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Book Review by Timothy W. Burns

SMALL LATIN AND LESS GREEK

Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity, by Colin Burrow.
Oxford University Press, 304 pages, \$75 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper)



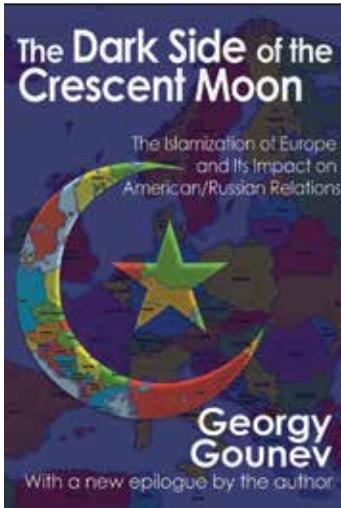
IN A VERSE EULOGY PREFIXED TO THE First Folio, Ben Jonson famously wrote that William Shakespeare had “small Latin and less Greek.” Colin Burrow sets out to refute the implications of the line—that Shakespeare had native genius but lacked classical learning—by demonstrating that he knew a good deal of classical literature quite well, and that understanding the subtle and surprising things he did with that knowledge is crucial to appreciating his plays. But Burrow would have us avoid seeing Shakespeare as part of a renaissance retrieval project, or as a romantic curator of a remote and homogeneous “classical” world. His Shakespeare is someone for whom ancient works were alive and could reveal important truths.

A senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, Burrow acknowledges that Shakespeare’s “knowledge of the classics was substantially that of an extremely clever Elizabethan grammar-school boy...used to brilliant effect,” an admission that some readers may find fatal. Yet much depends on what Elizabethan grammar-school boys actually learned, and how Shakespeare made use of it. King’s School at Stratford was not Westminster, but the study of literature (mostly Latin, with Greek enough to read the New Testament)

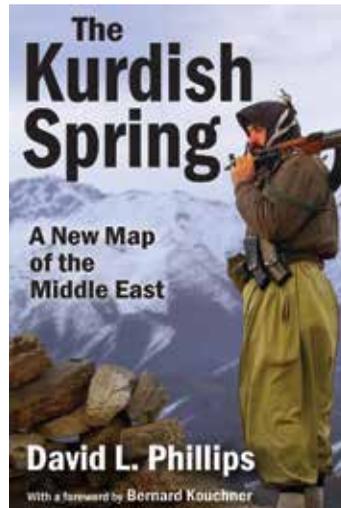
was “far more important” in such schools than the study of science (“maths”). And Burrow reminds us that the boys’ education was remarkable not only for its reading of ancient texts (including Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*) but for its disposition toward those texts. It was not uncommon for young men of Shakespeare’s generation to read Cicero, Ovid, Horace, Plautus, and (for those in universities) Plutarch, Plato, and Aristotle in order to learn “how to live in the present”; for them engagement with the literature was “driven by need and use” and could have “a moral effect on the present.” This approach to literature—so very different from today’s historicist approaches—Shakespeare encountered above all in Plutarch, whose comparisons of Greeks with Romans “added a transtemporal ethical perspective, which assumes that human actions can be judged according to the same criteria irrespective of time and place, to the ethnographical perspective of individual lives.” The approach makes sense if there are permanent human questions and corresponding answers that transcend time and place. Burrow does not himself make an attempt to establish that there are, but his Shakespeare was convinced that there are, and (happily for us) determined to present those questions and answers on the stage.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT SHAKESPEARE was oblivious of the differences between Elizabethan England and ancient Rome or Athens. Rather, he could think “both historically and unhistorically at once.” He was open to the possibility that what was to be learned from accounts of the speeches and deeds of citizens of an ancient city might well be unavailable in, and superior to, the wisdom of his own day. And the translations of classical texts that were appearing with increasing frequency in Shakespeare’s lifetime (Thomas North’s 1579 translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, for example, or George Chapman’s translations of Homer, which began appearing in 1598) meant that, if not Shakespeare himself, then others who needed to rely on translations of classical literature were not without recourse. For this and other reasons it was a remarkably fruitful time for the cultivation of natural gifts like Shakespeare’s. And Shakespeare’s use of his grammar-school education and of the great learning he acquired afterwards—perhaps making use of the libraries of noblemen, patrons, or friends—was astonishingly wide and deep.

