

## 2

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# Shakespeare's reading

Most of what Shakespeare wrote was played before it was read. The Sonnets are an exception, and *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which he probably saw through the press himself. But for the most part he committed his words to the mouths of actors, and the printers of the quartos and First Folio came later, doing their work sometimes illicitly, then posthumously. Shakespeare was a man of the theatre, not a bookworm. But then again – what performance of Shakespeare is *not* informed by reading? There is the reading that actors do as they commit scripts to memory. There is the life of reading that literate members of an audience bring to the playhouse. Finally there is what Shakespeare himself read, his sources and influences. That idiosyncratic bibliography – a compost of school text and eight-penny romance and chronicle history – has been painstakingly reconstructed by generations of scholars. But the plays also have a great deal to say about *how* he read, and what he thought about the whole business of reading. Though reading may be, after sleep, the least dramatic of activities, Shakespeare returns again and again to scenes where a character is perusing a letter or turning a page or brandishing or just talking about a book. The result is a sporadic but career-long meditation on what reading is for.

So what *is* reading for? Or what *was* it for? To ask that question of the late sixteenth century is to enter an urgent contemporary debate. London's multiplying printing presses, rising literacy and an explosion of vernacular writing put pressure on the institutions – church, school, court – once accustomed to regulating reading lives. Around 1581, a browser in the book stalls of St Paul's could find devotional manuals and recipe books alongside romances like *The Wandering Knight*, 'a work worthy of reading', as the title page protests. A good humanist might trace such boasts to Horace's *Ars Poetica* and its injunction that a poem both teach and delight. But in these new fictions nods to Horace were probably outnumbered by winks.

Such an uneasy marriage of pleasure and profit betrays a culture where reading was moving beyond the institutional contexts where its value had

been secure. How did Shakespeare – schoolboy, poet, playwright, pleasure-reader – fit this changing landscape? Subsequent opinion has had it that he read everything and nothing, that he was polymath and philistine. Praising the lifelikeness of his plays, Ben Jonson, the poet's friend, let slip that Shakespeare 'had small Latin and less Greek' – the nativist Shakespeare most prized by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an avid reader of Nature's book. By contrast, the new scholars' Shakespeare, the man of William Baldwin's *William Shakespere's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, sometimes seems to have read everything, adding to intuitive genius the achievements of scholarly expertise.

The truth must lie somewhere in between. We can say with some certainty that Shakespeare went to school, and that the classroom stayed on his mind long after he left it; also, that as an adult he did his reading in the community of actors and playwrights and hangers-on that flourished on the south bank of the Thames, the so-called 'Liberties'. Given the assault that the players endured from the keepers of civic and religious virtue, it would not be surprising if this new, popular art had turned its back on the literary culture of the schools. And yet Shakespeare thought about reading in all its forms, all his life – thought back to his own schooldays, back to ancient Rome, and across the classes and professions of his own city. The result is a portrait of reading as a culturally central but rapidly transforming practice, made from the vantage of a theatre that was changing just as fast. We will assay that variety by taking up four of Shakespeare's readers: the student Hamlet, the Stoic Brutus, the buffoon Malvolio and the scholar-magus Prospero.

## Hamlet

Hamlet is first summoned to the stage only to be told he cannot return to university: 'For your intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg', his uncle says, 'It is most retrograde to our desire' (1.2.112–14). It proves easier to take the student out of school, however, than the school out of the student. Three scenes later, charged by the ghost to remember his father's murder, Hamlet falls back on the habits of the good schoolboy. They must be deeply engrained to serve him at such a moment:

Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there,

## Shakespeare's reading

And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain.

...

My tables – meet it is I set it down  
That one may smile and smile and be a villain.

(1.5.97–109)

The 'table of my memory' casts Hamlet's mind as a commonplace book, one of the reading digests that schoolboys and scholars kept to organize 'saws' and other short texts for recollection and re-use. The appearance of the ghost fills Hamlet with sudden contempt for the trivia of his youth, and he vows instead to write a single, living commandment in the book of his brain. In the next breath, however, he is ready to jot down that anodyne maxim, 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain' – as though schoolboy habit might still give him a grip on a world out of joint.

