Skenè Studies I • 2

Oedipus at Colonus and *King Lear*: Classical and Early Modern Intersections

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

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S K E N È   Theatre and Drama Studies

Contents

Part 4 – Revisiting Oedipus and Lear

1

How to Be Classical

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Abstract

Modern notions of the classical were essentially invented in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with the writings of Winckelmann in Enlightenment Germany and the installation of the Elgin Marbles in Regency London. But 16th-century England consciously undertook to develop classical models for English literature and the visual arts, and those looked quite different from anything we recognize as classical. What did 'classical' sound like and look like to Sidney and Spenser? A good deal of energy in the period went into the devising of appropriately classical models for vernacular verse. The Earl of Surrey, in the 1530s, translated two books of the *Aeneid* in a style designed to be classical, a poetic meter intended to serve as an English equivalent to Virgilian hexameters. The meter was what became known as blank verse, and strictly speaking, all that was Virgilian about it was that it was unrhymed. Surrey presumably considered pentameter 'natural' to English, as hexameter was to Latin. The assumption was shrewdly prophetic, but in the 1530s, it would have seemed very surprising.

Keywords: Classical; Sidney; Spenser; Earl of Surrey

1.

Humanism came to England relatively late, and even then much classical scholarship was devoted to biblical exegesis and the study of theology, rather than to the revival of what we think of as the classics. John Colet, Thomas More and the visiting Erasmus were superb Latinists, but their Latin was a living language, the language of modern literature and philosophy. Nevertheless, Christian Humanism emphasized the continuity of ancient wis-

dom with Christian doctrine, and Erasmus duly compared John Colet to Plato. But though Colet was thoroughly familiar with the modern Platonists Ficino and Pico, he devoted much of his critical energy to interpreting the Epistles of St Paul; and Erasmus's Greek for over two decades was put at the service of establishing a correct text of the New Testament, not of reviving ancient philosophy. Greek was introduced into the English school curriculum after Colet re-founded St Paul's School in 1512; by the mid-century it was being regularly taught in the grammar schools, but even by the end of the century, though it was a tremendously prestigious subject, few scholars were sufficiently at home with it to work without a translation at hand – Sir Thomas North's Plutarch was based on the French version of Jacques Amyot, and even the famously scholarly George Chapman used a Latin trot for his Homer. There was unquestionably a good deal of Greek in circulation – rhetorical terms, scientific names, aphorisms – and Cambridge students were required to attend weekly lectures on Greek. Nevertheless the expression "it's all Greek to me" as a trope of incomprehensibility was already proverbial in Shakespeare's time – it appears in *Julius Caesar* (1599), and in Dekker's *Patient Grissel* (1603).

Recent scholarship has shown that England was heavily invested in classical translation, even in Anglo-Saxon times, though there was obviously no settled notion of what a classical style for English would be. But the larger question was the really elusive one: what would it mean for the principles of Humanism to inform literature in the vernacular – how could English literature become 'classical', not only classical in imitating the ancients, but classical in the sense subsequently applied to music, classical as opposed to popular, classical as formal, serious, and therefore good.[1] The literary forbears, Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, continued to be admired, but they lacked 'correctness'. Nor do the excep-

1 'Classic' and 'classical' applied to literature, denoting both Greek and Roman writings and standards of excellence, had come into English by the mid-16th century. The *OED*'s first citation for "classical" in relation to music is from 1829, but in a context that clearly implies that the term was already in use.

tions rescue the English past: Sidney praises Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, but wonders at his ability to produce it – "I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him" (Sidney 1595: sig. I4r).[2] What should English literature sound like, what rules should it follow – how can we, in this clear age, not stumble? In short, how can we produce a vernacular literature that is recognizably classical, whether ancient works in translation or modern works on the classical model; make the classics our own; make our own classics? The problem for Sidney is epitomized in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, which is praised, but also criticised because it does things that Theocritus and Virgil did not do. Similarly, English drama for Sidney is defective in so far as it does not emulate classical drama. The models, the tradition, are essential.

And originality? This critic was himself surely one of the two most daringly original poets of his age (the other was Marlowe, who was also probably, among vernacular writers, the best classicist of his generation), but an adequate defence of poetry required of it stringent constraints on the new, continual deference to the old. There is, however, an element of question-begging in Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*: what in the English sixteenth century would constitute being traditional, adhering to tradition? If the tradition is classical, what should classical imply? What elements could stamp a work of vernacular literature or drama or art as classical? What does English classical look like, or sound like? Sidney's own sense of the classical in the *Defence* appears to us absurdly limited – English plays that do not observe the unities of time and place are said to be not simply incorrect, but incomprehensible; audiences are assumed to be radically unimaginative (so much for *Antony and Cleopatra*). And yet Sidney's critique of English sonnets – that as love poems they are for the most part failures because they would not persuade a mistress of the reality of the lover's passion – makes the success of the poetry dependent entirely on its effect on the listener or reader. Though the model is clearly Petrarch, the originals here produce no set of rules for sonnets; and Sidney's

2 The quotation has been modernized.

own sonnet sequence, though it admirably responds to the critique in the *Defence*, departs significantly from any Petrarchan model, and indeed, explicitly rejects "poor Petrarch's long-deceasèd woes" (*Astrophil and Stella*, 15).