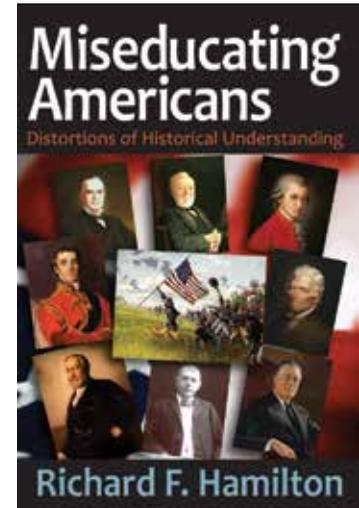
In explaining how that learning shows itself, Burrow eschews “traditional source-study, of the kind that lists direct allusions” hunted



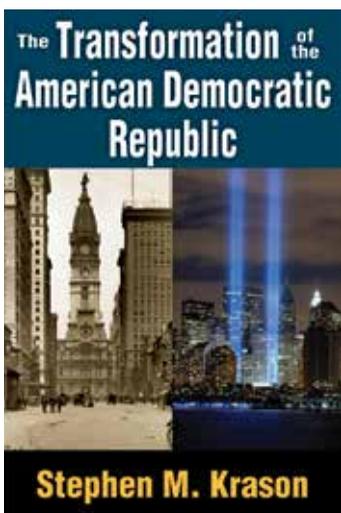
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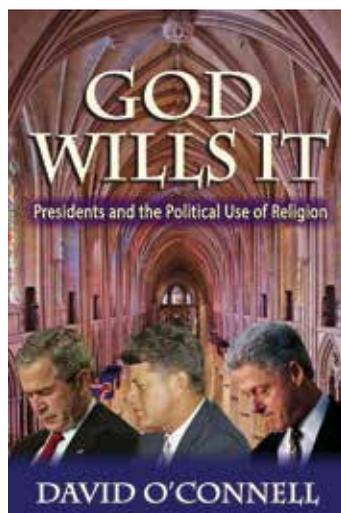
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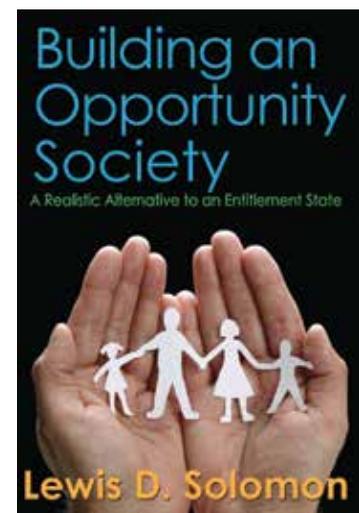
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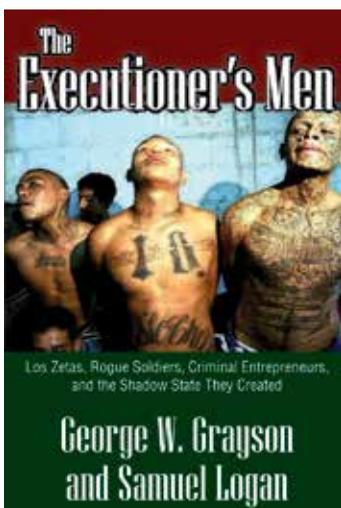
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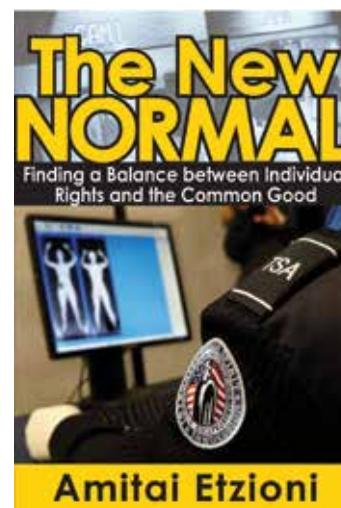
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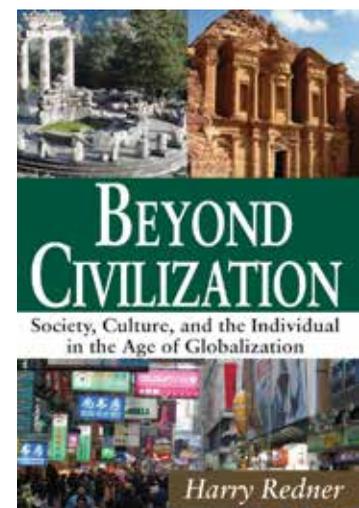
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down by “traditional source-hunters.” He is aware, for example, that *The Comedy of Errors* is a melding of several plays by Plautus, but he isn’t interested in these direct influences of story line or script. Instead, he sets out to discover influences at once subtler and more far-reaching. For example, one important effect of the reading of Latin texts was to provide Shakespeare with “many works which ascribed enormous rhetorical skill and power to women,” with which his own plays abound. More broadly, Burrow’s classically trained playwright, initially constrained by the circumstance of non-aristocratic birth and education, set out to overcome those constraints. Contemporary playwrights and rivals had university degrees, and Shakespeare wished to avoid the kind of drubbing that Gabriel Harvey gave to the less educated Thomas Nashe for ostentatious display of “grammar-school wit” and learning.

