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SHAKESPEARE'S LONDON AND ANCIENT ROME

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In November 1597 the local tax collector in the city parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, reported the names of a number of local residents whose payments had been due a year before and who were in default. Among them was a certain William Shakespeare. He was assessed again, in October 1598 – thirteen shillings and four pence due on his goods valued at five pounds, payment required the following winter. One wonders what those goods were: books, perhaps? Again, he did not pay. In 1600, the overdue sum was referred to the Bishop of Winchester, who had authority in the liberty of the Clink, on the south side of the river in Bankside and thus outside the jurisdiction of the city sheriff.

The logical inference is that from 1595 or 1596 to 1598 Shakespeare had a London residence in Bishopsgate, but that by the turn of the century he had crossed the water to Bankside. This is consistent with what we know of the movements of his acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Upon their formation in 1594, they played at the modestly-named Theatre in Shoreditch; in 1597, following problems with their landlord, they moved to the nearby Curtain. Then, between Christmas and New Year 1598, they stole back to the deserted Theatre by night, accompanied by an accomplished carpenter called Peter Street and some dozen workmen, dismantled the structure and put the timbers into storage in Street's yard near the Bridewell jail. In the spring, they shipped the materials across the river and built the Globe, not far from the site of the reconstruction that stands beside the river today, near Southwark Cathedral.

The authorities in the city of London did not approve of playhouses. Theatre in the afternoon meant absenteeism on the part of apprentices and mischief among merchants' wives. The theatres were accordingly located in the "liberties" on the margins of the city. As my first piece of research for this lecture, I walked from St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, to Curtain Road, Shoreditch, the site of those first two theatres. It took just under fifteen minutes: an easy commute for Shakespeare, during which he could mull over the plays he wrote for his company in these pre-Globe years. And what a group of plays they are: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and the lost *Love's Labour's Won*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing*; *Richard II* and the two parts of *King Henry IV*, in which the Boar's Head tavern on Eastcheap, a ten minute walk in the opposite direction, is the key location.

It made sense for Shakespeare to move across the river in 1599, in order to be close to his new theatre, for which he wrote a new comedy, a new history play and a new tragedy: *As You Like It*, *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*. He was out of reach of the taxman – though a couple of years later, he moved back into the city, where he lodged in Silver Street in the home of a French Huguenot called Mountjoy and his wigmaker wife, which is now buried somewhere beneath the Barbican.

Shakespeare could have been fined for not paying his taxes. He could also have been fined for failing to attend church, as his father had been back home in Stratford-upon-Avon. Records are patchy, so we do not know whether he was marked for non-attendance at St Helen's. But given the duration of his assessment as a resident of the parish, it would be highly unlikely for him never to have darkened its doors. What would he have found inside?



St Helen's survived the Great Fire and the Blitz, though it was badly damaged by IRA bombs in the early 1990s. The first thing one notices going into it today is a distinctive double nave. That is because it was built as a two-for-the-price-of-one place of worship. There was a wall down the middle. One side was for the lay people of the parish. The other was for nuns. This part of Bishopsgate was originally occupied by a Benedictine priory. Following the dissolution of the monasteries, the refectory became the livery hall of the Leathersellers and the curtain wall between the two naves was removed, giving the whole of the church over to the parish. The rest of the priory fell to ruin. Here in the city, as well as in the country, Shakespeare's England was a place where you could go – as a Goth soldier somewhat incongruously does in *Titus Andronicus* – to 'gaze upon a ruinous monastery' (5. 1. 21) and where a metaphor for the ravages of time and the decay of all things could be found in 'Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang' (Sonnet 73).