The curriculum of grammar schools like Shakespeare's at Stratford encouraged students to scan texts for such fragments of eloquence and wisdom. Records from Stratford are scant, but at the Plymouth grammar school – the best-described English school of the sixteenth century, thanks to the schoolmaster William Kempe's *The education of children in learning* (1588) – the boys began reading Latin literature in the second form, at the age of 8. Kempe describes how a passage for study (or a 'lecture') was introduced:

The master shall first read sensibly a competent lecture, then declare the argument and scope of the author, afterward English it either word for word, or phrase for phrase ... Last of all teach ... the diverse sorts of the words, their properties and syntaxes of speech. And about three or four hours after, the scholar shall be diligently in every point examined, and tried how he can refer the examples of his lecture to the rules of art.<sup>1</sup>

The master read the Latin text, then declared its argument, probably by proposing a motto to summarize its parts and fix them in memory; then he translated it, then analysed the grammar. When the students were tested they had to prove that they understood the text in terms of the rules in Lily's *Grammar* – the standard in English schools and a recurring resource for foolery in Shakespeare's plays. (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* makes hay of Lily's Latin 'accidence' (4.1), while in *As You Like It* Touchstone schools the bumpkin William in a mockery of grammar, rhetoric and logic (5.1).) Memorization was paramount, both of rules and texts. That emphasis persisted as the students moved through the forms, learning to keep the commonplace books where they were trained to record – as Erasmus had it – 'any purple passage, archaism, neologism, Graecism, any obscure or verbose expression, any abrupt or confused order, any etymology, derivation,

or composition worth knowing, any point of orthography, figure of speech, or rhetorical passages'.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to see how one might miss the forest of narrative and argument amidst those philological trees. But maxims constitute in themselves one idea of the profit of reading, embraced by Polonius when he prepares his son, Laertes, for the temptations of Paris: 'And these few precepts in thy memory / See thou character' (1.3.58–9).

The power of a choice aphorism was not lost on Stratford's most curious student. *Sententiae* round out many sonnets ('The hardest knife ill used doth lose his edge' (95)) and sound in the mouths of his aristocrats and commoners, kings and clowns. In *Hamlet*, however, they are handled with special cynicism. 'Words, words, words' (2.2.192), scoffs the prince when Polonius finds him with a book, and he goes on to disburden himself of a collection of old saws about old men. This ongoing impersonation of a bitter ex-schoolboy gives ironic point to his famous delay. The justifying end of a humanist education was praxis: boys were supposed to learn to read for action, and the commonplace book was a tool for making their reading accessible and adaptable to occasions of state. Hamlet, so desperate for a path to action, grows disgusted with books altogether, as the refuge of his own paralysis – a bitter reflection on what his training offers in an hour of need.

As Hamlet loses confidence in books, however, he begins to explore the resources of the theatre. Not only does he adopt his famous antic disposition, but at a crucial moment he dashes off new lines for an old play. Here, too, there is a debt to school. Much instruction took the form of catechism from the grammar book, so boys were reading scripts from the beginning. Older boys would participate in the more elaborated, improvised drama of *disputatio*, debating such themes as 'Should one marry?' or 'Should one go to sea?' before their classmates, exercising rhetorical techniques learned from ancient (Quintilian, Aphthonius) and modern (Susenbrotus) textbooks. Taking either side in such debates, they were trained to adopt the lawyer's pragmatic orientation towards the truth. They learned imitation, too, via techniques like double translation, casting a Latin text into English, then into Latin again. The more ambitious schoolmasters, if they followed the advice of Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570), introduced their boys to imitations already embedded in the canon, Virgil of Homer, Ovid of Virgil.