But of course, the rejection of a model is also a way of deferring to it – Sidney, rejecting Petrarch, acknowledges the priority of the Italian model, how essential the Italian model is. He substitutes his own woes for Petrarch's; the result, one could say, is a new Petrarchan sonnet sequence – Sidney becomes a new Petrarch. A good deal of energy in the period went into the devising of strategies for becoming the new ancients in this way, strategies of translation and adaptation, and the invention of appropriately classical-sounding models for vernacular verse, the domestication of the classic. The locus classicus, so to speak, was provided by the Earl of Surrey, who in the 1530s translated two books of the *Aeneid* in a style designed to be 'classical', a poetic meter intended to serve as an English equivalent to Virgilian hexameters. The meter was what became known as blank verse, and strictly speaking, all that was Virgilian about it was that it was unrhymed. Surrey presumably considered pentameter 'natural' to English, as hexameter was to Latin (though the Latin hexameter was not native, but based on the Greek). The assumption was shrewdly prophetic, but in the 1530s, it would have seemed very surprising, and the translations remained unpublished until long after Surrey's death.[3]

3 Recent claims for Surrey's influence on Marlowe and Milton are surely overstated. When Marlowe translates non-dramatic poetry he almost invariably uses couplets (the one exception is his Lucan, cited below); the blank verse of his drama is for him an innovation, and judging from *Hero and Leander*, if the Virgilian *Dido Queen of Carthage* had been conceived as a little epic, it would not have been in blank verse. It is arguable that Surrey is somewhere behind Milton's blank verse, but the chief source is surely Shakespeare. I have suggested elsewhere that Milton's model for the ten-book 1667 *Paradise Lost* is the ten-book revolutionary epic *Pharsalia*, but there is no evidence that Milton was aware of Marlowe's translation of Book 1, which was published in 1600 and not reissued. Arthur Gorges's and Thomas May's translations of *Pharsalia* (1614, 1629) are in couplets. For the counter-arguments, see Gillespie 2011: 30, Cummings 2010. Cummings, oddly, asserts that "somebody, possibly Marlowe" first introduced blank verse

In 1554, seventeen years after Surrey's execution for treason, the printer John Day issued Surrey's translation of Book 4, with the following explanation on the title page:

> The fourth book of Virgil, intreating of the love between Aeneas and Dido, translated into English, and drawn into a strange meter by Henry, late Earl of Surrey, worthy to be embraced. (Surrey 1554)

Blank verse in 1554 is "a strange (that is, foreign) meter . . . worthy to be embraced" (ibid.). Historians of prosody explain that the meter was foreign in that it was influenced by the Italian *verso sciolto* – unrhymed hendecasyllables; literally 'free (or open) verse' – which by the sixteenth century was being used as an Italian equivalent to classical hexameters. But how "strange" it also was is clear from the bafflement registered by such contemporary critics as Roger Ascham, Gabriel Harvey and William Webbe as late as the 1590s – Webbe says that Surrey "translated . . . some part of Virgil into verse indeed, but without regard of true quantity of syllables" (1586: 122). Such critics assumed Surrey was attempting to write quantitatively, and therefore, naturally, found all sorts of mistakes.[4] For such readers, the only verse that sounded classical was quantitative verse, which did seem to have a real future in the English 1590s – Sidney in the *Defence* argues for both the ancient and the modern systems; asserting that "Truly the English, before any other vulgar language I know, is fit for both sorts" (sig. L2r).

To those for whom only quantitative verse was properly poetic, blank verse would certainly be "strange", but in fact, there was nothing foreign about it. Surrey may have been imitating *versi sciolti*, but he was writing in Chaucer's meter, simply without the rhyme. Possibly it was not recognized as Chaucer's meter because

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onto the stage in the 1580s (42-3). *Gorboduc* (1561) is in blank verse; so is Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh's *Jocasta* (1566); and there are of course numerous lost plays from the period of which we can say nothing. Marlowe in the prologue to *Tamburlaine* (1) does say he has rescued drama from the verse of "rhyming mother-wits" (Marlowe 1973), but what that implies is that he is either unaware of earlier blank-verse drama, or ignoring it.

4 See Derek Attridge's excellent account in 1974: 109-11.

by the sixteenth century the culture had forgotten how to read Chaucer – Chaucer was perfectly regular in middle English, but sounded rough as pronunciation changed, and, especially, as the final e's were no longer sounded.

In 1557, three years after John Day's edition of Surrey's *Aeneid* IV, Richard Tottel issued, in the space of less than two months, what was essentially Surrey's complete works: both the second and fourth books of the *Aeneid* in blank verse, and two separate editions of *Songes and Sonettes Written By the Ryght Honorable Lord Henry Howard, late Earle of Surrey, and other* – the volume that has become known as *Tottel's Miscellany*. The principal "other" was Thomas Wyatt; Wyatt and Surrey were thereby all at once major poets, but Surrey was the benchmark. Wyatt's irregular metrics were therefore duly revised to accord with Surrey's style – Tottel, that is, understood that Surrey's verse was 'regular', and was not a bungled attempt at quantitative metrics.