A place, that is, where reminders of the old faith were ever present. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of the father speaks of residence in Purgatory, a Roman Catholic idea abolished in Protestant thought, while the son goes to university at Wittenberg, *alma mater* of Martin Luther, architect of the Reformation. In *Measure for Measure*, a Puritan called Angelo is pitted against a novice nun called Isabella. One element in the authorial background of that play is the fact that Shakespeare had an aunt called Isabella who was the prioress of a Benedictine nunnery at Wroxall in Warwickshire, just thirteen miles from Stratford. Another might be Shakespeare's imagination setting to work as he sat or knelt, probably bored, one Sunday in St Helen's church during his years of residence in the parish: as he thought of the old curtain wall, the embodiment of the boundary between an enclosed priory and a bustling city of commerce, legal dispute and sexual intrigue, the seed might have been sown for a dark comedy in which a pimp visits a nunnery in the heart of a steamy city.

But that is speculation. What we can say for sure is that there were a number of monuments in the church. Among them, just above an imposing altar tomb in the nave of what was originally the nun's half of the church, there was a memorial to William Bond, died 1576, flanked by Corinthian columns and bearing an inscription, split across the two sides of the mural and laid out as verse:

Flos mercatorum, quos terra Britannia creavit,
Ecce sub hoc tumulo Gulielmus Bondus humatur.
Ille mari multum passus per saxa per undas
Ditavit patrias peregrinis mercibus oras.
Magnanimum Græci mirantur Iasona vates
Aurea de gelido retulit quia vellera Phasi. /
Græcia doctu tace, graii concedite vates.
Hic jacet argolico mercator Iasone Major
Vellera multa tulit magis aurea vellere Phruxi
Et freta multa scidit magis ardua Phasidos undis.
Hei mihi quod nullo mors est superabilis auro
Flos mercatorum Gulielmus Bondus humatur.

To take the key points from this: Bond, buried here, is the "flower" of merchants. Born of Britannia, he has sailed the seas, braving great dangers, in order to enrich his native land with foreign merchandise. As ancient poets have praised Jason for winning the Golden Fleece from the king of Colchis, so Bond must be praised because he is a new Argonaut, a greater Jason, who was won many fleeces, vast quantities of gold. Death cannot overcome the honoured memory of this flower of merchants. Bond was an alderman and sheriff of the city who, as the monument makes clear, accumulated great wealth as a "merchant adventurer". He was, incidentally, the brother of Sir George Bond, who became Lord Mayor in the Armada year, which happens to be the first year when William Shakespeare is recorded in London, acting for his family in a legal case.

I am intrigued by the thought of Shakespeare reading this inscription on Bond's monument. Or, if not Shakespeare himself, then certain members of the theatre audience at the Curtain doing so – or indeed readers of the scripts of Shakespeare's plays that were available from the booksellers a fifteen minute walk away in St Paul's churchyard. For two reasons: first, the obvious fact that it is in Latin. The monument itself shows Bond



and his wife and their six sons and one daughter kneeling, at prayer, to reveal their piety and the sure hope of his eternal salvation. But the flanking Corinthian pillars and the language of the inscription are reminders to the viewer that, even (or maybe *especially*) though church and state had broken from the Roman church, the culture of Elizabethan England measured itself by – forged itself in the image of – ancient Rome. Latin was the language of the grammar school: anyone with even a rudimentary education would have been able to read the inscription.

The second matter of interest is the comparison used to praise William Bond and assert his fame. He is described as another Jason and his merchant sailors are seen as new Argonauts. The comparison is a perfect example of a way of thinking that was utterly characteristic of the age of Shakespeare: understanding and judgment in the present are shaped and bolstered by measurement against the classical past, evocation of the exemplars of ancient Greece and Rome.

We may date *The Merchant of Venice* with a degree of certainty. In a book published in 1598 that reveals close knowledge of Shakespeare's plays on stage, a clergyman named Francis Meres listed it among his comedies. In July that year it was registered for publication. A reference to a ship called the Andrew suggests a date of late 1596 or early 1597, because that was the time when a Spanish vessel called the St Andrew was much in the news, having been captured during the assault on Cadiz. Shakespeare's merchant adventurer play, then, was written whilst he was resident in the parish of St Helen's.