Towards these various kinds of reading, Prince Hamlet adopts two distinctive attitudes. The first we might call *reading as refuge*. From the princes in *Love's Labour's Lost* to Prospero in his library, characters in Shakespeare's plays repeatedly retreat into study, reading to forget as much as to remember. But Hamlet also indulges in pedantic game-playing, the 'words, words, words' spouted elsewhere by overstuffed schoolmasters like Holofernes (*Love's Labour's Lost*) or Gerald (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*). We can call

this *quibbling reading*: no profit, but considerable comic pleasure in its idle ingenuities. Hamlet escapes both sorts of bookishness. He may hold a codex in Act 2, but by Act 5 he holds a skull, and then a rapier, a progress of props that carries him ever further from Wittenberg. But then again, his additions to *The Mousetrap* (and the letter he writes to save his skin) display gifts of stylistic imitation that are nothing if not the fruits of a humanist education. Shakespeare may have missed no opportunity to make fun of a schoolmaster, and have seen in reading risks of abstraction, solipsism and pedantry. But like Hamlet, his debt to his education is everywhere.

### Brutus

Brutus, too, is a great reader. The description of his devotion to books in Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* caught the playwright's attention. 'Brutus, being in Pompey's camp, did nothing but study all day long, except he were with Pompey ... Furthermore, when others slept, or thought what would happen the morrow after, he fell to his book, and wrote all day long till night, writing a breviary of Polybius.'<sup>3</sup> A breviary is an abridgement, Polybius is the Roman historian and Brutus, in the camp of Caesar's enemy, occupies himself with a grown-up version of a schoolboy's exercise, distilling the wisdom from another man's narrative, banishing thoughts of the future that distract his inferiors. This is a kind of *reading as self-discipline*, an exercise in Stoic detachment from worldly circumstance – like Hamlet's refuge, but claiming a more vigorous, principled autonomy. Such self-centring is what Shakespeare's Brutus wants from his book the night before his battle with Antony and Octavius: 'Let me see, let me see, is not the leaf turned down / Where I left reading? Here it is, I think' (4.2.324–5). The anachronism is often noted – Romans read scrolls, not books – but the point is clear enough. Brutus, in the onrush of events, wants to go back to the page where he was before.

What is Shakespeare's Brutus reading – or what might Shakespeare have imagined him reading? Perhaps Polybius, or perhaps, anachronistically, the Roman philosophers who did most to convey Stoic doctrine to the Elizabethans, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The Stoic strain so evident in the Roman plays informed the curriculum from the start. The *Catonis Disticha*, or Cato's distichs, let students practise their Latin on maxims like *Plus vigila semper nec somno deditus esto; / Nam diuturna quies vitiis alimenta ministrat* ('We ought to take heed, that we lose not the greatest part of our life with sleep namely since of the same many vices be engendered'). Aesop's ubiquitous *Fables* feature a maxim at the end, as in the story of the wolf and the lamb: *satis peccavit, qui resistere non potuit* ('he sinned enough who

was not able to refrain').<sup>4</sup> A more generically various diet awaited students in later forms, but still with a generous helping of Roman virtue. At the Plymouth school, it was Johannes Sturm's school edition of Cicero, leavened by Terence's comedies, prized as models of conversational Latin. By the sixth form, Virgil, Ovid and Horace. History, too: the older boys at Canterbury read 'the best poets and historians', the latter probably including Sallust, Livy, Justin, Valerius Maximus or Julius Caesar himself.

The humanists who prescribed this canon – men like Erasmus, Sturm, Sir Thomas Elyot (*The Boke Named the Governour*, 1531) and Ascham (*The Scholemaster*, 1570) – advocated reading these books personally, in a double sense. First, *reading for the style*. In his *Ciceronianus* (1528) Erasmus asserts that 'it is stupid to try to write in another man's humour and endeavour to have [his] mind breathing in what you write'. Better, he says, to digest reading such that your speech will be 'redolent of your personality, your sensitivities, your feelings'.<sup>5</sup> Imitation is a balance between respecting the strangeness of another mind (or another time) and finding and fashioning yourself in the words that affect you. In contemplating this ideal we are a long way from Hamlet's estranged 'Words, words, words'. Shakespeare could hardly have escaped contact with such high humanistic ambitions, articles of faith for his friend Ben Jonson and much bandied about, if not always piously, by so-called university wits like Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe.

