

Another of Hamlet's Books?: Petrarch's De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae, by Thomas Twyne

By Jan Cole

In Act II, Scene ii of *Hamlet* the Prince enters reading a book. When Polonius asks Hamlet, “What do you read, my Lord?” Hamlet answers, accurately, but with petulant sarcasm, “Words, words, words.” In the exchange between the two which follows over the “matter,” Hamlet refers directly to the author of the book he has been reading and to a passage on old age:

Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams ...

This is not the only book to appear as a prop in the play. In Act III, Scene i, Polonius offers Ophelia a book to read so that her being alone may appear plausible: “Read on this book, / That show of such an exercise may colour / Your loneliness.” The book given to Ophelia by Polonius has been regarded as being a religious text, devotional manual or perhaps a Book of Hours, appropriate for an unmarried woman to be reading on her own. Interestingly, Polonius recognises that Ophelia’s mind is preoccupied and that her reading of this volume will appear as a virtuous act to an observer, whatever state of mind she is actually in. Books were and are a consolation to the troubled mind.

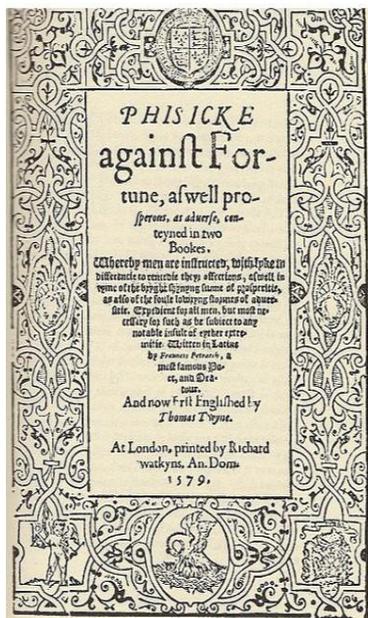
In the play, books, a common-pace notebook, poems, songs, letters, play-scripts, actors’ speeches, playing on words, memorised words, remembered words, words spoken by the living and by the dead, things said and unsaid, feelings that run too deep for words or that can only be scrambled by a distracted brain into riddles or madness ... these

are the threads that make up this strange unravelling tapestry of a tragic play, that itself exists in five differing Quarto texts of different lengths, one of which may be a memorial reconstruction by actors, another an amended text expanded to almost double the size of the previous published quarto, as well as the enigmatic ‘ghost’ of a text, the so-called lost (or non-existent) *Ur-Hamlet* dating back to the 1580s.

Scholars continue to look for and find sources for Shakespeare’s plays and poems¹, not only for the plots of the plays but for many individual *topoi* and images within the speeches, some of which are actually proverbial or derived from long popular usage. Despite Harold Jenkins’ caution that “it is futile to look for” specific books that Hamlet reads in the play², several have been suggested. Chief among these is the book held to be responsible for Hamlet’s imagistic reflections on death, sleep, dreams and the afterlife; the latter is described as “the undiscover’d country, from whose bourne / No traveller returns” (Act III, Scene i). The passage that relates to this is in Girolamo Cardanus’ *De Consolatione*, translated as *Cardanus’ Comfort* (1573) by Thomas Bedingfield (1543-1613) and dedicated to the Earl of Oxford:

What should we account of death to be resembled to anything better than sleep... but if thou compare death to long travel ... there is nothing that doth better or more truly prophesy the end of life than when a man dreameth that he doth travel and wander into far countries.

There is indeed a parallel correspondence here: Hamlet’s focus on *death, sleep, dream, “something after death,” travel, “undiscover’d country”* is in almost the same sequence as Cardanus/Bedingfield’s *death, sleep, travel, end of life, dream, travel into far countries*. And so *Cardanus’ Comfort* became known as “Hamlet’s book,” following the suggestions of Francis Douce in 1839, Joseph Hunter in 1845, Hardin Craig in 1934 and latterly especially by ‘Oxfordians’ - those who prefer to believe that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (not William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon) was the creative mind behind the Shakespeare canon. De Vere was in close contact with Thomas Bedingfield in 1571-72 and wrote a Latin preface to his translation.



