The University of Illinois can claim to be the place where the modern study of Shakespeare’s classicism began, for it was a professor there, Thomas Whitfield Baldwin, whose two-volume work William Shakspere’s Smalle Latine and Lesse Greeke (1944) first put the subject on a scholarly footing. By 1984, when Baldwin died in his early nineties, his pioneering research had begotten a small library. Jonathan Bate is well aware of this—“Why add to the groaning shelf?” he imagines the reader asking—and his own previous contribution to the field, Shakespeare and Ovid (1993), remains among the most valuable monographs. His new book, based on his 2013 Gombrich Lectures at the University of London’s Warburg Institute, casts its net more widely.1

Its odd title muddies the waters—What Shakespeare Made of the Classics would be more helpful. Besides some new suggestions, of a traditional kind, about Shakespeare’s sources, Bate presents “an extended argument about the ‘classical’ nature of [Shakespeare’s] imagination.” This he characterizes as “almost always Ovidian, more often than is usually supposed Horatian, sometimes Ciceronian, occasionally Tacitean, an interesting mix of Senecan and anti-Senecan, and . . . strikingly anti-Virgilian—insofar as Virgilian meant ‘epic’ or ‘heroic.’ ” It’s notable that all the named authors are Latin. The extent of Shakespeare’s knowledge of Greek literature in the
original, as opposed to translation or Senecan adaptation, is still in dispute, but such literature plays a minimal role in Bate’s book, despite his title. The Greek dramatists in his index turn out to have been referenced by writers other than Shakespeare. As for Greek philosophers, their ideas could be found in a variety of sources such as Sidney or Montaigne, while Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch could supply the Greek history.

Rather than systematically documenting the debts of a given play to classical authors, Bate examines the ways in which those authors are employed against each other in Shakespeare’s mind over the whole canon. This ambitious approach is frequently enlightening, but makes for a sometimes-untidy book, whose chapters feel more like separate essays and do not really build a cumulative case. There is also, I fear, quite a lot of padding. That Shakespeare was taught a classical curriculum at school to what would now be university standard, that he lived in a country where the classical and Christian worlds coexisted, that he belonged to a religious tradition which still bore traces of its Catholic past—all this we know, almost too well. Bate explains that he has the general reader in mind in going into these matters, but how general does a reader have to be in order to be drawn to this book in the first place?

T. W. Baldwin’s archaically spelled title refers, of course, to Ben Jonson’s well-known estimation of Shakespeare’s classical skills in his poem prefacing the First Folio. The immediately following lines are less familiar, but they are crucial. Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, or Seneca, says Jonson, should be summoned from their graves to see what Shakespeare could do with tragedy (as noted above, this need not suggest that Shakespeare knew the work of the first three), while as for comedy,

Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.

(“Scenes” here means “stages.”) Far from belittling Shakespeare, as is often mistakenly assumed, Jonson claims for him, and through him for Britain, as great an achievement in drama as any that the ancient or modern world can boast.

Jonson’s tribute is the more impressive because his own reworking of the classical heritage was so different from Shakespeare’s. His Roman tragedies Sejanus (1603) and Catiline (1611) prove that greater erudition did not make for more gripping drama. Shakespeare acted in Sejanus: I was gratified to see Bate backing a long-held hunch of my own that, in a neat self-referential touch, he may have played the historian Cremutius Cordus, rather than Tiberius, as many critics suppose,
which seems too major a role for him. Jonson’s barely digested use of Tacitus in *Sejanus*, like his use of Cicero and Sallust in *Catiline*, reflected a steadiness of focus and a consistency of tone that Shakespeare had no interest in emulating. He absorbed his sources more thoroughly and diverged from them more radically. In *Catiline*, Cicero takes center stage; in *Julius Caesar*, he is oddly peripheral, even though Shakespeare can be seen, in Bate’s phrase, as “the Cicero of his age,” warning tirelessly against the destructive effects of civil war (*bellum civile* appears to be a Ciceronian coinage). Cicero’s importance for Shakespeare lay elsewhere, in his rhetorical strategies which served as stylistic models, in his advocacy of a mixed constitution in *De re publica*, and in his analysis of social obligation in *De officiis*. Shakespeare’s Roman plays, tracing the movement from republic to empire, with implicit messages for the Elizabethan polity, are indebted to the first of those Ciceronian works, just as his understanding of political relationships (the partnership of Brutus and Cassius, the fatal isolation of Coriolanus or Timon) is indebted to the second.