The charisma of exemplary lives also asks readers to take the past personally: imitation was practical as well as stylistic, proposing the deeds of historical and sometimes fictional figures as patterns for action. Here is another sort of humanist profit in reading, *reading for exempla*. Early in *Julius Caesar*, Cassius flatters himself with an analogy to Aeneas (1.2.114–17), and Brutus in turn compares himself to another legendary ancestor – Junius Brutus, who liberated Rome from monarchy. 'There was a Brutus once that would have brooked / Th'eternal devil to keep his state in Rome / As easily as a king' (1.2.160–2). The preface to North's Plutarch, translated from Jacques Amyot's French, is full of incitement to such reading. By the contemplation of the self in the past's mirror, Amyot argued, the reader of history may proceed to glorious action all his own. Indeed, 'not to feel the sparks of desire of honour is an infallible sign of a base, vile, and cloyish nature'.<sup>6</sup> In the world of *Julius Caesar*, however, such imitative desire is an ambivalent business. How can a Stoic tell the difference between finding a model of conduct in the deeds of the past and projecting into history his present desires for wealth or power? Between principle and appetite? Shakespeare's Cicero observes sceptically that 'men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves' (1.3.34–5), and the play appears

to wonder whether, were it not for the candle of the reader's desire, history's page could be read at all.

Such is Brutus' Stoic dilemma. But perhaps it should be said – tacking back again from character to author – that Shakespeare hardly seems to have been troubled by such scruples. The Plutarch he used for *Julius Caesar* was no school text and is only one of a host of history books he must have read on his own, not only classical historians, but also the English chroniclers, Edward Hall and Richard Grafton and above all Raphael Holinshed, whose *Chronicles* were in their second edition in 1587. Shakespeare's relation to Holinshed is typical, at least in its freedom. As with his ancient sources, he was liberal in his adaptation of the facts, reconstructing even the genealogies to suit his narrative needs. Moreover he quarried all these histories for some version of the same plot. His plays repeatedly enact a transition from some idealized and long-standing order to a new world of *Realpolitik*. The lurch from republic to monarchy described in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* covers this ground, as do Bolingbroke's irregular succession in *Richard II*, Prince Hal's transformation into Henry V, even the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth*. We can only speculate what it was about his own moment – the always-about-to-end reign of Elizabeth and the succession of James – that made this story so urgent and appealing. But this was the plot that Shakespeare read for, and his skill in adapting his narrative sources went quite beyond the training his school would have provided.

But back to Brutus – who himself never gets back to the place in his book he marked so deliberately. Once Cassius recognizes that his friend's desire to mirror great deeds makes him vulnerable to self-deception, Brutus' fate is sealed: 'Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet I see / Thy honourable mettle may be wrought / From that it is disposed' (1.2.302–4). Brutus is slow to catch fire and, having been lit, he is reluctant to burn, but it is not long before even he perceives Caesar as tyrant and himself as Rome's best hope for liberty. He is prompted by letters that Cassius has thrown through his window, supposedly written by Roman citizens exhorting him to imitate his ancestor. When letters are projectiles, it seems inevitable that reading will be projection: 'O Rome, I make thee promise, / If the redress will follow, thou receivest / Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus' (2.1.56–8). We are inducted into another problem of Shakespearian reading – *reading what you will*, no matter what is written. When he turns to his book on the eve of battle, Brutus tries to contain himself, all too aware that he has become like the man he killed. It is then that Caesar's ghost appears, as though to tell him how futile it is to seek in the pages of history a reprieve from events that he himself has set in motion.