Cardanus' *De Consolatione* was a book in a genre popular since the period of late antiquity, i.e. the 'consolatio' or philosophical 'conduct of life' book that aimed to assist the reader to cope with the vicissitudes of life. Today we would probably regard the genre as being similar to the equally popular contemporary 'self-help' book. One of the most popular 'consolatio' was written by the humanist scholar-poet, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) c.1345 in Latin and published as *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* [DRUF], variously translated as "Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul"³ and by Thomas Twyne as "Physicke against Fortune,"⁴ printed by Thomas Dawson for Richard Watkyns in 1579. The title-page in full was as follows:

Physicke against Fortune, aswell prosperous, as aduerso, conteyned in two bookes. Whereby men are instructed, with lyke indifferencie to remedie theyr affections, aswell in tyme of the bright shynyng sunne of prosperitie, as also of the foule lowryng stormes of aduersitie. Expedient for all men, but most necessary for such as be subject to any notable insult of eyther extremitie. Written in Latine by Frauncis Petrarch, a most famous poet, and orator. And now first Englished by Thomas Twyne.

Petrarch is often remembered solely for his Italian love poetry, the *Canzonieri*, 366 poems inspired by his unrequited love for Laura, but to scholars, Petrarch is 'the father of humanism.' He produced 24 works of prose comprising books on philosophy, history, geography, polemical writings such as defences and invectives, 4 orations, collections of letters and autobiography⁵. It has been noted that his writing is characterised by a very individualised inward-looking stance, and that all his works contain self-analysis, internal conflict, and pensiveness arising from

moral dilemmas. His introspection is psychological rather than religious or academically philosophical. His thought is a matter of tendencies and aspirations rather than a fully worked out philosophy or system. It is



Petrarch

individualistic rather than generalised. Petrarch has been called a solipsist and even an isolationist. He rejected the medieval Aristotelian philosophy of the university schools and therefore stands historically as the forerunner of Renaissance thought which, looking back to the civilisations of Greece and Rome, put ‘Man’ rather than God at the centre of study and the personal ‘Self,’ rather than society, as the focus of questioning the meaning of life. We are in the realm of what Stephen Greenblatt called “Renaissance self-fashioning”⁶ with the emphasis no longer on an individual’s relationship to God but his or her relationship to themselves. This engagement involves

self-awareness, self-analysis, self-examination and self-exploration in

relation to the experiences of life and could perhaps be regarded as the genesis of the subject we now call ‘psychology,’ literally ‘the study of the *psyche* or soul.’ It wasn’t entirely new, of course, and one could cite among the classics the works of Seneca, Cicero and Marcus Aurelius as falling into this line of thought. By the 16th century it would lead to copious essay-writing (which became a literary genre), for example by Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon.

Petrarch was in his late ‘50s when he wrote *DRUF*. It was dedicated to Azzo d’ Correggio, sometime Lord of Parma and governor of Verona. It consists of two books of dialogues, one of 122 chapters and the other of 131 chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of

good or bad fortune. It was not published until 1473-75, and reissued in 1490, 1492, 1497, 1501, 1532 (German illustrated edition) and 1536 (French abridged edition with title-page woodcut of Fortuna and her Wheel), 1581 (Basle) and more. So, it must be regarded as a very popular book.

In his dedication Petrarch speaks of “the unpredictable and sudden changes” in a man’s fortune and says: “I can hardly find anything more frail, more restless, than the life of mortals.” And so he poses the question, “How can we learn to live among so many sudden, unpredictable and inevitable changes?” The book tries to answer this question. Overall, it tried to show how an individual’s thoughts and actions can generate either happiness or sorrow, and the only real advice given is to have humility in prosperity and fortitude in adversity. Thus, the book presents no profound philosophy, but is simply a ‘consolation’ for the reader experiencing the flux and vicissitudes of life.

There is a 1503 French illuminated manuscript of the work which is of particular interest. One of the illuminations shows Petrarch presenting



his book to Louis XII. We may remember that Henry VIII’s sister, Mary, was briefly married to Louis XII before he died and she returned to England with Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, whom she married as her second husband.

Since the 1503 illuminated manuscript was in the possession of Louis XII, it is fairly certain that the book remained in the Royal Library in Paris. Moreover, it is quite possible that Edward de Vere saw it when he visited the French court in 1575.