Shakespeare knew that when playing before aristocrats few things could be more gauche than trying to prove how learned one is. So while he could, for example, have Lucentio use lines from Ovid’s *Heroides* to great effect in *The Taming of the Shrew*, choosing an epistle from Penelope to Ulysses that mirrored the situation on the stage, more typical are his comical scenes of bunglers misunderstanding classical lines.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, SHAKESPEARE learned how to write both from performing Latin composition and from reading Latin authors. And, as boys were supposed to, he learned virtue and eloquence from reading the classics, but he also learned to raise questions about virtue. In this connection, Burrow three times alludes to the art of careful writing needed and practiced under Roman emperors—by Ovid, “writing with some care late in the reign of the emperor Augustus”; by Tacitus and Seneca, “those wily critics of late-imperial decadence”; and by Plutarch, who believed the Greeks superior in culture and education to the Romans but who “was not about to risk an overt assertion of superiority over his rulers.” Their writings were “valuable examples for aristocratic readers who felt their own authority to be diminished by the imperial ambitions of their rulers,” and exemplars for philosophical scholars who “wished to...preserve their intellectual autonomy” by means of artful writing. An understanding of the practice of this art allows one to see that the thought of Ovid or Seneca is Roman, and that of Plutarch, Greek, only accidentally and not essentially.

Burrow, wisely following the work of J.H.M. Salmon, finds Shakespeare an admir-

er of this prudential art of writing. But there are other reasons, having to do with pedagogy and the attractiveness or acceptability of the truth to most readers or spectators, for prudent philosophic writing—reasons that would have impressed themselves on Shakespeare and moved him all the more to employ drama to conceal as much as to reveal. It is to be hoped that Burrow, who observes Shakespeare’s keen attention to the ways in which we deceive not only others but above all ourselves, will employ his considerable talents in attention to them. One might then leave to others the attempt to determine whether Shakespeare addresses the issue of the English corn riots in *Coriolanus*, or the claim that both *Lear* and *Macbeth* are in their different ways meditations on the Scottish King James VI’s proposed union between England and Scotland.” For the transcending of historicism, which the recovery of artful writing permits, entails not the transposing of particulars onto other particulars but the examination of what is permanent within the particular.