## Malvolio

In *Twelfth Night* the ambitions behind Malvolio's reading take the problem of interpretative desire to its limit, but this time the limit is comic. The puritanical steward's great scene of reading comes when he stumbles upon a counterfeit letter left in his path by Maria, his fellow servant in the household of the countess Olivia. Malvolio fantasizes that their mistress harbours a secret passion for him, and the letter, written in an imitation of Olivia's hand, plays upon that hope – most ingeniously in its last line, 'M. O. A. I. doth sway my life' (2.5.97). Throughout all the plays there is great traffic in letters, between lovers or soldiers or senators, and they are always read by someone, like Brutus, who wants something from them. When Malvolio reads this one aloud, he makes no attempt to disguise from himself what he hopes for: 'And the end: what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me. . . to crush this a little, it would bow to me' (106–8, 123). Here is another case of reading what you will, seasoned with a modest gift for quibbling – reading not as self-discipline, now, but as wish-fulfilment.

Shakespeare himself seems to have taken what he wanted from the sources of *Twelfth Night* even more freely than from the histories – a business not so much of crushing as dismantling them and absconding with whatever was useful. The deep lineage of these plays of confused identity and relentless reversal runs to Roman New Comedy, and like most of his fellow comic playwrights Shakespeare was a student, in school and after, of Terence and Plautus. Sometimes those borrowings are direct, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, based closely on Plautus' *Menaechmi*. In *Twelfth Night* the influence is more mediated, and the main plot – Olivia and Orsino and the nearly identical twins Viola and Sebastian – is adapted from the Barnabe Rich tale 'Of Apolonius and Silla'. Rich tells the story of Silla, who disguises herself as a boy and runs away from home to serve the duke she loves, only to find herself wooing his intended Julina on his behalf. The characters' affections are somewhat purified by Shakespeare – there is, in Rich's version, a scandalous pregnancy, and Silla's brother is considerably more cavalier in his amorous conduct than *Twelfth Night's* Sebastian – but the lineaments of the plot are retained.

The volume that gathers these tales – 'for the only delight of the courteous gentlewoman', as Rich puts it on his title page – is called *Riche His Farewell to Militarie Profession* (1581), and its composition describes in little the growing market for vernacular fictions in Shakespeare's era. Three of the stories are versions of *novelle* from Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565), prime examples of the Italian tales that the schoolmaster Ascham



thought were 'commended by honest titles the sooner to corrupt honest manners'.<sup>7</sup> Five others draw more freely upon a wide range of sources, from Giovanni Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1550–5) to George Pettie's *A Petite Pallace of Pettie His Pleasure* (1576). All of these collections were themselves translations and adaptations, and with each step towards their origins we move further away from any great certainty, or great concern, about particular authorship. In borrowing from Rich, therefore, Shakespeare could be said to have borrowed from most, if not from all, of these stories, at least as far back as Plautus, just as he borrowed from many romance writers, low and high, closer to home: from Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynd* (1590) for *As You Like It* (1600), from Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1593) for *King Lear* (1608), from Greene's *Pandosto* (1588) for *The Winter's Tale* (1611).

The sea-traffic in these romances amounts to another sphere of prodigious imitation in a culture of imitation – though perhaps not *imitatio*, or at least, not the discipline that was taught at school. For what circulate among the Painters and Petties are stories, characters and notable properties, the names and details of which change freely with each new printed or performed occasion. Because such borrowings usually go unacknowledged, the only clues for source-hunting scholars are the resemblances discovered by wide reading. Wide reading was likewise the only way to learn the craft of making such plots. Schoolmasters may have cultivated stylistic and argumentative virtuosity in their pupils, but the wholesale imitation of a narrative had no place in the typical curriculum. Just like a Rich or a Lodge, Shakespeare would have had to pick up his tricks as he read through the unbound quartos for sale in the bookstalls of St Paul's. We have seen how he borrowed narrative from histories, and how he was drawn to moments of transition to a new order. As he read these fictions, it seems to have been disguise, cross-dressing and other species of confused identity that attracted his attention – perhaps because, on a stage where boys played at being women, such stories already had something theatrical about them. Call this *reading for the plot*: from Plautus to Rich, Shakespeare the comedian had an eye for a tale that he could keep roiling in delightful confusion until a final anagnorisis (or discovery), followed by marriage, put everyone in place.