There are several chapters in Petrarch's *DRUF* that remind us of Hamlet's character and concerns as he makes his difficult emotional journey through the play. Here are just six of them:

- On Sadness and Misery
- On Lethargy of Mind or A Disagreeably Wavering Mind, Torpor & Sleepiness
- On Lost Time or Lost Opportunity
- On Suicide
- On Women's Faults (a misogynistic dialogue which cites St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas)
- On the Abundance of Books

Taking a copy of the play in hand, we can find several speeches in the plot that show Hamlet in these states or thinking about these topics. For example:

On Sadness and Misery (DRUF Book II, 93)

Hamlet is presented from the outset as being in a melancholy state; he is in bereavement following the death of his father and, in addition, his mother Gertrude has been hastily re-married to Claudius. In Act I Scene i, a ghost or apparition appears on the battlements of the castle that closely resembles Hamlet's father. It is winter and night-time. Horatio arrives, challenges the ghost, and regards it as an omen foretelling trouble for the state of Denmark, as the country is about to go to war. The ghost returns and a cock crows, heralding sunrise and causing the ghost to vanish. Marcellus and Horatio comment that "evil creatures of the night" are driven away by the new day.

So, we have the mood set: anxiety, unease, apprehension, confusion, scepticism, fear – all of which prepare us for Hamlet’s **melancholy** in the next scene. The phrase “sick at heart,” used by Francisco in the opening scene, pretty much sums up the state Hamlet is in, and indeed the whole play. The only time we see Hamlet cheer up is when he greets the travelling players and goes through the preparation for a performance with them.

On Lethargy of Mind or a Disagreeably Wavering Mind, Torpor & Sleepiness (DRUF Book II, 109) and On Lost Time

These are the mental states we find Hamlet in particularly in the soliloquies. In Act II scene ii, after he has watched the players do the Hecuba scene in their play and they’ve left the stage, Hamlet has a soliloquy in which he ponders the huge difference between *acted* emotions that the players used and *real* emotions. And Hamlet bemoans the fact that he cannot express his feelings: “Yet I / a dull and muddy-mettled rascal...” he calls himself. “Muddy-mettled” means ‘dull-spirited,’ and he questions himself as to whether he really is like this, a “coward” and “pigeon-livered” and is aware that he has lost time by delaying action. Yet, in other parts of the play, he is similarly aware of his delay. On the way to England he notes that:

I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength and means
To do’t ...

And of course, the ambiguity in his hesitation to murder Claudius while he is praying: “Now might I do it ...,” but he thinks of reasons not to do it. Hamlet is a conflicted character, but he is not unaware of self.

On Suicide

In Act III scene i, in the most famous soliloquy of all, Hamlet questions existence itself:

To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler to in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.

Then as he ponders death, he discourses with himself upon the resemblance of sleep to death, and upon sleep and dreaming, until the two are conflated:

Aye there's the rub!
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause ...

And Hamlet's continued cogitations do cause him to pause and to become incapable of decision and action, one way or the other; but he knows it and is able to express it, and thus he is self-aware:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

On Women's Faults – a misogynistic or antifeminist dialogue

The misogynist stance in the play is seen in Hamlet's view of his mother, Gertrude, and of his sometime beloved, Ophelia. He is almost traumatised at the very thought of his mother's haste in marrying Claudius within two months, marrying, that is, the murderer of her

husband and his father. And Gertrude herself recognises that this event is the main cause of Hamlet's "distemper" or "lunacy" - Act II sc.ii 56-57. In his first soliloquy, the situation is reduced and generalised in Hamlet's phrase, possibly proverbial, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Act I scene ii, 146.) All is reduced in his mind to sexual disgust and to the unspoken suggestion that his mother perhaps instigated the murder of the old King Hamlet.

These thoughts about his mother are echoed in his totally dismissive attitude to Ophelia, "women's love being short ..." (Act III, sc. 2, 135), and the famous phrase, "Get thee to a nunnery ..." (Act III, sc. i.). During the play-scene, Hamlet becomes sexually disinhibited, using innuendoes and possibly lewd actions (depending on how the scene's acted).

On the Abundance of Books

This is Petrarch's semi-comic section on the proliferation of books, on book-learning and memorisation.

If you would win glory from your books...you must know them
and not merely have them. You must stow them away not
in your library but in your memory, not in your bookcases but in your
brain ...