Tottel clearly expected some resistance. In a brief and acerbic preface, he writes "If perhaps some mislike the stateliness of style removed from the rude skill of common ears, I ask help of the learned to defend their learned friends the authors of this work. And I exhort the unlearned, by reading to learn to be more skill-full, and to purge that swinelike grossness that maketh the sweet marjoram not to smell to their delight" (Surrey 1557: sig. A1v)[5] pigs were said to hate the smell of marjoram; unlearned readers are pigs. Surrey's "stateliness of style" is something unfamiliar, but also learned and aristocratic – it is what English poetry should aspire to, as John Day had said, it is "worthy to be embraced". Interestingly, Tottel's edition of the *Aeneid* translation makes no special claims. The title page says only *Certain Bokes of Virgiles Aeneis turned into English meter* – Tottel, unlike Day, markets blank verse not as "strange", but as English. And unlike the *Songes and Sonettes*, there is no apology or justification, no critical harangue, not even the usual dedicatory and commendatory verses. The poem begins at once, on the next leaf: this is, quite simply, English Virgil.

But English classicists, even those who were not attempt-

5 The passage has been modernized.

ing quantitative verse, were without exception unpersuaded – Surrey's blank verse seems, in the history of English prosody, revolutionary; but it did not start a revolution, and blank verse was re-invented several times before it became the norm. In 1558, the year after Tottel published Surrey's Virgil, the first seven books of Thomas Phaer's *Aeneid* were published. Phaer's English classical verse was fourteener couplets (the translation was eventually completed by Thomas Twine in 1584). In 1565 Arthur Golding's first four books of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* "*Translated Oute of Latin into Englishe Meter*" appeared. Golding's English meter was again rhyming fourteeners. The complete translation appeared in 1567, and was continuously in print for half a century – the Elizabethan Ovidian meter was essentially a ballad measure. By 1595 the verse could already be parodied by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Bottom suddenly breaks into a bit of old-fashioned classicism:

> The raging rocks
> And shivering shocks
> Shall break the locks
> Of prison gates;
> And Phibbus' car
> Shall shine from far,
> And make and mar
> The foolish fates.
> (Shakespeare 2000a: 1.2.27-34)

In 1621 Golding's Ovidian fourteeners were finally superseded not by blank verse, but by pentameter couplets, with the publication of the first five books of George Sandys's translation, completed in 1626. This set the standard for the next two centuries: Sandys is Ovid in a style that looks to us recognizably neo-classical. As for the *Aeneid*, after Phaer, Richard Stanyhurst's version in "English heroical verse" was first published in Leiden in 1582. English heroical verse in this case was quantitative hexameters – genuinely classical, though finally not English enough. A second edition was published in London in the next year, but there was no subsequent edition until the nineteenth century.

And then finally the tradition develops a norm. When Ben

Jonson, near the end of his play *Poetaster* (1601), has Virgil recite a passage from the *Aeneid*, his prosody was pentameter couplets – although Phaer and Twine's *Aeneid* continued to be the standard translation (the last edition was 1612), the pentameter couplet had become the norm.

Consider some samples. Here is a bit of Surrey, Dido preparing for death:

> Sweet spoils, whiles God and destinies it would,
> Receive this sprite, and rid me of these cares:
> I lived and ran the course fortune did grant;
> And under earth my great ghost now shall wend:
> A goodly town I built, and saw my walls;
> Happy, alas, too happy, if these coasts
> The Troyan ships had never touchèd aye.
> (Surrey 1554: sig. G1v)

In the 1550s this would have sounded strange, though it retains some bits of traditional alliterative verse ("sweet spoils", "great ghost").

Now here is the opening of Thomas Phaer's *Aeneid*:

> Of arms, and of the man of Troy, that first by fatal flight
> Did thence arrive to Lavine land that now Italia hight,
> But shaken sore with many a storm by seas and land ytost
> And all for Juno's endless wrath that wrought to have had him lost,
> And sorrows great in wars he bode ere he the walls could frame
> Of mighty Rome . . .
> (Phaer 1562: sig. A1)

Today Phaer has disappeared from the literary histories, but this really reads quite impressively, a supple verse rhythm with real momentum. This is what English Virgil sounded like for Elizabethan readers.

Here is the same passage from Richard Stanyhurst's quantitative *Aeneid*, 1582:

> I blaze the captain first from Troy city repairing,
> Like wand'ring pilgrim to famoused Italy trudging,
> And coast of Lavin': soused with tempestuous hurlwind,
> On land and sailing, by God's predestinate order:

> But chief through Juno's long fost'red deadly revengement.
> (Stanyhurst 1582: sig. B3)

If you count it out in the original orthography you can see that it really is quantitative, though there was some fiddling with the spelling to make it work. Read aloud it has undeniable awkwardnesses ("soused with tempestuous hurlwind"); rhythmically, however, it is natural enough, though the end-stopped lines slow it down.

But here, finally, in 1601 is Ben Jonson in *Poetaster*. The emperor Augustus asks Virgil to recite a bit of the *Aeneid*, his work in progress. Dido and Aeneas take shelter in the storm:

> . . . fire and air did shine,
> As guilty of the match; and from the hill
> The nymphs with shriekings do the region fill.
> Here first began their bane; this day was ground
> Of all their ills; for now, nor rumour's sound,
> Nor nice respect of state, moves Dido ought;
> Her love no longer now by stealth is sought.
> (Jonson 2012: 5.2.65-71)

This is a Virgil we can recognize as classical. Not that one would mistake it for Dryden or Pope – there is no playfulness; it has a formality and stiffness that are part of the Jonsonian sense of authority. But in 1601, on Jonson's stage, Virgil no longer sounds early-modern.