What can we say that Shakespeare learned from this extra-curricular reading in romance? He seems to have been free to discover and invent uses for these texts that the syllabus of classical authors could not countenance, prescribe or imagine. Presumably the only virtue of these stories was that they were *good*, and in giving pleasure they reinforced the idea that what counts in narrative is a pragmatic facility in changing the pitch and direction of a familiar plot, or mixing plots together in order to generate surprising results. For Shakespeare, this way of using texts was evidently linked to flexibility

of perception and resourcefulness in finding multiple meanings in language. ‘A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit’, says Feste to Viola. ‘How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!’ (3.1.10–12). This is quibbling reading, again, or maybe *reading as foolery*, if not as folly: agile, uninhibited, sceptical and, perhaps most importantly, clever. Its pleasure is immediate; its profit, keeping just beyond the reach of authority’s whip.

### Prospero

These problems of liberty and authority, generosity and constraint, bring us to Prospero, the character in whom tradition has been most tempted to see Shakespeare himself. Cast out of Milan, what survives of the library beloved above his dukedom? The isle that he comes to govern is certainly full of reading. As for its master, there is no one in Shakespeare’s corpus, with the possible exceptions of Aaron, Titus and Lavinia, whose fortunes are more directly bound to books. At the end of a line that includes Hamlet, Brutus and Malvolio, Prospero bears a certain resemblance to all these readers. Like Hamlet, he takes refuge in books. Like Brutus, he finds there the promise both of self-control and of controlling others. And perhaps he shares with Malvolio a tendency to read wilfully – though there is in Prospero’s library one book (it is always singular) that gives him a power that Olivia’s steward never dreamed on. With this book he can crush the wills of the island’s natives and nonce-citizens and make them bow, and much of the moral drama of the play turns on whether he can relinquish his book-given power and the volume that gives it.

Along the way, the play traffics with many other books, of more traditional composition. In Milan, he tells Miranda, ‘the liberal arts’ were ‘all my study’ (1.2.73). He means the *trivium* of the grammar school (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). His pupils, Miranda and Caliban, testify that his lessons reached from one end of this curriculum to the other, from parts of speech to the bigger and lesser lights in the sky. Somewhere in the middle are the poets, and *The Tempest* is as closely engaged with the classical tradition – especially Virgil and Ovid – as anything that Shakespeare wrote. The recollections of Virgil range from indisputable local echoes to elusive narrative symmetries. On the one hand, there is Ferdinand’s astonished ‘Most sure the goddess’ (1.2.425) when he first sees Miranda, a phrase that translates Aeneas’ exclamation to his disguised mother, Venus, *O dea certe*. On the other, there is Prospero’s exile and Aeneas’ flight, *fato profugus*; or the arrival of Ferdinand on the island to woo its heir apparent, and Aeneas’ suit to Dido. The most explicit and extended allusion – tediously, calculatedly extended – is the banter

about Dido in Act 2. Gonzalo's passing reference to 'widow Dido' sparks twenty lines of debate with Sebastian and Adrian about her marital history, sustained by a misunderstanding: Gonzalo properly remembers that Dido's husband, Sychaeus, was murdered, while the others, forgetting this, are hung up on the question of her dubious marriage to Aeneas ('What if he had said "widower Aeneas" too?' (2.1.78)). Generations of scholars have worried about the significance of this allusion, but it may just as well be said to stand for the obliquity of the play's relation to the epic, and perhaps to remind us how dependent allusion is upon imperfect audiences. Does all this Virgil point us to a kind of counter-epic, contrasting the forgiveness that Prospero extends to his enemies with the slaughter of Turnus, Aeneas' rival, at the conclusion of Virgil's poem? Is Prospero's return home to Milan a kind of heroic backsliding? The *Aeneid* lends the play weight, but it has been hard to agree in which direction its ballast lists.