In Act 1, scene v, 98-108, we find this same book-memory metaphor when Hamlet says:

Yes, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain ...

“Tables” were books of blank pages. It’s rather interesting that today we call a portable computer, usually loaded with the software called “Word,” a ‘tablet’ – a rather similar usage. “Tables” were used as commonplace-books to write up quotations from poetry or plays or books one had read, and also to jot down observations and thoughts⁷.

Interestingly, we know that Oxford received a “table,” a book whose cover was decorated with diamonds, as a prize from Queen Elizabeth when he was victorious in the tournaments at the Accession Day Tilts of 1571. We find a “table” mentioned in Shakespeare’s Sonnets no. 77 and no. 122, one the poet had perhaps received as a precious gift and later gave away as a precious gift, perhaps to the beloved friend⁸. Hamlet refers to “my tables” in the context of erasing all memories and thoughts save the “word” that the ghost said on departing, that word being “Adieu.”

Act 2, scene ii: “words, words, words”

... the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams ...”

Hamlet’s “satirical rogue,” the author of the book he has been reading in Act ii, could be regarded as Seneca, who wrote a treatise “On Old Age”, or it could be Petrarch who published “Letters on Old Age” (*De Rebus Senilibus*), or it could be almost any other author who wrote on that topic. But the five details Hamlet cites about old men are the same **five** (among others) that Petrarch cites in *De Remediis*, and are expressed in much the same [DRUF Book II, 94-5, 353, 564-6]:

The degradation and increasing unloveliness of the body
and the loss of bodily pleasures are indicators of the fragility,
impermanence and insignificance of this world. Says Reason to Joy:

the blond curls will be shed; **the single curl which remains will turn white; wrinkles** will plough furrows in the forehead and cheeks; **a gloomy cloud will cover the ... glowing stars in the eyes**; before they fall out the teeth will lose their smoothness and white gleam; the neck and shoulders will become stiff and crooked; the hands will dry up; **legs and feet will bend** so much you'll no longer recognise them... the old body will suffer from gout, scabies and constant fatigue... there will be **dimming of understanding, weakening of memory** and disturbance of speech.

Conclusion

Several events and even emotions in the play can be traced in the literary sources, e.g. in *Saxo Grammaticus* and in Belleforest. But as Harold Jenkins noted, "The mind of Hamlet, confronting the enigma of man's life, is not in Belleforest at all."⁹ The "mind of Hamlet," his dramatic character, is built from language and action that is entirely the author's creation, though this too may still have had literary sources. The construction of Hamlet's mental states seems to have had a background, particularly in books of the 'consolation' genre, the forerunners of what we'd now probably call 'popular psychology' or 'self-help' books. *Cardano's Comfort*, long regarded as "Hamlet's book" is not the only one: Petrarch's *De Remediis* also hovers over the play in significant ways. And it is particularly interesting that both these books were translated into English by protégés of Oxford (Thomas Bedingfield and Thomas Twyne), by two men who were well-known to him through his teens and twenties.

Footnotes

1. Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: a Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, The Athlone Press (2001).
2. Harold Jenkins, ed. *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, Methuen (1982)
3. Conrad H. Rawski, trans., *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, 5 vols. with commentary, Indiana University Press (1991). [Note: I have not been able to consult this work in full and therefore have not been able to provide exact citations from it; my citations have come from online essays which have quoted from this work.]
4. Thomas Twyne, transl. *Physicke against Fortune* (1579); facsimile reprint, Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints (1980)
5. see *Catalogue of Petrarch's Works* at The Online Library of Liberty_ www.oll.libertyfund.org
6. Greenblatt, S. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Univ. of Chicago Press (1980)
7. Stallybrass, P. et al. *Hamlet's Tables and the Technology of Writing in Renaissance England*. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol.55, no.4 (2004), pp. 379-419.
8. Cole, Jan. *Queen Elizabeth's Gift to Oxford in Sonnets 122 and 77...?* (2011) unpublished
9. Harold Jenkins, ed. *op.cit.*, p.95

Further Reading

Dobson, Susan (transl.) *Petrarch's View of Human Life* (1791) – 18th century English translation of *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae*, Facsimile edition published by Lulu Books (2017).

Havicek, L.L. *Antifeminist Dialogues in Petrarch's "De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae"*. Univ. of Maryland (1978).

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