Bassanio, in the opening scene:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues ...
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1. 1. 163-74)

And his fellow-adventurer Gratiano, after Bassanio achieves the rich prize of Portia's fortune:

How doth that royal merchant, good Antonio?
I know he will be glad of our success,
We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece. (3. 2. 243-5)

I am not trying to suggest that Shakespeare made the comparison between Bassanio and Jason as a result of reading the words on the monument in the church comparing Bond to Jason (though it is a nice coincidence that the word "bond" is at the very heart of the play – 39 of the 73 Shakespearean occurrences of the word are in *The Merchant*, mostly in the context of the bond between Antonio and Shylock over a loan and a pound of flesh). My point is rather that Shakespeare the dramatist and the anonymous author of the inscription on Bond's funeral monument share a frame of mind in which they reach instinctively for the example of Jason as they extol the exploits of a modern merchant adventurer. During the 1560s, while Bond was making his fortune by land and sea, Arthur Golding was at work on the English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that would be read by Shakespeare and in which the story of Jason and the Argonauts was transmitted to an Elizabethan readership. In his prefatory epistle, Golding explained that

The good successe of Jason in the land of Colchos, and
The dooings of Medea since, do give to understand
That nothing is so hard but peyne and travail doo it win,
For fortune ever favoereth such as boldly doo begin.



“Travail” is a pun on “hard work” and “travel”. As far as the writer of the encomium to Bond was concerned, his arduous labours by land and sea, like those of Jason, proved the adage that fortune favours the brave. The message of Shakespeare’s play is rather more complicated, as is hinted by the presence there of the name of Medea as well as Jason, but that is something we will come to later.

The Merchant of Venice, with its trading argosies at sea, its commercial bonds and legal disputes at home, is very much a play of the modern city. As often in the drama of the period, an Italian setting is used as a kind of body double for an English one. The powerful men of the city of London were suspicious enough of the world of theatre without adding to their hostility by coming too close to home. The contentious matter of usury, lending money at interest, was best displaced to Venice and the Jew. But the displacement invites reflection upon the parallels. When the dispute with Shylock over the bond is referred to the courts, Antonio says

The duke cannot deny the course of law,
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of his state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. (3. 3. 29-34)

A London audience hearing these lines spoken at the Curtain in 1597 or 1598 would have thought of their own city: the “trade and profit” of London, in the first age of globalization, depended on “strangers” (traders from abroad, but also resident aliens) having full confidence in the legal system, particularly when it came to the enforcement of contracts. For Shakespeare’s original audience, there was a clear sense in which the conduct of business on the Rialto mirrored that in the Royal Exchange in London. So it is to say the least suggestive that Shakespeare hatched the play when he lived in Bishopsgate: for in St Helen’s church he would also have seen the tomb of the most famous Merchant of London, Sir Thomas Gresham. It is indeed the altar tomb just below the monument to William Bond. Furthermore, one of the principal landmarks of the parish was Gresham’s mansion.

We will come in a moment to what was going on there while Shakespeare was writing and premiering *The Merchant of Venice*, but first let us walk five hundred yards down the road to the building that was opened by Queen Elizabeth I in January 1571, on a site provided by the City of London Corporation and the Worshipful Company of Mercers. At the suggestion of his factor, Gresham had the vision of a commercial centre for the city. Having made his money as a businessman in the Low Countries, he had a model to hand: the design of the Royal Exchange was based on that of the *bourse* in Antwerp, the city that had been Europe’s greatest trading centre throughout the first half of the sixteenth century. So it is that in Thomas Heywood’s play *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, which combines the story of the building of the Exchange with the defeat of the Spanish Armada, a Lord is imagined standing in front of the new building, saying that he has never seen a “goodlier frame” in all his life:

yet I have been in Venice,
In the Rialto there called St Mark’s:
’Tis but a bauble if compared to this.
The nearest that which most resembles this,
Is the great Burse in Anwerp, yet not comparable
Either in height or wideness, the fair cellarage,
Or goodly shops above: O my Lord Mayor,
This Gresham hath much graced your city London,
His fame will long out-live him.