Jonson himself reveals that he was not the catalyst. In the first act of *Poetaster*, Ovid recites one of his *Amores*. The lines Jonson gives him are the translation done a decade earlier by Marlowe. Marlowe's *Ovids Elegies* – the first translation into English – had been published surreptitiously in 1599, in a volume with Davies's epigrams. The book had been banned and burnt by the Bishop of London, though the objections may have been to the libelous Davies, not the scurrilous Marlowe. But Marlowe – notorious atheist, sodomite, counterfeiter – was already the classical benchmark. His Ovid was in pentameter couplets: for Jonson in 1601, that was the prosody of classical poetry, not Phaer's hexameters, Golding's heptameters; least of all Surrey's blank verse. What Surrey had provided for Jonson was a model not for classical ep-

ic, but for the play itself, dramatic dialogue – poetry comes in couplets, but speech on the English stage, starting in the 1560s, and from the 1580s on, is predominantly blank verse.

Here, for comparison with the *Aeneid* samples, is Golding's *Metamorphoses*. In Book 10, Venus learns of the death of Adonis:

> Dame Venus in her chariot drawn with swans was scarce arrived
> At Cyprus, when she knew afar the sigh of him deprived
> Of life. She turned her cygnets back, and when she from the sky
> Beheld him dead, and in his blood beweltred for to lie:
> She leapèd down, . . .
> (Golding 1584: 146)

Rhythmically secure, it reads aloud impressively (Ezra Pound called it the most beautiful book in English), and though it seems to speak with the voice of a much earlier era, it was in fact written within Marlowe's lifetime.

2.

The refiguring of the classics into English was not a novelty, and it did not begin with Surrey. The enduring prestige of translation in England may be gaged by Chaucer's claim that his *Troilus and Criseyde* is not original, but derives from the work of a mythical Lollius. The fictitious Roman author provides a degree of authority that would be missing from the citation of Chaucer's real source, Boccaccio's *Filostrato* – contemporary, not ancient; Italian, not Latin. A more puzzling example may indicate the prestige of specifically English translation: Marie de France claimed to have translated Aesop not from the Greek, but from a version in Old English by Alfred the Great – no trace of this work, nor any other reference to it, survives (see Gillespie 2011: 6).

But pervasive as the translation of the classics was, it was neither systematic nor comprehensive. Here are the highlights up to 1600, including a few surprises. The sole surviving Anglo-Saxon example is a Boethius from the ninth or tenth century. Boethius is also the only classical author Chaucer translated, if we except

the mysterious Lollius, though Chaucer was obviously thoroughly familiar with Ovid. The only English Cicero before the sixteenth century is Caxton's translation of *De Senectute* from a French version, and the only Ovid Caxton's *Metamorphoses*, a prose translation also based on a French prose version, which survives in a single ms and was never published – did Caxton not consider it marketable? A selection from Horace in fourteener couplets appeared in 1567; up to that point there was only a single Horace poem in English. The ten tragedies ascribed to Seneca were translated in the 1560s and 1570s; most of these, like the Horace, were in fourteener couplets. The first bits of Tacitus did not appear until 1591. Marlowe's translation of the first book of Lucan's *Pharsalia* appeared in 1600, seven years after his death and the year after his Ovid's *Amores* – the Lucan alone of all the English classics was in Surrey's blank verse. Often translation was in the service of the teaching of Latin. Abraham Fleming's version of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* was published in 1575 and again in 1589, as he says in a preface, "for the profit and furtherance of English youths desirous to learne, and delighted in poetrie . . . , not in foolish rime . . . but in due proportion and measure . . . that yoong Grammar boyes, may euen without a schoolemaister teach themselves by the help thereof" (1589: sig. A4v). Fleming's "due proportion and measure" is unrhymed fourteeners. It is quite literal, and scrupulously places in brackets words that have been included either to satisfy the demands of English grammar or to fill out the meter. And although Terence was part of the academic curriculum both in the classroom and in performance, the only translation of the plays was Nicholas Udall's *Floures for Latine spekynge selected and gathered oute of Terence, and the same translated in to Englysshe, together with the exposition and settynge forthe as welle of suche latyne wordes, as were thought nedefull to be annoted, as also of dyuers grammatical rules, very profytable [and] necessarye for the expedite knowledge in the latine tongue*, published in 1534, and in editions throughout the century – the Flowers are taken from three plays, *Andria*, *Eunuchus*, and *Heautontimorumenos*; and as the title indicates, the volume offers only renderings of exemplary bits of dialogue. Terence here was a model not for comedy, but for Latin conversation.

Figure 1 is one of the surprises: in 1588, William Byrd published a setting of a bit of Ovid's *Heroides*, the opening eight lines of Penelope's epistle to Ulysses, translated by an anonymous poet into English quantitative measures. Byrd understood the scansion perfectly, setting long syllables to minims and short syllables to crochets. The music even corrects three errors in the metrics.[6]

Figure 1: "Constant Penelope," from William Byrd, *Psalms, Sonnets and Songs of Sadness and Piety*, 1588. The metrical corrections are outlined. Photo courtesy of Professor Philip Brett.

And another surprise: a single epigram of Martial's, translated into English and Welsh, appeared in 1571 on a broadsheet, presumably to be sold as ballads were. The next Martial in English was not published till 1629. There was no Catullus until Jonson's *Volpone* attempted to seduce Celia with a translation of *Vivamus mea Lesbia* in 1606; no Lucretius until the 1650s, no Tibullus until 1694,

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6 For a full discussion, see Orgel 2015.

and not even a Latin text of Propertius until 1697. The first British *Aeneid*, translated by Gavin Douglas into Scots dialect in 1513 (not published till 1553) had been in loose pentameter couplets, a striking premonition; but as anomalous for the English tradition for most of the century as it was for the Scots.