IN ADDITION TO AN INITIAL CHAPTER ON learning from the past, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* has chapters devoted to the influence on Shakespeare of Virgil, Ovid, Roman comedy, Seneca, and Plutarch.

Burrow argues that Shakespeare’s debt to Virgil is real but subtle. The declamatory set pieces one finds in Virgil’s poetry weren’t terribly useful to a playwright who wished to present conversations on the stage. But Virgil’s presentations of the “affective force of speech” (e.g., Queen Dido reacting with “superabundant emotional affect” to Aeneas’ relation of the sorrows at Troy, and falling in love with him) were emulated by Shakespeare in, for example, Othello’s wooing of Desdemona. One might object that Othello, unlike Aeneas, is *intending* to woo his beautiful listener with his tales, so the affect is not superabundant. Still, Burrow makes a helpful and persuasive case. Interesting, too, is his argument that Hamlet (“What’s...Hecuba to him?”) suffers from a “‘modern’ incapacity” to feel grief as did the ancients—though one might wish for some explanation of this incapacity. Burrow is at his best concerning Virgil, though, when he demonstrates the classically elevated and austere style of Jupiter’s speech in *Cymbeline*, noting the meter, the preponderance of compound adjectives, and the replication of the compression of past participles (“The more delayed, delighted”).

As for Ovid, Shakespeare does him the great compliment of having copies of his poetry appear on stage in *Taming, Titus An-*

dronicus, and *Cymbeline*. And Burrow argues, again persuasively, that of all the Latin poets, Ovid had the greatest influence on Shakespeare, in the first place as a poet exiled from Rome and its virtues; then as the poet of female complaint in the *Heroides*; next as the ironical commentator, in the *Metamorphoses*, on Homer’s and Virgil’s heroes (and hence as a probable influence on *Troilus and Cressida*); but above all as the source of some of Shakespeare’s “most philosophically serious writing.” Shakespeare read Ovid’s tale of Philomela in the *Metamorphoses* “not just with great intelligence, but in the light of his education, which had immersed him in a rhetorical and literary culture that enabled him to appreciate the full force of both the tale and of the way that Ovid tells it.” Philomela’s rape provides the inspiration for the rape of Lavinia by Chiron and Demetrius (see *Titus Andronicus* II.iii.2), who exceed their Ovidian counterpart by cutting off Lavinia’s hands as well as her tongue, and whose deed is disclosed by Lavinia by pointing to the passages on Philomela’s plight in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (IV.i.44-61). It seems unlikely, though, that Shakespeare had to learn from Ovid that “rhetorical skill inevitably part[s] company with extreme pain,” since the notion of suffering beyond words and even beyond tears is available to human beings everywhere.

THAT SHAKESPEARE LEARNED THIS from Ovid is made the less plausible by the fact that Shakespeare, though drawing from Ovid’s *Fasti*, was as Burrow himself notes moved *not* to make Lucrece silent but to “include Lucrece’s *lengthy complaint* after her rape” (emphasis added). In addition, there is a manifest difference, noted by Shakespeare, between suffering justly and suffering as a result of just or upright behavior, a difference Burrow overlooks in his description of Philomela’s vow “to make her suffering public.” Building on the work of Robert S. Miola, Burrow convincingly argues that while the influence on Shakespeare of Roman comedy is far less obvious than that of Ovid, it is deeper. Especially because Plautus and Terence were “Romans who consciously put on Greek dress,” using the fictive distance of time and place to conceal their critiques of contemporary Roman life, they were of great interest to Shakespeare. Plautus carefully asked “about the relationship between being a citizen and being virtuous,” for example. And so Burrow finds mistaken the traditional view according to which “Shakespeare read a worldly materialistic Roman comedy and brought to it the sophisticated skepticism of a Renaissance reader.” Plautus is more sophisti-

cated than that view allows, and was a comic poet from whom Shakespeare learned and whose thoughts he developed.