As indeed it has.



But now look at an engraving of the Bourse that was Gresham's model: it bears a tabular inscription headed with the initials "S. P. Q. A." That is to say, *Senatus Populusque Antwerpum*. Rome was the centre of the ancient world. Thus Antwerp proclaims itself the centre of the modern world. For a time, the boast was justified: the historian Fernand Braudel argues that by the mid-sixteenth century Antwerp had become not merely the richest city in Europe but "the centre of the *entire* international economy". In this, it was the true successor to Venice. But, as Venice had begun its long slow decline, so Antwerp's moment passed: the religious wars in the Low Countries broke out in the 1560s and in 1576 the city was sacked in a fit of Spanish Fury. Gresham's timing was impeccable: if Venice was Antwerp's predecessor, London was its successor. As the *bourse* had taken over from the Rialto, now the Royal Exchange took over from the *bourse* as the engine room of the world economy.

Each great trading city in early modern Europe thus sought to outdo the others in claiming to be the modern descendant of ancient Rome. So it was that the Temple of Janus built for the 1604 coronation procession of King James was emblazoned with the initials "S. P. Q. L." – *Senatus Populusque Londinium*." Shakespeare lived in a neo-Roman world. He was drilled in that idea from an early age. His own plays were part of a national project to invent a new cultural heritage on the model of ancient Rome, not least as a form of resistance to the Catholic authority of modern Rome.

Look around Shakespeare's London. His culture – visually, verbally, and in its customs – was as steeped in the examples of antiquity as it was in the habits of Christianity. Yes, the skyline of the famous Visscher panorama of London is dominated by the tower of old St Paul's and dozens of church spires, but the engraving's inscriptions are in Latin – the title is "*Londinum Florentissima Britanniae Urbs Toto Orbe Celeberrimum Emporiumque*", while "*Thamesis Fluvius*" flows through the middle – and the theatres in the foreground are of a form that, as the tourist Johannes de Witt put it when sketching the Swan, "seems to bear the appearance of a Roman work". Indeed, in labeling the parts of the theatre for the benefit of a friend back home in the Netherlands, de Witt used Roman terms: *proscenium* for the stage, *mimorum aedes* for the tiring-house, *ingressus* for the entrance, *planities* or *arena* for the yard or pit. Elsewhere in his *Observationes Londiniensis*, which only survives in fragmentary form, de Witt noted that London had four theatres, which he called *amphiteatra*, a classical term that he probably derived from Justus Lipsius' treatise *De Amphiteatro* (1584), which attempted to reconstruct the Colosseum in Rome.

If we follow another European tourist around London in 1599, the year when Shakespeare moved from Bishopsgate to Southwark, we find allusions to ancient Rome everywhere. The man in question is Philip Hentzner, a tutor accompanying a minor German aristocrat on his grand tour. London, writes Hentzner in his notebook,

the head and metropolis of England: called by Tacitus, Londinium; by Ptolemy, Logidinium; by Ammianus Marcellinus, Lundinium; by foreigners, Londra, and Londres; it is the seat of the British Empire, and the chamber of the English kings ... and was originally founded, as all historians agree, by Brutus, who, coming from Greece into Italy, thence into Africa, next into France, and last into Britain, chose this situation for the convenience of the river, calling it Troia Nova, which name was afterwards corrupted into Trinovant. But when Lud, the brother of Cassibilan, or Cassivelan, who warred against Julius Caesar, as he himself mentions (lib. v. *de Bell. Gall.*), came to the crown, he encompassed it with very strong walls, and towers very artfully constructed, and from his own name called it ... Lud's City. This name was corrupted ... again in time, by change of language, into Londres.

