

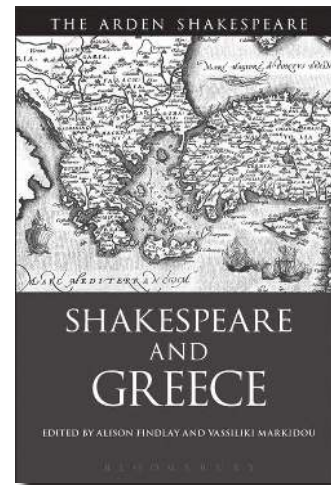
Rediscovering Ancient Greece in Shakespeare's Plays

Reviewed by Earl Showerman

Shakespeare and Greece. Eds. Alison Findlay and Vassiliki Markidou. Bloomsbury, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 2017, 288 pages (hardcover \$114, Kindle, \$37.95).

For the past fifteen years I have been engaged in studying the century of scholarship focused on Shakespeare's debt to classical Greek literature, so it was with great anticipation that I began reading *Shakespeare and Greece*, whose editors boldly claimed that it would correct traditional literary criticism's "stock blindness to Shakespeare's Hellenism." Findlay and Markidou's essay collection sets out to invert Ben Jonson's assertion that Shakespeare had "lesse Greek," to "prove that there is more Greek and less Latin in a significant group of Shakespeare's texts."

Shakespeare and Greece focuses on seven Shakespeare plays: *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Pericles*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, and *King Lear*, which the editors identify as "a group whose generic hybridity (tragic-comical-historical-romance) exemplifies the hybridity of Greece in the early modern imagination." In their introductory chapter, editors Findlay and Markidou maintain that Greece represented a paradoxical enigma to early modern England, serving as both the "origin and idealized pinnacle of Western philosophy, tragedy, and democracy," but also a decadent, fallen state "currently under Ottoman control, and therefore an exotic, dangerous 'other' in the most disturbing sense of the word." From the start the reader is forewarned that this volume features New Historicist jargon rather than an exploration of the playwright's debt to classical Greek literature, especially to Greek drama.



Indeed, classical Greece constituted the paragon of and model for European power, civility and scripture, while early modern Greece,

infected with political, moral and religious corruption, was a warning.... Shakespeare's plays, set in Athens, Thebes, Mytilene, Ephesus, Antioch, Tarsus and Tyre, engage directly in these tensions, while his other texts draw more obliquely but no less resonantly on the shifting sands of Greek philosophy and the geographic and linguistic landscape of Greek romance as a means of simultaneously authorizing and dislocating the early modern English nation. (1-2)

The notion that Shakespeare conceived of Greece as the "landscape of ancient romance and the source of philosophic wisdom" is hardly a new revelation. The editors state that the primary aim of *Shakespeare and Greece* is to "illuminate the complex ambiguities of ancient and early modern Greek settings," but in so doing, they miss the opportunity to consider the philological evidence that Shakespeare was directly influenced by the Attic playwrights in a number of his dramas.

In *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* (2013), Colin Burrow wrote that Shakespeare "almost certainly never read Sophocles or Euripides (let alone the much more difficult Aeschylus) in Greek," and that he learned about Greek drama indirectly through North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Jonathan Bate asserted that Shakespeare's concepts of Greek drama and culture primarily derive from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A.D. Nuttall went a bit further by suggesting that a description of the gates of Troy in *Troilus and Cressida* is so close to Homer's text in *The Iliad* that "perhaps, after all, with Chapman sitting at his elbow, Shakespeare did back his way through some of Homer's Greek."

However, Findlay and Markidou go well beyond these imagined solutions in asserting that Shakespeare's "domed forehead," as portrayed in the Droeshout engraving of the First Folio, "held a considerable reservoir of knowledge about Greek literature, history and politics, gathered throughout his life from translations, quotations by other authors and possibly even from learning of Greek at school." They cite as their proof, "Greek Literacy in

Earl Showerman graduated from Harvard College and the University of Michigan Medical School, and practiced emergency medicine in Oregon for over 30 years. After retiring in 2003, he enrolled at Southern Oregon University to study Shakespeare and research the authorship question. Over the past decade Dr. Showerman has presented a series of papers at conferences and published on the topic of Shakespeare's Greek dramatic sources and his medical acumen. Earl contributed the chapter on Shakespeare's medical knowledge in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?—Exposing an Industry in Denial* (2013) as well as several topics in *Know-It All-Shakespeare* (2017). He is a longtime patron of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, an associate of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust, and past president of the Shakespeare Fellowship.