If we try to bring Shakespeare into focus as a reader of his poetic predecessors, not just as an opportunistic borrower, what then of Ovid? The most conspicuous use of the *Metamorphoses* in *The Tempest* is the speech where Prospero abjures his magic. 'Ye elves of hills' (5.1.33), he begins, borrowing from Arthur Golding's rendering of Medea's incantation over the body of old Aeson: 'Ye airs and winds: ye elves of hills, of brooks, of woods alone, / Of standing lakes, and of the night, approach ye everyone' (7.265–6).<sup>8</sup> There are other scraps from Golding as the speech continues, as well as echoes of Ovid's Latin – whether from memory, or from a book open on his writing table. (He would not be the first imperfect Latinist to make such use of a crib.) But the allusion matters because of the story it recalls. Medea is a magician, a commonplace in Renaissance treatments of witchcraft, and the spell that she casts in Ovid's poem rejuvenates Jason's father. When Prospero invokes her words, he is preparing to revive the conspirators he has charmed into compliance; perhaps he is thinking about his own age too. But most importantly, the witch is a revenger, who will turn on Jason and slaughter their children when he betrays her. Shakespeare knows his source, and maybe Prospero does too, and yet he does not seem bound to reach the same conclusion. Yes, he makes use of the resurrection trope that Ovid gives him (he has been preoccupied with making men new throughout the play), but in choosing to drown his book, he forswears new youth and revenge. Every third thought, he later remarks, will be his *own* death.

It is worth contrasting the way Shakespeare handles Virgil and Ovid in *The Tempest* with the early play that brings them most conspicuously together, *Titus Andronicus*. There, Tamora suggests that she and Aaron play at being Dido and Aeneas in the forest, only to be convinced by Aaron that they should make the rape of Philomela the model for their imitation – an Ovidian plot

manifested both as a series of increasingly gruesome borrowings and also as a material book, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In its pages, Titus recognizes himself as a character in a revenge story that has but one ending: 'For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be revenged' (5.2.193–4). In *The Tempest*, by contrast, allusions to Virgil and Ovid tend to be implicit and except, perhaps, for Prospero it is rarely clear that characters who allude to their stories know they are doing so. Unable to hold Virgil and Ovid in the same frame of reference, *Titus Andronicus* gives ample evidence that Shakespeare could talk about these poets the way that his contemporaries did, at opposite ends of a spectrum of ideas about civility and barbarism. But in *The Tempest*, Virgilian and Ovidian texts float more freely through a range of meanings, with respect to each other and to the events unfolding in the play.

The difference from *Titus* to *Tempest* suggests something about Shakespeare's own development as a reader, and one more of his sources may help us to see where that development leads. Among his debts to authors from his own time, one stands out: Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essays* appeared in John Florio's English translation in 1603. The most prominent borrowing from this book is the vision of a utopian commonwealth that Gonzalo fashions from the description of New World societies in 'Of Cannibals'. More recently, scholars have queried this passage for evidence of Shakespeare's views of European colonialism in North America and the English conquest of Ireland. Here, in free speculation that is reminiscent of the foolery of Shakespeare's most knowing clowns, Gonzalo's adaptation of Montaigne models a kind of reading that seems typical of *The Tempest's* relation to all its sources. Gonzalo's textual wit, with its lightness of touch, tolerance of internal contradiction, and readiness to sympathize with its raw materials and its audience, suggests that there is something more at stake in reading than a literal or exhaustive application of text to context, book to life.

*The Tempest's* allusions to Virgil and Ovid do not oblige its plot to end in blood, and Montaigne is a humanizing influence in the story. Nevertheless, Prospero's book must be drowned. For there is still a shadow that falls on this magician's reading – doubly dark with self-absorption and discipline – and perhaps that shadow darkens all reading in Shakespeare's plays, where there are no beneficent schoolmasters to be found, and not much happy leafing under trees. And yet there is also ample evidence in *The Tempest* that Shakespeare himself was a different kind of reader from Prospero. For one thing, the range of Shakespeare's books wildly exceeds the catalogue of Prospero's library. There is Virgil and Ovid, of whom Prospero may not be entirely innocent; but there is also Hakluyt, Strachey and any number of other examples of travel writing that walk a fine line between fact and

fantasy. The walls of the Milanese library in which Prospero devoted himself to 'liberal studies' were presumably lined with books written in classical languages, drawn from the range of Renaissance disciplines, but Shakespeare's reading extends itself into popular and vernacular writing and, as we have seen, includes imitations of contemporary romance plots, English translations of Latin poetry and the adaptive mediations of Stoic philosophy that are characteristic of Montaigne's essays.