I will return in a later lecture to the idea that Britain was founded by Brutus, legendary descendant of Aeneas, and to the war between the Romans who came to Britain in the generation after Julius Caesar and Cassibilan's nephew Cunobelan, otherwise known as Cymbeline. But for now, the point to note is that Hentzner is buying into the myth that, like ancient Rome, modern London saw itself as a new Troy.

King Lud was buried in Ludgate, which Hentzner observes as the oldest entrance into the city. "Though others", he notes, imagine rather that the gate was originally "named Fludgate, from a stream over which it



stands, like the Porta Fluentana at Rome”. Whichever story you buy into, ancient Rome is the point of comparison. Similarly when Hentzner takes a tour of Westminster Abbey. He observes “the chair on which the kings are seated when they are crowned”. In it is enclosed a stone. Its sacred power is attributed to the Judaeo-Christian tradition: it is said to be the stone on which the patriarch Jacob slept when he dreamed he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven, angels descending upon it. But the Latin verses “written upon a tablet hanging near it” not only tell this story but also inform the visitor that “Edward I, the Mars and Hector of England, having conquered Scotland, brought it from thence”. The military heroism that enabled King Edward to steal the Stone of Scone is defined by a comparison of him to the Roman god of war and the exemplary Trojan hero, Hector.

Again, when Hentzner’s tour takes him to the Tower of London, we learn that the “very ancient and very strong” White Tower, enclosed with four others, “in the opinion of some, was built by Julius Caesar”. The Tower that we see (correctly) as a symbol of the Norman conquest, the Elizabethans (fancifully) construed as a vestige of the Romans in Britain. Thus Shakespeare, towards the end of *Richard II*, with the deposed king about to enter under guard, using the Tower to tell his audience that the scene to be imagined is a London street:

QUEEN This way the king will come. This is the way
To Julius Caesar’s ill-erected tower,
To whose flint bosom my condemnèd lord
Is doomed a prisoner. (5. 1. 1-4)

“Flint” economically plays on the materiality of the White Tower and the harshness of the prison conditions within.

Richard II is not the only Shakespearean royal to be taken to the Tower. Here is one of the boy Princes on the way to his fate in *Richard III*:

PRINCE EDWARD I do not like the Tower, of any place.—
Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?
BUCKINGHAM He did, my gracious lord, begin that place,
Which, since, succeeding ages have re-edified.
PRINCE EDWARD Is it upon record? Or else reported
Successively from age to age, he built it?
BUCKINGHAM Upon record, my gracious lord. (3. 1. 68-74)

It is a shame that the Prince is about to be slaughtered. He is clearly a clever schoolboy, a budding historian eager to question his sources and warn against the unreliability of oral tradition, otherwise known as legend. Here, Shakespeare is gently poking fun at the “Romans in Britain” tradition, as he will do more sustainedly in *Cymbeline* near the end of his career.

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Ancient Rome, then, was everywhere in Shakespeare’s London. And the stories of ancient Greece and Rome were everywhere in Shakespeare. These connections will be my theme in my first year of Gresham lectures.

When we speak of Shakespeare and Rome, we usually think of the four plays that the Royal Shakespeare Company is staging round the corner at the Barbican in its current season: the early bloodfest of *Titus Andronicus* and the three mature tragedies of *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. It is easy to forget that no fewer than thirteen of his forty or so works are set in the world of ancient Greece or Rome. That constitutes one-third of his corpus, a body of work ranging from erotic and narrative poetry to tragedy to comedy to ancient history to satire to romance, covering a timespan from the Trojan war to fifth-century Athens to the early years of Rome to the assassination of Julius Caesar to the Roman empire, with excursions into mythological narrative, Hellenistic seafaring romance and more.