To continue the comparison with Jonson: in his great comedy *Poetaster* (1601), Jonson exalts Virgil (the poet as celebrant of national greatness and counselor to princes) and Horace (the poet as guardian of public morality) above Ovid (the poet as embodiment of amatory idleness). *Negotium*, the conduct of affairs of state or business by the conscientious citizen, is ranked above *otium*, the withdrawal from civic responsibility to the leisured existence of the country gentleman. (In fact, Jonson is weighting the scales here, for Horace was the leading example of the yearning to cultivate one’s garden, far from the squabbles of the capital.) Bates believes that the derogation of Ovid, and of love poetry as a genre, in *Poetaster*, is a sideswipe at Shakespeare, which was repaid in *Timon of Athens* where the Poet is a flatterer courting his rich patron (Jonson and James VI?). There is a second Roman presence in *Timon*, however; the Poet’s dialogue with the Painter, about the merits of their respective arts, is an obvious allusion to the Horatian tag *ut pictura poesis*. The Poet praises the rendering of “mental power” and “big imagination” in the Painter’s portrait of Timon, while the Painter insists that the imagery in the Poet’s verses “would be well expressed/ In our condition”—i.e., in a painting—“more pregnantly than words.” All this, of course, in words; Shakespeare is teasing. “Look not on his picture, but his book,” Jonson urged the reader of the First Folio. Yet both painters and poets deal in images.

Introducing one of his most original ideas, Bate sets Shakespeare’s appreciation of “the verbal pyrotechnics and erotic entanglements” of Ovidian poetry beside the “voice of calm, autonomy, and detachment that may properly be called Horatian.” The trajectory of Shakespeare’s
life, shuttling between the negotium of London and the otium of Stratford, recalls the structure of so many of his comedies and romances. If he celebrates the ideal of pastoral retreat and repose, he also criticizes it. The would-be celibate academy of Navarre in Love’s Labour’s Lost is not proof against erotic desire or the intrusion of Marcade, the emissary of Death, nor is the Forest of Arden in As You Like It exempt from “winter and rough weather.” Monarchs and courtiers have the luxury of playing at the simple life, but grinding poverty and back-breaking toil are the reality for the less fortunate. The garden in Richard II is an emblem for England, in need of prudent husbandry; the rebel Jack Cade becomes the serpent in the garden of Alexander Iden in 2 Henry VI; Justice Shallow’s Gloucestershire country seat, in 2 Henry IV, is the setting for bittersweet memories of misspent youth in London. Otium may be dearly bought and precariously held. The concept included, for Horace, the Epicurean emphasis on friendship, companionable talk, and a safe distance from politics. Similarly, Shakespeare often sets the claims of love against those of friendship, from The Two Gentlemen of Verona at one end of his career to The Two Noble Kinsmen at the other, and in several places he celebrates the private haven which love can create as a bulwark against an often harsh and menacing wider world. In comedy this may be blissful (Jessica and Lorenzo, for example), in tragedy only fugitive (Romeo and Juliet, or Antony and Cleopatra).

Other classical philosophies appear briefly. Cynicism, as personified in Timon of Athens by Apemantus (“a churlish philosopher” in the First Folio’s list of characters) and later Timon himself, or by Thersites in Troilus and Cressida, offers no attractions. (Though no philosopher, Iago may be called a cynic in the modern sense.) About Stoicism Shakespeare was more ambivalent. Bate detects “a strong vein of anti-Stoicism” in his work; that may be too extreme, for the suicide of Brutus has a bleak grandeur, and Hamlet admires Horatio for not being “passion’s slave.” The power to endure, to confront suffering resolutely, looms large in King Lear, and is not despised. Admittedly, Shakespeare did not share the Stoic disdain for the physical. He does not shy away from the pleasures and pains of bodily existence. Like Caesar, he is more well-disposed towards fat people than thin ones. He is more generous towards emotional characters than to cold reasoners, and he writes for the supreme art of the body, that of the actor, counterfeiting passion.