And this is only the first distinction that we might draw between Prospero and Shakespeare as readers. If, from the stuff of Virgil and Ovid, Prospero makes a pageant of forgiveness that embraces every other character in the play, not everyone plays his part willingly. *The Tempest* reaches its conclusion without staging the massacre that announced Odysseus' long-awaited homecoming, or launched Aeneas on his way to Rome, or made Medea a horror to the Greeks, but in the final scene Antonio's silence – like Ariel's pleas to be released from bondage – reminds us that Prospero's mercy and generosity are coercive. In contrast, Shakespeare's extraordinarily wide reading brings him to a point from which he appears to be free in a way that Prospero is not: free not to judge, among the many different perspectives to which the plays gives voice, which is right and which is wrong. The success of Prospero's forgiveness is qualified by his insistence that there is only one way to interpret his story correctly, or even that there is only one story to tell. How different Shakespeare's reading is: how disinclined to struggle with the texts from which it borrows; how apt to entertain the possibilities that arise from them; and how unencumbered by the idea that to read, or to write, well is to arrive at a point beyond all contradiction.

### Shakespeare?

Reading as refuge. Reading what you will. Reading for style and for plot. Reading as quibbling; as foolery; reading as self-discipline, and as a tool for disciplining others. Reading for profit, reading for pleasure. It is something of a commonplace among historians of this polyglot practice that, in the sixteenth century, reading was a more communal business, more likely to be done out loud and with others. Certainly Shakespeare's London harboured no class of cloistered novel readers, any more than it harboured novels. And yet, whatever route we take through Shakespeare's career-long meditation on books and their uses, we encounter the idea that reading is somehow a private activity. More than anything else it was the propensity for solace, solipsism and self-delusion that attracted his attention. Whether it is Hamlet pondering his tables or Brutus brooding in his tent, Malvolio strolling in the garden or Prospero deep in study, reading in his plays is perforce on

display, there to be scrutinized and interpreted by other characters and by the audience – but on display by accident, under protest or as a performance of power. In making reading so much the subject of his dramatic work, Shakespeare sought to understand a potentially reclusive activity with the resources of a profoundly social genre, exploring what it means to read and asking whether one ought to read otherwise, or even not at all.

Having read his works, could we then – as a speculative exercise – write the scene of Shakespeare reading? We know so little about the physical particulars. Did he read with a pen in hand, filling the margins with comment, as many of his contemporaries did? None of his books survives to tell us. Did he own the books he read, or did he borrow them from other men, or women? Did he keep a library? Did he read at night, by candlelight? On the job, between the acts; reclining in bed? Reading itself is such an inscrutable activity, and to watch someone read is to be forcefully reminded of everything we cannot know about another mind. Shakespeare, whose mind has always seemed so unknowable, recedes from us yet again as we try to picture him in study, recedes towards the very literate privacy that his plays relentlessly pry open. About that privacy – which lies at the heart of even the most public exhibition of reading – he seems to have had his doubts. Shakespeare loved books, and made much of them, for pleasure and profit, but he was always suspicious of reading.

## NOTES

- 1 Robert D. Pepper (ed.), *Four Tudor Books on Education* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1966), p. 227.
- 2 Erasmus, *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), vol. XXIV, ed. Craig R. Thompson, pp. 682–3.
- 3 Plutarch, *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Macmillan, 1875), p. 129.
- 4 *Catonis Disticha* (London: 1562), A71–v; *Aesopi Fabulae* (London: 1568), B11.
- 5 Erasmus, *Collected Works*, vol. VI, p. 402.
- 6 Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (1579), \*iiiiir.
- 7 Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (1570), ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 67.
- 8 *Shakespeare's Ovid, Being Arthur Golding's Translation of 'The Metamorphoses'*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Norton & Company, 1961), p. 142.

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