The Comedy of Errors is a free adaptation of the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, with embellishments from the same author's *Amphytrion*. *Titus Andronicus* is a tragedy in the style of Seneca that brings onto stage the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. *Venus and Adonis* is also developed from the *Metamorphoses*, while *The Rape of Lucrece* is derived from a fusion of Livy's *History of Rome* with Ovid's *Fasti*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in the mythical Greece of Theseus and Hippolyta whilst incorporating a dramatization of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe story. The three tragedies traditionally grouped together as "The Roman Plays" – *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* – are all based closely on Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* in the English translation of Thomas North. *Troilus and Cressida* draws on both classical and medieval narrations of the matter of Troy. *Timon of Athens* brings Plutarch's life of Alcibiades together with a satirical dialogue by Lucian. *Pericles* is in a tradition that dates back to third century Greek romance. The world of *Cymbeline* holds chronicle histories concerning the Roman occupation of Britain together with the appearance of Jupiter as a *deus ex machina*; its style of narrative is, like that of *Pericles*, shaped by Hellenistic romance (in particular the *Aethiopian Tale* of Heliodorus).

Among Shakespeare's characters are not only such famous figures from the classical tradition as Venus and Hymen, Theseus and Hippolyta, Achilles and Hector, Lucrece and Alcibiades, Caesar and Cleopatra, but also Soothsayers, Goths sacking Rome, and (by report) the Delphic oracle of Apollo. Furthermore, all his works, wherever and whenever set, include frequent allusions to the mythology, literature, history and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. And his favourite books were either classical works or contemporary ones influenced by the classics.

Where did all of this begin? Patterns of thought are learned at school. It was Stratford-upon-Avon grammar school that formed the mind of young William – to whom he surely nods in the scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (his most English play) where a Welsh schoolmaster (he apparently had one himself) gives a Latin lesson to a bright but cheeky schoolboy called William.

Sir Hugh Evans's hig, hag and hog are a comic reminder of the tedium of Elizabethan early years education, which was all accident and syntax. But once one had grasped the essentials of Lily's Latin grammar, there were rewards in store.

Play acting, for one thing. The dramatization of scenes from classical myth and history was a common schoolroom task of a kind evoked in the memory of Julia disguised as the boy Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

For I did play a lamentable part:
Madam, 'twas Ariadne, passioning
For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight,
Which I so lively acted with my tears
That my poor mistress, movèd therewithal,
Wept bitterly; and would I might be dead
If I in thought felt not her very sorrow. (4. 4. 150-56)

Emotional education – the art of "passioning" – is taught by way of a dramatization of one of the stories in Ovid's *Heroides*. The rhetorical art of persuading listeners to change their minds here becomes a dramatic art of moving an audience to tears – in anticipation of the player's speech to Hamlet.

And exemplary stories, for another: in *Titus Andronicus*, a schoolboy's book is the device whereby the silenced and mutilated Lavinia reveals her own history:

Soft, so busily she turns the leaves!
What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape –
And rape, I fear, was root of thine annoy. (4. 1. 47-51)



Storytelling was Shakespeare's method of making sense of the world and no stories caught his imagination more fully than those of classical antiquity. "What books readeth your master unto you?" asks the interlocutor's voice in a language textbook printed in 1591 by Shakespeare's schoolfellow Richard Field: "he readeth Terence, Virgil, Horace, Tully's *Offices*." Shakespeare's encounters with these authors in grammar school laid the foundations of his art: Terence introduced him to comedy, Virgil to the heroic idiom, Horace to lyrical, occasional and satirical poetry, and Tully (Cicero) to thoughtful reflection upon ethics, politics and public duty.

But it wasn't only the stories, the character types and the literary genres. Most fundamentally, it was at the grammar school that Shakespeare learnt the art of rhetoric – the persuasive use of words, the elaboration of linguistic figures, the ability to argue both sides of a case. This art of rhetoric provided him with the building blocks of his literary achievement. That was his technique, his mode of writing. And it brings us back to the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, during Shakespeare's residence there in the late 1590s.

Why are we here today? Because Sir Thomas Gresham specified in his will that his house in Bishopsgate should be turned into a College, where a Professor of Rhetoric should enlighten the citizens of London upon that subject:

The solemn rhetoric lecture is to be read twice every week in the term time upon Saturday; whereof the first must be in Latin from eight of the clock until nine of the clock in the forenoon of the same day and the later to be in English, from two of the clock in the afternoon until three of the clock of the same day.