Imagination becomes a species of magic-making, seducing the mind away from the search for ultimate wisdom and truth into a secondary world of deceit and illusion, even madness or witchcraft. The mimetic nature of theater, however, leads us to another classical quandary. As mentioned earlier, Bate’s book is partly a study of Shakespeare’s imagination, a faculty distrusted by both Plato and Aristotle on account of its power to give “to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name.” Theseus’s speech in A Midsummer Night’s Dream about the lunatic, the lover,
double meaning of “compact”; they are all composed of imagination (and, in a play, by the
author’s imagination), but they are also bound together by it in their common opposition to
reason. Therein, according to Plato and Aristotle, lies the danger. Imagination becomes a species of
magic-making, seducing the mind away from the search for ultimate wisdom and truth into a
secondary world of deceit and illusion, even madness or witchcraft. (One thinks of the exploration
of the irrationality of romantic love in the comedies, or the studies of jealousy in Othello and
The Winter’s Tale.) Horace is again relevant here; the contrast between Rome and Egypt in Antony
and Cleopatra is effectively that between public and private loyalties, negotium and otium, and
Cleopatra is a kind of enchantress who captures Antony’s imagination, as Othello captured
Desdemona’s. The love-philtre in the Dream works in a similar, albeit benign, way. The Mousetrap,
in Hamlet, is a special case: its effect on Claudius is to recall to him the horror of his own actions,
and so to reveal the truth to Hamlet rather than disguise it.

The iconoclasts of the Protestant Reformation had their own reasons for disliking imagination.
They held that holy pictures in any medium blocked the soul’s direct access to God, and that
the doctrines of Rome were blasphemous fables. Many of them shared the ancient philosophers’
dislike of the stage. Shakespeare treats all this obliquely. Bate is not greatly interested in the
Christian subtexts which have been identified by recent scholarship, doubting that the original
audiences would have noticed them—but that does not mean they are not there, and there are
many other things that could pass unnoticed in performance but are recognized in the plays now.

The supernatural of the classical world is another matter. Bate identifies an interesting link
between ghosts and the imagination. Shakespeare greatly complicates the stock ghost of the
Senecan tragedy of blood, imitated by Kyd in The Spanish Tragedy, which does little more than
demand revenge for murder. Hamlet’s perplexity about his father’s ghost stems from his
uncertainty about its ontological status (Bate is excellent on this and on the way the ghost’s
caracter changes during the play), but at least its independent existence is proven by the fact that
he is not alone in seeing it. Only Brutus sees the ghost in Julius Caesar (which calls itself Brutus’s
“evil spirit” rather than Caesar), just as only Macbeth sees Banquo’s. Antigonus in The Winter’s Tale
believes he has seen Hermione’s ghost, but—as we only discover ourselves at the end—he is
mistaken, for she was never dead. What, moreover, are we to make of the appearance of the
Leonati, and of Jupiter himself, in Cymbeline? They seem to represent a dream Posthumus is
having, but they leave a written message that he finds when he awakes. In all these cases, we share
the experiences of the characters, whether they be dreams, hallucinations, or inspired visions.
Puck and Prospero remind us that a play offers us participation in a kind of dream-vision
(Prospero, the benevolent magus controlling other people, is a stand-in for the creative artist, and
his magic is his “art”), and, as the Chorus in Henry V repeatedly urges us, we have to cooperate
with the actors in giving imaginative depth to the story. If the dramatic illusion is in danger of
breaking down, then, as Hippolyta sardonically remarks to Theseus, “it must be your
imagination”—that of the spectator—which makes good the deficiency.
Beneath the objections of Plato and Aristotle lies the philosophical issue of the relation of the mind to the external world. Plato’s Ion denounces the rhapsode as possessed, a madman peddling lies to a credulous audience. This was answered definitively by Sidney in the Apology for Poetry: “Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.” “Much virtue in ‘If,’” as Jacques put it. Works of art never pretend to be real, but they may still in some sense be true. They may convey the kind of “rare vision” that Bottom experiences. “The truest poetry is the most feigning,” we hear in As You Like It. Yet our delight in such feigning may also lead us to deceive ourselves by imagining the world is in fact what we wish it to be. This may produce entertaining confusion (as in The Comedy of Errors or Twelfth Night) or disastrous self-delusion (as in Richard II or King Lear).