The Greek classics, not surprisingly, got a later start. Of the major prose works, the first English Thucydides appeared in 1550, Herodotus in 1584; the only prose translation popular enough to appear in multiple editions was the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus, which was first published in 1569, and reissued six times by 1627. Of verse, the first Theocritus translation, published anonymously in 1588, is, like most of the Latin translations, in either hexameter or fourteener couplets, with the last of the idylls in trimeter couplets. The only attempt at dramatic translation, aside from Gascoigne's Euripidean *Jocasta* (of which more presently), was Jane, Lady Lumley's prose version of Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* in the 1550s – this was, of course, unpublished. Thomas Watson's Latin *Antigone* appeared in 1581. Chapman's *Iliad*, published beginning in 1598, is in the usual fourteener couplets; by 1616, for the *Odyssey*, he had switched to pentameter couplets. The standard had again been set by Marlowe, with his superb version of Musaeus's *Hero and Leander*, pentameter couplets like his Ovid – by the turn of the century this was the voice of English classicism; though it has to be added that Marlowe's little epic is not very much like Musaeus's, even with Chapman's dutiful continuation. Nevertheless Chapman, returning to the poem in 1616 to produce a proper translation (the title page declares it "*Translated* According to the Ori*ginall*"), casts it in pentameter couplets.

In short, the only poets interested in Surrey's blank verse were the dramatists, starting in the 1560s, but (judging from what survives) not regularly till late in the century – the mid-century academic plays based on Plautus and Terence, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, *Ralph Roister Doister*, *Jack Juggler*, make no attempt to be stylistically classical. Subsequently, with the single exception of Marlowe's Lucan, blank verse was useful only for dramatic dialogue: as a version of classical verse it served for Seneca in *Gorboduc* (the first English play in blank verse); for Euripides in *Jocasta*, Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh's version of *The*

Phoenician Women; for Plautus in *The Comedy of Errors*, Terence in *The Taming of the Shrew* (in both cases liberally interspersed with couplets, and in *Errors* at one point with old-fashioned hexameters); and for English drama of the period generally, for Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, producing an English classic theatre. But never for English Virgil, Ovid, Homer – that required another kind of 'classical'.

English epics, moreover, significantly, were nothing like any of these: the stanzaic verse of Spenser, Harington's Ariosto, Drayton, Daniel, derived from the Chaucer of *Troilus*, from Rhyme Royal, and from Ariosto, Boiardo, Tasso. The classics they recalled were those of the romance tradition; and even those had started to sound unnatural by the late seventeenth century. In 1687 an anonymous "Person of Quality" (now presumed to be Edward Howard; see Bradner 1938) brought *The Fairy Queen* up to date, as the title page advertised, with Spenser's "Essential Design preserv'd, but his obsolete Language and manner of Verse totally laid aside. Deliver'd in Heroick Numbers" (An. 1687). The heroic numbers were, by now inevitably, pentameter couplets. Milton, a century after Surrey, was still bucking the tide in declaring blank verse to be the natural language of English epic poetry.

3.

If these examples give us some sense of what the classical sounded like in Elizabethan and Stuart England, what did the classical look like? To us, the classical looks like the Venus de Milo or the Apollo Belvedere – these are real ancient statues, but the idea of the classical they embody is the one that Michelangelo's Renaissance created, which only reached England two centuries later in the era of William Kent and Robert Adam, subsequently filtered through the aesthetic theories of Winckelmann and enshrined in the Elgin Marbles: white, pure, thoroughly idealized. But even the Elgin Marbles, if you look closely, give the show away: they have traces of pigment on them. In their original state, they were painted to look lifelike, and recent reconstructions of ancient sculpture show

them looking more like waxworks than like art.[7]

I think most of us would agree that such reconstructions look awful – from our standpoint, the ancients paid a heavy price for authenticity. And though the Italians knew that the statues they were digging up had once been coloured, nobody ever proposed painting the David to look lifelike – the rebirth of the classical was always profoundly revisionary. Still, a pediment of the Philadelphia Art Museum, completed in 1928, has its deities in full color, an attempt at how the Parthenon really looked.[8] The gods are a little stiff – Philadelphia had no Phidias – but from afar, the group is elegant and convincing enough. This is certainly classical in spirit; it suggests to us, however, not the Parthenon but a much less animated version of Raphael in the Farnesina, or Giulio Romano in the Palazzo Te – that is, not at all classical, entirely of the Renaissance.

The seventeenth-century's classical was, moreover, far more capacious than this. The greatest collection of classical remains in Stuart England was the Arundel Marbles – the Earl and Countess, over three decades, formed a magnificent art collection, including both ancient and modern works. Their collection, however, was really not what we would call an art gallery. The Arundel Marbles seem to us the forerunners of the Elgin Marbles; but they looked quite different to contemporary observers. Arundel's protégé Henry Peacham in *The Complete Gentleman* (1634) praises the statues in terms that are indicative: there is nothing about ideal Greek bodies or perfect proportion or *contrapposto*; they bring the past to life – what they give the observer, he says, is "the pleasure of seeing and conversing with these old heroes . . ."; moreover, "the profit of knowing them redounds to all poets, painters, architects, . . . and by consequent, to all gentlemen" (1634: 110-12). As for Arundel House, Peacham calls it "the chief English scene of ancient inscriptions . . ." (ibid.). It is rather startling to us to take up John Selden's book entitled *Marmora Arundelliana* and to find in it not depictions of sculptures but pages like the one in *figure 2*