In Latin for the university educated and the international visitors – London was becoming a place of intellectual as well as commercial exchange – and in English for those who had not had the benefit of an Oxford or Cambridge education. Perhaps even for such people as the country grammar school boy who was making a splash in the theatre world despite being mocked by the Oxbridge writers as an "upstart crow".

Of course it is a fancy to imagine Shakespeare taking a break from the rehearsal of *The Merchant of Venice* or the writing of *Hamlet* and popping over the road to listen to Richard Ball delivering the inaugural Gresham Lecture on Rhetoric during Michaelmas Term 1598. But people who attend public lectures are often the kind of people who also attend plays, so it is by no means fanciful to suppose that some of Shakespeare's original city of London audience would have been at some of those early lectures on rhetoric. The texts do not survive, so we can only guess at the content. But as good a guess as any would be to imagine that the inaugural lecture began along lines similar to these:

What is Rhetorique?

Rhetorique is an Arte to set forth by utteraunce of words, matter at large, or (as *Cicero* doth say) it is a learned, or rather an artificiall declaration of the mynd, in the handling of any cause, called in contention, that may through reason largely be discussed.

¶ *The matter whereupon an Oratour must speake.*

An Orator must be able to speake fully of al those questions, which by lawe & mans ordinance are enacted, and appointed for the use and profite of man, such as are thought apt for the tongue to set forwarde ...

¶ *Of questions.*

Every question or demaund in things, is of two sortes. Either it is an infinite question, & without end, or els it is definite, and comprehended within some ende.



Those questions are called infinite, which generally are propounded, without the comprehension of tyme, place, and persone, or any such like: that is to say, when no certaine thing is named, but onely words are generally spoken. As thus, whether it be best to marrie, or to live single. Which is better, a courtiers life, or a Scholers life.

Those questions are called definite, which set forth a matter, with the appointment and naming of place, time, and person. As thus. Whether now it be best here in Englande, for a Priest to Marrie, or to live single. Whether it were meete for the [queen's] Majestie that nowe is, to marrie with a stranger, or to marrie with one of [her] owne Subiects. Now the definite question (as the which concerneth some one person) is most agreeing to the purpose of an Orator, considering particuler matters in the law, are ever debated betwixt certaine persons, the one affirming for his parte, and the other denying as fast againe for his parte.

That is actually the opening of Thomas Wilson's *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), the first vernacular treatise on a subject that had a history going back via Erasmus and Vives in the early sixteenth century humanist educational revolution, through Quintilian and Cicero in ancient Rome, to Aristotle and ultimately the Sophists of ancient Athens. The famous Sophist Gorgias said that a successful rhetorician could speak convincingly on any topic, regardless of his experience in that field. If you are a good enough orator, you can argue that Helen of Troy was not to blame for the start of the Trojan war. That was the kind of irresponsible line of argument of which Plato thoroughly disapproved. His strictures upon rhetoric led in turn to Aristotle's defence and codification of the art of rhetoric. And so the story continued through the centuries.

What is rhetoric? "The declaration of the mind" in persuasive, well-organized and memorable words. What is the appropriate subject-matter for rhetoric? Any question that is of "use and profit" for humankind. What kind of questions? Ultimately unanswerable (or "infinite") ones, such as the relative merits of the active and the contemplative life, of marriage or the single life. Certainly, too, such unanswerables as Hamlet's "To be or not to be, that is the question" – or, as William James rephrased the question, "Is life worth living?" But also answerable (or "finite") ones, such as the religious question of priestly celibacy and the political one of royal marriages. And especially legal questions. Lawyers – who resided in the Inns of Court and of Chancery, and many of whom attended the theatres, or commissioned special performances from Shakespeare's acting company, and no doubt sat in on Gresham lectures – were trained in the art of rhetoric because it taught them the art of debate, "the one affirming for his parte, and the other denying as fast againe for his parte", which gave them the skill to argue on behalf of either a plaintiff or a defendant.