Sixteenth-Century England” (2015), wherein Micha Lazarus argued that students reaching the highest level at a grammar school like Westminster would have had extensive exposure to Greek literature, “both more and better Greek than a just matriculated Classics undergraduate does today.” Although there is literary evidence for Greek editions having been donated to Westminster and Eton, there is no evidence that the curriculum at the King’s Grammar School of Stratford-upon-Avon included Greek texts.

Shakespeare and Greece does not include an essay relating Shakespearean drama to Greek romance, but the editors’ introduction emphasizes the great importance of Thomas Underdown’s English translation of Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*, which was dedicated to the 17th Earl of Oxford and published in 1569. Underdown introduced Heliodorus’s Greek romance as both “profitable” and “pleasaunt,” and claimed that it holds a distinctively Greek authority in his dedicatory letter to Edward de Vere:

The Greeks in all manner of knowledge and learning did far surmount the Romans, but the Romans in administering their state in warlike facts, and in common sense, were much their superiors, for the Greeks are wedded to their learning alone, the Romans content with a mediocrity applied themselves to greater things.... Now of all knowledge fit for a noble gentleman, I supposed the knowledge of histories is most seeming. For furthering whereof, I have englished a passing fine and witty history, written in Greek by Heliodorus, and for right good cause consecrated the same to your Lordship. For such virtues be in your honor, so haughty courage joined with great skill, such sufficiency in learning, so good nature and common sense, that in your honor is, I think, expressed the right pattern of a noble gentleman,.... (spellings modernized)

Shakespeare and Greece editors state that Underdown’s translation proved to be “the inspiration for the work of Nashe, Greene, Sidney and Lodge, as well as Shakespeare.” Eighteen years later, after two more editions had been published, anti-theatre critic Stephen Gosson commented that Underdown’s Heliodorus had been “thoroughly ransacked to furnish the playhouses in London.” Greek romance challenged the “conventional hierarchy which prioritized reason and utility above emotion and fancy extended to the elevation of Greece above Rome.... The value of ancient Greek culture lay in the purity or ‘blue-skies’ thinking, its ability to transcend the mediocrity of everyday life and engage in enduring human questions about the self, society and the cosmos, emotionally as well as intellectually (25).” This is music to my ears.

In the concluding paragraph of the introduction, Findlay and Markidou quote John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* for evidence that “Greece was never without some wily Ulisses,” and that Shakespeare’s dramas tend to

both reinforce and challenge this type—the representation through dramatic characters as different as Ulysses and Autolycus. “Greece surfaces as a fluid, multifaceted mosaic that constitutes a formative *stratum* of, and crucible for, the purposes of this specific collection, Shakespearean drama.”

The most relevant chapter in *Shakespeare and Greece* to the Oxfordian theory may be Efterpi Mitsi's, “Greeks ‘digested in a play’: Consuming Greek Heroism in *The School of Abuse* and *Troilus and Cressida*.” Mitsi is not alone in asserting that Shakespeare deliberately digested the epic narrative, inverting relationships in translating Trojan War heroes to the early modern stage. Arden editor David Bevington has noted that, “Achilles’ reputation is severely deglamorized.... Ajax is much more of a buffoon.... Ulysses is more wily than in Homer.... Nestor is more senile, Agamemnon more pompous and ineffectual. Homer’s pro-Greek perspective gives way to a matter-of-fact view of war in which the few heroes like Hector are victimized by an all-engulfing conflict.” Mitsi argues that Shakespeare’s Homeric heroes are not only belittled, they literally “seem to embody the anti-theatricalists’ fears about the stage by realizing the most negative versions of their characters instead of becoming moral examples.” *Troilus and Cressida* thus directly ridicules the moralizing of the ancient epics as represented in Stephen Gosson’s *School of Abuse* (1579). Gosson wrote:

The right use of ancient Poetry was to have the notable exploits of the worthy captains, the wholesome counsels of good fathers, and virtuous lives of predecessors set down in numbers, and sung to the Instrument at solemn feasts, that the sound of the one might draw the hearers from kissing the cup too often, and chalk out the way to do the like. (93)

In fact, the use of figures from antiquity as models of action “was a familiar Renaissance notion related to the doctrine of imitation.” Gosson praised Homer’s *Iliad* for its representations of martial excellence, contrasting it with “the emasculating effect contemporary theatre has on its audience,” that modern drama which turns poetry into a commodity. In contrast, Shakespeare’s Prologue in *Troilus* claims the play “leaps o’er the vaunts and firstlings of those broils” to “what may be digested in a play.”