As for Terence, while there are fewer precise echoes of his work than of Plautus' in Shakespeare's plays, and certainly fewer framed allusions to his work than to that of Ovid or Virgil, his deep influence appears in how Shakespeare structured his plays—with dramatized quizzing prologues, for example, or with the use of colloquial language. Equally important, since thoughtful contemporaries of Shakespeare did not simply assume comedy to be healthy for the soul, editors of Terence's works frequently felt compelled to attach prefaces that discussed "the structure and moral value of comedy," expanding on Aelius Donatus' 4th-century commentary. That commentary included discussion of the parts of comedy, such as "catastrophe...the reversing of affairs toward a happy ending," which, Burrow writes, were "the early-modern equivalent of a writer's guide to plot construction." Shakespeare would, consequently, have read Terence for "tips on how to be a playwright." Here one might wish for a bit more caution. In *King Lear*, after all, Edmund describes the approaching Edgar, whose reputation he is about to destroy, as being "like the catastrophe of the old comedy." That "old" gives some reason to doubt that Shakespeare accepted the parts of comedy as discerned and recommended by Donatus and his Renaissance followers, as Ben Jonson appears to have done. Burrow is more helpful when insisting that speculation about an original performance of the play at Gray's Inn, which allowed for a set resembling a Roman street, should not lead editors to Latinize the play by adding to the stage directions phrases such as "to the Phoenix" or "from the Centaur," as the *Oxford Collected Works* has done.

HE IS HELPFUL, TOO, WHEN HE SHOWS Shakespeare engaging in "transformative substitution," so that the financially endowed and hence powerful Roman wife finds an English equivalent in the wife as second self or "better part" of a union. And he argues that Shakespeare "takes Roman comedy inside," so that scenes occur not only in the street but in domestic interiors—scenes, that is, that would have been in Roman plays only allusions to off-stage actions. Finally, according to Burrow, Roman comedy taught Shakespeare the significance of illusions or misperceptions, so that his characters alternate uneasily "between belief and experience, and between acts of persuasion and truth" to great effect, deceived by others or by themselves until the truth is disclosed.

Entering the lists on the question of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare, Burrow finds him not only "a vital element of the origins of Shakespearean drama" but "a crucial component of theatrical meaning." But the influence—especially of Seneca's philosophic (Stoic) works—is "elusive," "deep but indirect," coming in part through Shakespeare's contemporaries. In reporting the substance of this influence Burrow might, again, have exercised more caution. He claims that according to Seneca, should the man of virtue be "overwhelmed by Fortune," he "would rationally choose to kill himself in order to avoid subjecting himself to external events." No line from Seneca is adduced in support of this claim, and being overcome by Fortune contradicts Seneca's teaching about Fortune as a thing unable to harm the virtuous soul (e.g., *Epistles* 9, 14, 15, etc.). Burrow alludes to Seneca's own suicide, but he fails to mention that it was forced on Seneca by Nero. More telling against Burrow's thesis is that, in the only place in Shakespeare's plays where the matter of Stoicism and suicide is actually discussed (*Julius Caesar* V.i.115-128), Brutus first tells Cassius that, following his philosophy (Stoicism) he disapproves of suicide, but when pressed he admits to Cassius that he bears too great a mind to be paraded through Rome's streets, and so, ready to kill himself, he *abandons* the Stoic teaching on suicide. It is also a mistake to argue that according to Seneca, the virtuous have "rage" against tyranny, which they prudently check outwardly while they "boil within." Like most Stoics, Seneca counsels not pretended but genuine resignation.