Once one sees rhetoric in these terms, it becomes clear that it is Shakespeare's essential tool. His plays explore all the big questions, such as the pros and cons of marriage, the rights and wrongs of monarchical behaviour, the case for and against revenge, the weighing of justice and mercy, the relationship between public and private selves. His characters are orators, each using language to affirm for his part as another denies as fast again for her part. Shakespeare's rhetoric runs the gamut from the razor-sharp banter of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing* to the formal orations of Brutus and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* to Hamlet's restless asking of the "infinite", the unanswerable, questions.

The inaugural Gresham lecture on rhetoric of 1598 in all probability referred at some point to Aristotle's influential anatomy of rhetoric into three kinds: forensic (essentially legal), epideictic (the language of praise, especially useful for public ceremonies), and deliberative. For Aristotle and Cicero, deliberative rhetoric took place in the political arena: its purpose was to offer counsel about appropriate actions in pursuit of the public good. Deliberation relied especially on a technique whereby an argument was made using examples from the past to predict future outcomes in order to illustrate that a given policy or action would be either harmful or beneficial in the future. Broadly speaking, it was an art of *comparison* or *example*. "The comparison should be with famous men; that will strengthen your case; it is a noble thing to surpass men who are themselves great ... 'Examples' are most suitable to deliberative speeches; for we judge of future events by divination from past events."



Such an art is applicable in any public forum, not merely a court or council, senate or parliament. Deliberative rhetoric thus had a very wide application. And in Shakespeare's London, the theatre was a new and democratic space for open debate about both public goods and private lives. The deliberative technique was, I believe, something that Shakespeare practiced in almost everything he wrote. To support this argument, in my next four lectures, I want to show how he used "divination from past events" in the form of classical examples to explore four key aspects of human life: erotic love (the realm of Venus), heroic action (the realm of Mars), civic duty (where the example of Cicero, Roman master-rhetorician, is a key), and the encounter with the uncanny or the supernatural world as manifested in ghosts and spirits (here we will flit between Seneca, Ovid and Renaissance neo-Platonism).

But to end for today on a lighter note. Although I will be arguing that Shakespeare's imagination was shaped by the art of rhetoric, broadly conceived and particularly exemplified by divination from the classical past, he was far too clever to be content with the elaboration of ingenious verbal tropes and schemes to which this ancient art was often reduced in the teaching and writing of his age. Rhetoric made him, but he also rejoiced in the parodying of pedantic figurative rhetoric, demonstrated most fully in the delicious verbosity of Holofernes and Don Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*, a play that might just as well have been called "rhetoric's labours lost". In the following passage, the Spanish Don's love letter to the dairymaid Jaquenetta takes the question and answer technique of rhetoric to something of an extreme:

The magnanimous and most illustrate king Cophetua set eye upon the pernicious and indubitate beggar Zenelophon, and he it was that might rightly say, *Veni, vidi, vici*, which to annothanize in the vulgar,—O base and obscure vulgar!—*videlicet*, he came, saw and overcame, He came, one; saw, two; overcame, three. Who came? The king. Why did he come? To see. Why did he see? To overcome. To whom came he? To the beggar. What saw he? The beggar. Who overcame he? The beggar. The conclusion is victory. On whose side? The king's. The captive is enriched. On whose side? The beggar's. The catastrophe is a nuptial. On whose side? The king's. No, on both in one, or one in both. I am the king, for so stands the comparison: thou the beggar; for so witnesseth thy lowliness. (4. 1. 64-73)

And so forth.

And then there is the punchline that brings to a (temporary) stop the absurd rhetorical amplitude of that courtier too much in love with the sound of his own voice, Polonius of Elsinore. I will be brief:

My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night is night, and time is time.
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief: your noble son is mad. (*Hamlet*, 2. 2. 91-7)

Thank you.