7 For a plethora of examples, google 'Classical statues painted'.

8 A colour photo of the pediment is at https://www.philamuseum.org/collections. (Accessed 23 November 2018).

(1629: 53). Peacham continues, "You shall find all the walls of the house inlaid with them and speaking Greek and Latin to you. The garden especially will afford you the pleasure of a world of learned

Figure 2: An illustration from John Selden, Marmora Arundelliana, 1629.

lectures in this kind" (112). A world of learned lectures: the classical languages have become an aristocratic touchstone, and the collecting passion was not simply aesthetic. It also involved a profound interest in recovering and preserving the past, an education in history; and classical connoisseurship has become the mark of a gentleman, who is here identified with the artist, marked as much by his taste as by his lineage. Such a claim involves quite a new notion of both gentleman and artist. In 1629, the year in which Selden published the *Marmora Arundelliana*, Rubens wrote from London to a friend in Paris of "the incredible quantity of excellent pictures, statues, and ancient inscriptions which are to be found in this Court" – the inscriptions are mentioned in the same breath as the works of art. His highest praise was reserved for one of Arundel's sculptures: "I confess that I have never seen anything in

the world more rare, from the point of view of antiquity" (Magurn

Figure 3: The Arundel Marbles: a tomb sculpture, from Humphrey Prideaux, *Marmora Oxoniensia, ex Arundellianis...*, 1676, p. 77.

1955: 320-1). As the last bit suggests, to collectors like Arundel and artists like Rubens, a primary value of the visual and plastic arts was their memorializing quality, their link to the past and the vision of permanence they implied. This is why Peacham emphasizes the importance and rarity not only of the statues but of the inscriptions: they were an essential element of the artistic power of the past. The word established the significance, the authority, of classical imagery; and modern masterpieces, the work of Giambologna, Michelangelo, Rubens, existed in a direct continuum with the arts of Greece and Rome.

They would not have seemed so to our eyes: look at some of the Arundel sculptures. Many of the figural works are tomb effigies, like the one in *figure 3*, or votive images like those in *figure 4*, from the illustrated catalogue of the marbles after they had passed from the Arundels to the University of Oxford – for us, these are archeology, not art (Prideaux 1676: 77, 82-3). But to an England in search of the classical world, they were a real link with the life of the past, especially through its death.
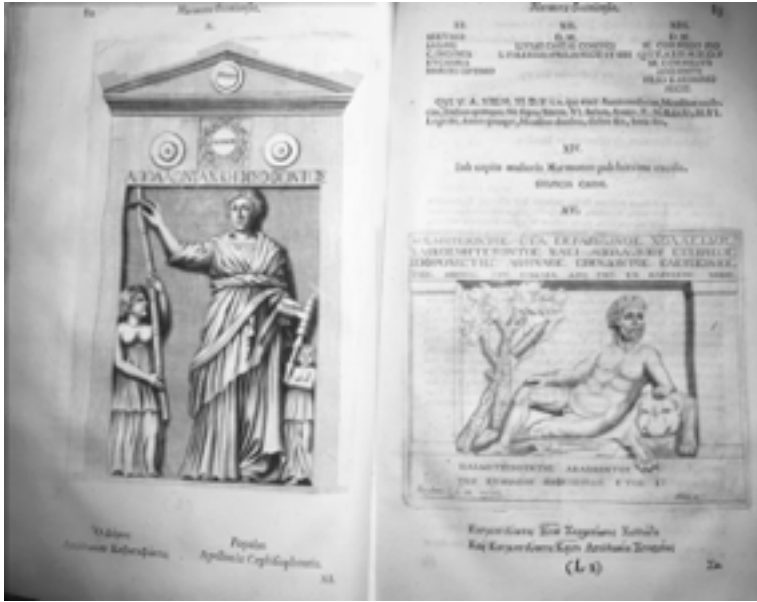
Figure 4: Votive images, from Prideaux, *Marmora*, pp. 82-3.

Moreover, the mythographers and iconographers admitted in-
to the classical pantheon a host of hybrid figures who appear to
us not at all classical, but merely grotesque. Vincenzo Cartari's
Imagini de i Dei de gli Antichi, a standard handbook for artists, in-
cludes many images like that in *figure 5*, of a hawk-headed Apollo
as the Sun with a three-headed Hecate as the moon (the heads are
a dog, a boar and a horse). In fact, classical religion was far more
strange and multifarious than classical poetry acknowledged, and
was never defined by the fixed pantheon found in literary texts,
to say nothing of purified mythology after Winckelmann, the my-
thology of Bullfinch and Robert Graves. The Olympian gods in
Virgil and Ovid are essentially engaged in domestic comedy; but
even for Ovid, the divine is a history of animal transformations
– Jove as a bull, a swan, an eagle – and even the Apollo myth be-
gins with the hero's defeat of a gigantic serpent, a divine python,
the remnant of an earlier cult which remained incorporated in-
to the worship of this most rational of the gods. This is the classi-
cal that Roberto Calasso (1988) describes, frightening, grotesque.

In late antiquity the Roman cults also imported the Egyptian gods, the dog-headed Anubis, the hawk-headed Horus and Ra, the ram-headed Khnum. The Renaissance felt no need to purge these as alien or inappropriate: the ancient gods to the sixteenth century constituted an endlessly malleable symbolic repertory. The classical was a mode of expression enabled by a pantheon of meaning.