FINALLY, THAT SHAKESPEARE PRESENTS Hamlet's famous inaction as "partly the consequence of his troubled and hybrid inheritance from classical and native Senecanism" is a theory only a geneticist of influence could love. The same is true of Burrow's claim that Lady Macbeth's "I have given suck" speech invokes an alternative world "in which she becomes Medea" and murders her children to avenge herself on Jason. Medea does indeed seek within herself "the 'ancient vigour,'" but Lady Macbeth does not; she asks spirits to unsex her, and by the end of the play is suffering from Christian remorse: "hell is murky."

That Lear's "O reason not the need" speech owes a debt to Seneca's attack on luxury in *De Beneficiis*, as does his understanding more generally of nature's bounty, and that the speech's second part owes a debt to Seneca's *Thyestes*, is, on the other hand, well argued. One wishes only that Burrow had stopped there, instead of claiming that in this speech "Lear seems just too old to be able quite to recall his Senecan texts." For this conjecture

replaces the actual drama with a scholar's projection. Lear isn't forgetful but angry, frustrated, on the verge of a breakdown, owing to the apparent absence of the divine support he had always assumed justice to have. Similarly, when Lear proclaims on the heath that he is a man "more sinned against than sinning," it is hard to see how he is following lines from Seneca's *Hippolytus*, whose hero calls upon the gods as follows: "Strike me with lightning...I am guilty. I deserve to die." Burrow resolves this manifest contradiction by claiming that Lear *wants* to say these lines, but *forgets* them; it is "a mighty act of erasure and amnesia." But had Shakespeare wished to show Lear forgetting lines of Seneca, he could, of course, easily have done so.

BURROW'S EXAMINATION OF PLUTARCH'S influence includes the smart observation that because Plutarch felt a need to explain Roman customs to his fellow Greeks more fully than he needed to explain Greek customs, he provided Shakespeare with more revealing details on Rome than on Greece, as well as (more broadly) the opportunity to see how the presentation of an alien way of life might be accomplished. Less helpful is Burrow's claim that "[f]rom his reading in Seneca, and indeed in Cicero, Shakespeare might have also identified 'Roman' with Stoic ethics" or Romans with "good old-fashioned Stoics" who "believe" they inhabit a "regulated moral order," and for this reason "cannot interpret" (or in Caesar's case cannot "hear") the other, "archaic Rome" of portents, which they inhabit. Burrow's portrait of this spooky, archaic Rome is overdrawn; it requires, for example, reading Gaius Ligarius' praise of Brutus for conjuring up his mortified spirit as if it entailed literally bringing Ligarius "back from the afterlife." Besides, the so-called archaic elements of *Julius Caesar* make Rome no more spooky—it is in fact considerably less spooky—than, for example, the Scotland of *Macbeth*.

Burrow over-generalizes Shakespeare's Romans, who display very different attitudes to the allegedly "archaic" Rome of portents, ghosts, and gods. Cassius is for four acts of *Julius Caesar* an Epicurean, not a Stoic; he renounces his Epicureanism in part on the basis of what he takes to be divine portents of the final battle (V.i.89-101). Caesar, on the other hand, is from the start presented as taking seriously religious or superstitious rites (I.ii.5-13; cf. II.i.213-219). Brutus and Casca, far from being "intent on separating the language of ancient Roman virtue from the world of archaic horror in which they find themselves," see ghosts, portents, and the gods as quite bound up with their ancient virtue. And the



dialogue between Cicero and Casca makes clear how unique is Cicero in denying the relation between non-human events and the human which “portents” require (I.iii.1-37; contrast *King Lear* I.ii.57-58). Finally, as noted above, the one Roman Stoic appearing in the play, Brutus, explicitly distinguishes the philosophy of Stoicism from having a great “Roman” mind.