Bate makes an important connection between the Greek word hereos, which in Latin became eros as personification of love, and melancholy, love as a kind of sickness, from which we see Romeo suffering before he meets Juliet. Hereos elides neatly into heroes, the superhuman offspring of gods and mortals in Greek mythology, whose achievements were celebrated in heroic (epic) poetry. But what if these heroes were also lovers? Michael Drayton, like Shakespeare a Warwickshire man, maintained in England’s Heroical Epistles (1597) that hereos and heroism were compatible, but for Shakespeare, the heroic and the erotic, Mars and Venus, exist in tension with each other. Antony, again, is an example, but so are Othello, Coriolanus, or Troilus, all of whom are faced with the choice of Hercules, between virtus (both moral and military prowess) and voluptas. (Hercules is the tutelary deity to Antony and memorably deserts him as his fortunes crumble.)

Virgil was the heroic-epic poet par excellence, “like two Homers for the price of one” as Bate puts it, in offering both an Odyssey in the wanderings of Aeneas and an Iliad in the exploits on the field of battle. Shakespeare, however, in Bate’s view, “had no desire to be the Elizabethan Virgil”—again we note the contrast with the respect accorded to Virgil in Poetaster. He displays a consistently skeptical attitude towards epic pretensions. If the history plays form a kind of national epic, they are full of unheroic moments and characters: the ineffectual piety of Henry VI and the naïveté of Edward IV in the first trilogy, the Machiavellianism of Richard III or of Bolingbroke in Richard II, the commonsense cowardice of Falstaff with his dissection of “honour,” the opportunism of Nym and Pistol at
The plays question the value of blind patriotism and nationalistic rhetoric. They see that calculation and pragmatism can defeat principle and dignity. They are aware that the decisions of the great may wreck the lives of the powerless and insignificant. Aeneas appears initially impressive in *Troilus and Cressida*, but the play subjects the ideal of military glory to a devastating critique—“All the argument is a whore and a cuckold,” in Thersites’ summary, “a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon.” The Player’s speech about Pyrrhus in *Hamlet*, which Bate calls “the most Virgilian speech [Shakespeare] ever wrote,” is a brilliant parody of 1580s tragedy, whose deliberately fustian style contrasts with the flexibility and versatility of the rest of the play. Hamlet cannot act the part of Pyrrhus to Claudius’s Priam: his Christian conscience intervenes. The classical past, routinely praised by historical scholars as offering patterns of ethical conduct, can only go so far. Striking a heroic attitude, however theoretically admirable, may leave the hero terribly alone.

The play-world ultimately dissolves, like the masque in The Tempest, into thin air. It is a world of shadows—the Elizabethan word for actors. Its dissolution points the way we must all go. Shakespeare’s obsession with the nature of illusion, resulting in plays that are uniquely meta-dramatic in their time, is not wholly accounted for by his knowledge of classical drama. Bate’s discussion of Shakespeare’s use of Plautus, Terence, and Seneca is largely confined to formal properties: character-types, plots, rhetorical tropes, here and there a more complex theme such as Seneca’s interest in mastery of the self by willpower, which gave a hint to early modern thinkers about interiority. Arguably—as Emrys Jones showed long ago in The Origins of Shakespeare (1977)—the medieval mystery cycles, still available to Shakespeare as a teenager, or the street theater which he could see when strolling players visited Stratford, “made” him in ways that the classics did not. They offered a greater variety of tone, a more multiple set of perspectives, and a broader popular appeal. Bate is not drawn to the medieval aspect of Shakespeare’s imagination, and to make his case he has to leave it to one side. This is no great cause for concern so long as we can correct the balance in our own minds; and, as Bate outlines in his closing chapter, when Shakespeare in his turn became a “classic” from the late seventeenth century onwards, he was weighed against a neoclassical, rule-based model of criticism, and often found wanting. It took time for his originality to be understood. Now he occupies in our educational system the same place that the Greek and Latin authors occupied in his—but for how much longer? Already, students more often read excerpts than a complete play. Bate well reminds us that the survival of the classical world he has explored is under an even greater threat, as its literature and history recede from our educational curricula. We have even smaller Latin and even less Greek. Then again, the digital revolution is bringing with it a brutally attenuated attention span and an indifference, if not hostility, to temporal distance and cultural pluralism. Shakespeare kept hold of the classics by remaking them. By our neglect, we risk losing them altogether.

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