Figure 5: Bolognino Zaltieri, Diana and Apollo as moon and sun, from Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagini dei Dei de gli Antichi*, 1571.

The meaning could be infinitely adjustable. Thus, Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, the most scholarly of the sixteenth-century mythogra-

phers, explains the figure of Saturn as variously a legendary king of Italy, a personification of heaven or of time, and a fertility figure – he sees no need to choose among these interpretations. Natalis Comes (or Conti), the most broadly influential of the mythographers after Boccaccio's pioneering *Genealogiae Deorum*, sees contradictions as of the essence in the ancient stories, not to be adjudicated or resolved. Comes, in fact, remains one of the most genuinely useful of the mythographers, precisely because of this – for Comes (as several centuries later for Lévi-Strauss) mythology is an expression of the irresolvable contradictions in culture.

4.

Let us return now to our literary texts. For most English readers, the classics were filtered through translation – necessarily in the case of Greek, which was less widely taught, but also in the case of Latin, despite the fact that Latin was taught throughout the school system, and that in so far as literature was taught, it consisted of the Latin classics. Nevertheless, there was an increasing market for translation: Latin literacy, and the refined taste it implied, did not descend very far down the social scale (remember Tottel deploring "the rude skill of common ears" – those ears belonged to a substantial proportion of the readers he was undertaking to attract). Sir Thomas More notoriously said he would rather burn his works than see them translated into English: they could then be read by the wrong people – both the uneducated, and those people who required vernacular translations of the Vulgate, Protestants. The wrong people, whether heretical or merely ignorant, were defined by their inadequate knowledge of Latin. But apparently even the literate classes needed help: the first translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Caesar's *Gallic Wars* were done from French versions, and the Greek classics posed even greater problems. I have already cited North's Plutarch, based on a French translation, and Chapman's Homer on a Latin one; but a more striking case is George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh's *Jocasta*, a version of Euripides's *Phoenician Women*, the first Greek play to be translated into English and published. The authors do certainly purport

to be translating Euripides – their title reads, "Iocasta: A Tragedie writtein in Greeke by Euripides. Translated and digested into Acte, by George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh . . . ", though in fact they are working quite faithfully from a recent Italian version by Lodovico Dolce.

Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh do not follow Dolce in one respect: Dolce says nothing whatever about Euripides – his *Giocasta* purports to be his own, though he acknowledges in a dedication that he has taken "le inventioni, le sentenze, e la testura" (the texture, the general feel) from the ancients, "dagli antichi" (1566: sig. A2r.). In fact, Dolce's indebtedness is far more complex than the English translators', and Euripides comes to him through several intermediaries. Dolce's Latin was fluent, but he knew little Greek. He used a recent Latin translation of *The Phoenician Women*, and his *Giocasta* is a free version of the play, omitting scenes and adding others, heavily reliant on Seneca's *Phoenissae*.[9] And while a fulsome dedication praises his patron's knowledge of Greek and Latin, there is no suggestion that he will recognize in *Giocasta* Euripides's (or Seneca's) *Phoenician Women*.

Perhaps all this implies is that Italian humanism felt more at home with the ancients than the British latecomers did, they saw themselves as part of a continuous tradition, and therefore more free to adapt and appropriate the classics. But by the end of the century, English writers like Marlowe, Chapman and Jonson (to say nothing of such programmatic classicists as William Gager and Thomas Watson) were quite at home with the ancient models, and not at all constrained by them – think of *Hero and Leander*. There probably were people as good at ancient Greek as Marlowe, but surely nobody had so much fun with it. But most Renaissance classicists worked the way Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh did, making use of translations and modern paraphrases to gain access to the ancient texts.

Our attitude towards that freedom has been on the whole condescending – we prize originality, and plagiarism has been a favourite charge of modern scholars against Renaissance classicism. Modern critics are usually willing to allow Renaissance

9 I have paraphrased the account by Papadopoulou 2008: 118.

authors their sources provided they are sufficiently ancient. If Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh had gone to Seneca for *Jocasta*, rather than to Lodovico Dolce, the fact probably wouldn't have been a strike against them. Even with classical sources, however, the idea of intermediate texts disturbs us. Here is a single example: E.W. Talbert, a scholar of Renaissance reference works, discovered that Ben Jonson's learned marginal annotations, such as those to *The Masque of Queens* and *Sejanus*, are often copied directly from dictionaries and encyclopedias. Talbert felt that Jonson's learning was thereby impugned. He accused the poet of lying when he claims, in the dedicatory epistle to the masque, that he wrote the work "out of the fullness and memory of my former readings".[10] To anyone who knew anything about Jonson, the accusation was nonsense – dozens of Greek and Latin texts from Jonson's library survive, with copious annotations in Jonson's hand; but as a poet constantly short of cash, he repeatedly sold off his books. When necessary, he used whatever reference works were available, including dictionaries and encyclopedias. Every age has its reference books, and a more scrupulous generation than ours may criticize us for failing to acknowledge our use of bibliographies and periodical indexes –to say nothing of Google and Wikipedia – as if we were thereby pretending to carry all the relevant scholarship in our heads.