The sacrosanct doctrine of imitation through exemplars, the moralistic view of ancient poetry, and the myth of Troy are all targeted in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* from the very beginning of the play. ...Responding to Gosson’s charge that the function of the epic poem in ancient culture directly opposes the modern commodification of poetry, *Troilus and Cressida* uses theatricality as well as imagery of cooking, eating and disease, also found in the *School of Abuse*, to reflect on the consumption, digestion, and indigestion of the ancient poetic material. (95)

Mitzi argues that Shakespeare's denigrating depiction of the Trojan and Greek heroes in his satiric tragedy was a direct challenge to Gosson's elevation of the Homeric epic in the *School of Abuse*. Although *Troilus and Cressida* was not registered until 1603 and never published until 1609, a long thirty years after Gosson's anti-theatrical polemic was first published, there was a continuum of "fierce debates taking place on the pulpit, in the playhouse and in print" over the years in efforts to regulate the playhouses, performances and publication of dramatic literature. "Shakespeare's 'merry Greeks,'" Mitzi claims, "brazenly foreground the alien quality of their Homeric origins in the 'very markets of bawdry,' partaking in the ideological war of the theatres." Thus, Gosson's call for attention to the notable exploits of ancient warriors becomes for Shakespeare "roleplaying, ridiculing the misreading and moralizing of the ancient epic."

The Oxfordian dating of *Troilus and Cressida* does much to confirm Mitzi's detailed arguments supporting the conclusion that *Troilus and Cressida* was a direct response to the *School of Abuse*. *The History of Agamemnon and Ulysses*, a lost drama performed at Greenwich on December 27, 1584 by the Earl of Oxford's Boys, is likely an early version of the tragedy. In *English Dramatic Companies, 1558-1642* (1910), J. T. Murray surmised that this play "may have been written by the Earl of Oxford himself, for he was reckoned by Puttenham and Meres among 'the best for comedy' of his time." Further, in the *School of Abuse* Gosson attacks "poets, pipers, players, jugglers, jesters and dancers" as "fuller of fools than wise men." Oxford would have taken this attack personally for, in the early 1580's, he was supporting two acting companies and touring companies of musicians and jugglers, and was himself a highly regarded dancer, musician, and playwright.

One other chapter of value in *Shakespeare and Greece* is "Hospitality and Friendship and Republicanism in *Timon of Athens*" by John Drakakis, who argues that friendship in *Timon of Athens* is "an aristocratic form of friendship which is open to abuse through failure to acknowledge obligation." Drakakis enters into a political discourse that includes references to Plutarch's *Lives*, Lucian's satire, *Timon, The Misanthrope*, Aristotle's *Politiques* and Sir Thomas Smith's *De Republica Anglorum* (1572), which laid out in detail the preferred English form of benevolent monarchy. However, the richest commentaries Drakakis cites about *Timon* include statements any Oxfordian would understand immediately: "Timon is first and foremost about money," and that "Timon is a feudal lord in a capitalist economy... an aristocratic 'lord' and exponent of conspicuous consumption... who stuck to the old country ways under new conditions; men who continued to keep open house to all comers, to dispense lavish charity, to keep hordes of domestic servants and retainers, to live, in short, as a great medieval prince." (146-7) This scenario exactly reflects Oxford's position in 1584, when the

first literary allusion to “the Athenian misanthrope biting on the stage” appeared in William Warner’s *Syrinx*.

Finally, the editors of *Shakespeare and Greece* cannot resist recruiting Alexander the Great to the cause of expanding Shakespeare’s spheres of Greek influence on the canon.

Ancient Greece, remote in time as well as space, constituted a fantasy of imperial greatness and a nightmare of fragmentation for early modern English culture. The “resplendent glory” of Alexander the Great (356 – 23 BC) ...held great currency for an English nation with strong colonialist and commercial aspirations. Plutarch’s “Life of Alexander” presents him as a formidable model of imperialist politics, whose “ambition & desire” of honour and “greatnes of minde and noble corage” beyond his years led him to “think of the conquest of Asia, yea of the empire of the whole world.” Lauded for his magnanimity, wisdom and learning, beauty and sexual sobriety, Alexander personified the virtue and glory of geographic, linguistic and commercial expansion. (16-17)

Certainly, Shakespeare was fascinated by Alexander, who is alluded to in *The Winter’s Tale*, in *Henry V*, in *Coriolanus*, and four times by Hamlet in Act V. Alexander is impersonated by Nathaniel, the Curate, in the lamentable Masque of the Nine Worthies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Is it surprising that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was compared to Alexander in a number of literary dedications?

Shakespeare and Greece may not fulfill my standards about broadening our understanding of Shakespeare’s fascination with and knowledge of Greek literature and drama. However, Findlay and Markidou are to be congratulated for opening up new vistas for those wishing to peer into the distant past to find new, valuable arguments about Shakespeare’s employment of Greek culture in the canon.