... And so a good patron to have. Get noticed by dedicating two poems to him very publicly. Well, it did not work out.

So I suggest that in these two poems we have the work of a very self-confident mature poet, of considerable learning and artistic experience, who is very aware not only of a Classical canon but also of an explicitly English, national(ist), one. Bale's witness clearly indicates that this idea, with all its implications, was current. I suggest further that the handling of bodies, attitudes and space in both poems suggest Shakespeare was alert to a strong European visual tradition too, though how he could have experienced it first hand and not just through the new medium of prints is not a problem easy of solution. I suggest that far from feeling any *anxiety* of influence, he is only too delighted to play games with what he has inherited, to make things quite new,

⁴² Stanza 100, lines 595-600.

and to challenge comparison with the greatest poets of past and present.⁴³ These two poems could almost be seen as a manifesto for a National Poet, as Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* certainly is, and as I have argued Milton's 1645 *Poems* is.⁴⁴ I suggest they reveal a vaunting ambition, which in the event was fulfilled in an unexpected way. But if, on the other hand, they were also a job application, so to speak, what a good thing he did not get the job! We might then have had something like Shakespeare's *Essays* and perhaps, awful thought, Bacon's plays.

⁴³ At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer also playfully and ironically invites us to see him in the line of "Great Writers" whose work he has used – and challenged: Book V, ll. 1786ff.

⁴⁴ *The Poetic Birth* (1991).

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