England at the turn of the century, the England of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, was increasingly imbued with the classics – even visually, as aristocrats began adding colonnades to their houses (not always very effectively, as in the lumpish example at Hardwick Hall in *figure 6*, built in the 1590s for the formidable Bess of Shrewsbury), and churches began to look like Roman temples – *figure 7* is Wenceslas Hollar's view of St Paul's Covent Garden, designed by Inigo Jones. Books adopted the typography of Roman inscriptions for their dedications, as in *figures 8 and 9*. But the classical model was endlessly various: in the

10 Talbert 1947: 622n52; see also the earlier article (1943). The argument was called to account by Percy Simpson in *Ben Jonson* 1925-52: 640. Talbert implicitly recants in Starnes and Talbert 1955: 212; but see the amusingly self-defensive piece of scholarly gobbledygook in note 69, p. 432.

Figure 6: Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire. Public domain photo.

Figure 7: Wenceslaus Hollar, Saint Paul's Covent Garden designed by Inigo Jones, c. 1647. Private Collection.

space of four or five years Shakespeare's version of Rome moved from "a wilderness of tigers" in *Titus Andronicus* (3.1.54) to the controlled rhetoric of *Julius Caesar*; his version of the *Menaechmi*

moved from the slapstick of *The Comedy of Errors* to the poetic passion of *Twelfth Night*. Just as Renaissance Latin was a vernacular, the classical style was a mode of expression, based not on a set of rules, but on a repertory of infinitely adaptable models.
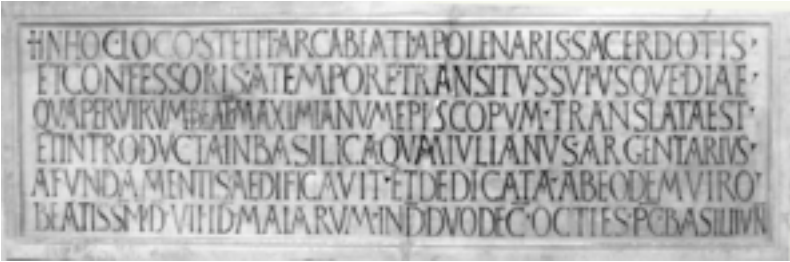

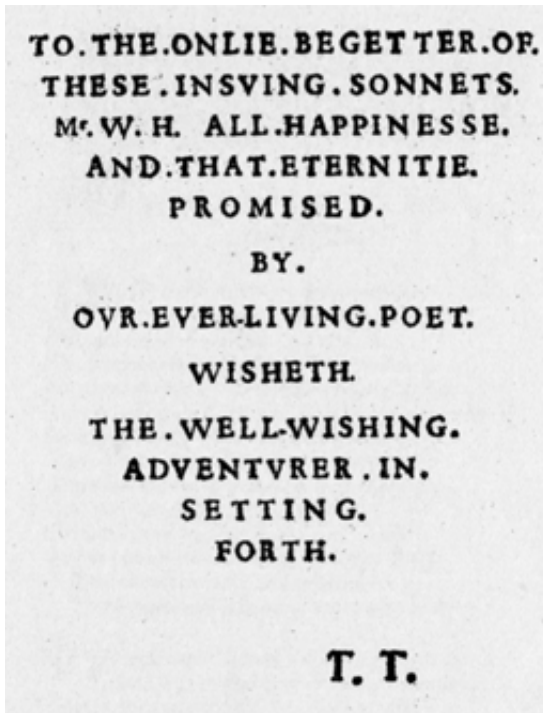*Figure 8*: Late Roman inscription. Author's photograph.

Figure 9: Dedication page of *Shake-Spears Sonnets*, 1609.

Let us look, in conclusion, at the astonishing remnant in *figure 10*, the only surviving drawing of a Shakespeare play from Shakespeare's lifetime. It looks like a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, but in fact it combines a number of actions, and gives a conspectus or epitome of the play as a whole – it is accompanied by a text that combines material from acts 1 and 5. This drawing is not an eye-witness sketch of Shakespeare on the stage; but it shows how a contemporary imagined Shakespeare in action, and is certainly informed by a theatregoer's experience. The costumes seem to us a hodgepodge, but they indicate the characters' roles, their relation to each other, and most important, their relation to us. A few elements are included to suggest the classical setting, but there is no attempt to mirror a world or recreate a historical moment. There is a Roman general at the centre, a medieval queen, two prisoners and their guard in outfits that are a mixture of Roman and Elizabethan; and the soldiers on the left are entirely modern.

Figure 10: Henry Peacham (?), a composite scene from Titus Andronicus, 1614. ©Reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire, Great Britain.

The anachronistic details serve as our guides, accounting for the figures and locating them in relation to our world. We are always told that the Renaissance stage performed history as if it

were contemporary, but an image such as this renders the claim untenable. On the contrary, the drawing provides a good index to the limitations on the imagination of otherness. Our sense of the other depends on our sense of its relation to ourselves; we understand it in so far as it differs from us, and conversely, we know ourselves through comparison and contrast, through a knowledge of what we are not – we construct the other as a way of affirming the self. The anachronisms here (and, indeed, throughout Shakespeare's drama), far from being incidental or inept, are essential; they are what locate us in history. The meaningful re-creation of the past requires the semiotics of the present. Anachronism is essential to the very notion of historical relevance itself, which assumes that the past speaks to, and is in some way a version of, the present. Sometimes it was a threatening version: hence Jonson's arrest over *Sejanus*, the suppression of the deposition scene in *Richard II*, the banning of John Hayward's *History of Henry the Fourth*. Nothing in the past is safely in the past, and the dark side of how productive classical models were was how dangerously pertinent they could also be.

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