WITH SO MUCH TO PRAISE, ONE HESITATES to register any further blame, especially since Burrow has through his own efforts begun to pierce through the miasma of historicism to recover Shakespeare’s presentation of permanent questions and answers in particular settings. But we must note that Burrow’s strong interest in biography, combined with the paucity of hard facts about what Shakespeare actually read and learned, leads him to an almost irresistible temptation to speculate. “The first four books of the *Aeneid*...seem to have been more frequently read than the rest (emphasis added); Shakespeare “might have read” Johannes Sturm’s *Nobilitas Literata* (written in 1549); he “may well have” taken cues from the *Aeneid*; lots of things are “likely,” or “just about possible.” For as Burrow sometimes (and to his credit) acknowledges, it “is not certain” that Shakespeare read a given classical work, or it “is open to debate” whether a given literary movement influenced him. Burrow even admits that “the world of literary genetics, like that of comedy, is one driven by probabilities rather than certainties.” With his own speculations growing, he is finally led to defend them by declaring that “life without speculation would be unutterably tedious.” But tedious, too, is endless speculation, and in the case of Shakespeare’s plays, interpretation without such speculation need never be tedious. Finally, speculation about a disposition toward the past that Shakespeare or his characters may have had sometimes overtakes what might have been substantive and serious argument. For example, in Lucrece’s description of the immensely old Hecuba, “Time’s ruin, beauty’s wreck,” we are astonished by a timeless reflection on time, beauty, decay, and death. But Burrow is intent on seeing in it a hidden statement on the inability to bring back to life the sufferings of the ancient world. He also succumbs occasionally to the scholar’s hazard of forgetting that most human beings learn things otherwise than from books. It is unlikely, for example, that Shakespeare needed to learn from Ovid the enduring quality of poetic writings *vis-à-vis* the bodies and civilizations that gave rise to them. Similarly, the distinction between reports, or hearsay, and seeing with one’s own eyes is certainly present

both in North’s Plutarch and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but it is doubtful that Shakespeare needed to learn it from Plutarch. And while most of Shakespeare’s Romans look to the past, as Burrow notes, that fact too is wrongly explained as imitation of Plutarch. Until modern political philosophy, with its inherent progressivism, had succeeded in transforming the West, looking to the past for guidance was the rule, not the exception.

The few remaining difficulties arise from the author’s ignorance or a failure to reflect. It is not true that “Greek women could not inherit a household”; Spartan women could and did, famously, inherit property from their fathers. Burrow observes that there are few songs set in the Roman plays and concludes that Shakespeare “seems to have imagined” ancient Rome “as a largely unmusical place.” But Caesar could not fault Cassius, as he does,

with being amusical were not the souls of most Romans musical. Finally, when Plutarch noted that Coriolanus lacked an education, leaving him “choleric and impatient,” he could not mean “the kind of philosophical and rhetorical training that went along with Greek education,” since Plutarch knew that “Greek” education differed from city to city, and that in *no* Greek city was the public education “philosophic.”

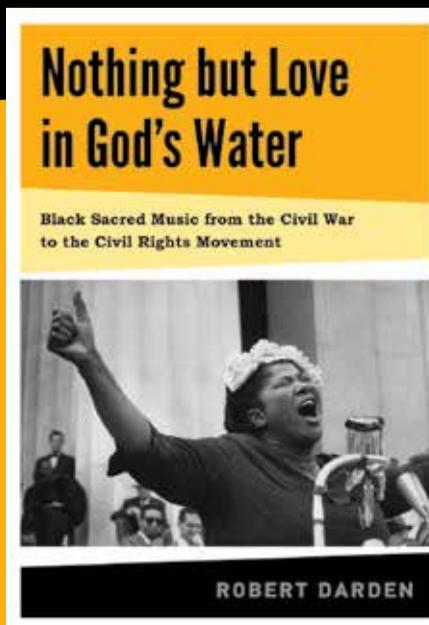
Yet these difficulties detract only slightly from a valuable book by a man of great learning and obvious love of both classical literature and Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare readers will find much to be grateful for in this thoughtful study.

Timothy W. Burns is professor of political science at Baylor University and the author of Shakespeare’s Political Wisdom (Palgrave Macmillan).

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