

LITERATURE ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK SHEET

Student Number	09014414
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Assessment No. and Description	ASSESSMENT 2 – 1800 WORD ESSAY
Essay Question/Title/No.	<i>'Examine the relationship between history and literature with reference to any two writers you have studied on this module'</i>
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The greatest goal of any writer is to create a work of fiction so believable it is almost indistinguishable from reality, and in history the greatest tales could almost have been penned from the mind of a creative being. As a result, the relationship between the historical and literary worlds is one where they ‘blur together like waves at a beach [...] every time you believe there is a difference, a wave comes forth and blurs the edges all over again’.¹ William Shakespeare and Francesco Petrarca are two writers of the Renaissance period. As a result, they have comparable – yet differing – relationships with the historical world. An obvious relation is the integration of historical events in their writing; ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ and ‘Africa’ by Shakespeare and Petrarca respectively, are historical plays and as such incorporate historical events in their plot. Both also take inspiration from historical writers – mostly of the classical period. While this relationship may seem concrete at face-value, both writers do also make conscious efforts to distance themselves from their historical influences, even if they are so passionately in favour of their stylings. As J. Christopher Warner wrote that in ‘a history of Renaissance epic poetry that starts at the beginning [...] begins with Petrarca’s *Africa* [...] the first Renaissance Epic’, it seems only natural to begin with him.²

Petrarca’s ‘Africa’ was never fully completed; however he began work on it in 1338, and was still slaving away at it until his death in 1374. He based it mostly on the work of Livy in the ‘History of Rome’, covering the Second Punic War. This ‘required historical basis’ allowed him to commune with the reader through a historical lens – using history as his literature’s structure and only fictionalizing when ultimately necessary – as Ronald L. Martinez detailed; ‘only three historical episodes in the epic are invented whole cloth.’³ For example, in the first book of his epic, Petrarca ‘sets forth the causes of the Punic Wars [...] the natural rivalry of the two great powers. Spain, especially, because of its position, was a bone of contention between the two peoples – like a sheep mauled by wolves.’⁴ This historicism is reflected in Petrarca’s writing through the narrative voice of Africanus’ father; ‘Spain, too confined by peoples on both sides. Exposed to every treachery [...] hardly different from a fatted sheep caught in the midst of wolves who is turned now here, now there, by flashing teeth.’⁵ This blending of history and fiction is taken a step further in the Second Book, where Africanus is told not of the past, but ‘predictions’ for the future – as Wilfred P. Mustard details; ‘in the Second book, Africanus asks what fate has in store for him, and his father foretells the remaining events of the war’.⁷ This is reflected in the fiction, as Africanus is told of the flight of Hannibal from Roman lands; ‘defeated, he will flee and will land on foreign shores where the tide of the Hellespont separates Asia from Grecian lands [...] he will grasp the feet of kings and their unworthy

¹ Soldini, Chantal, ‘Relationship Between History and Literature’, *Medium.com* (22/07/2015)

² Warner, J. Christopher, *The Augustinian Epic, Petrarca to Milton* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press: 2008) p.01

³ Martinez, Ronald L., ‘The Latin Hexameter Works: Epystole, Bucolicum carmen, Africa’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarca*, Ed. by Albert Russell Ascoli, Unn Falkeid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2015) p.94

⁴ Martinez, *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarca* p.94

⁵ Mustard, Wilfred P., ‘Petrarca’s Africa’ in *The American Journal of Philology* 42:02 (1921) p.98

⁶ Francesco Petrarca, ‘Africa’ in *Petrarca’s Africa I-IV: A Translation and Commentary* ed. and trans. Erik Z. D. Ellis (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press : 2007) Book I, p.10

⁷ Mustard, *The American Journal of Philology* p.101

knees and will beg for foreign troops, eager once more to bring ruin on Italian shores, should Fortune allow. But she will be kinder to us'⁸

William Shakespeare was not the first playwright to set some of his work in Rome, however his 'Roman plays' have been integral to the public's perception of the period. This, no doubt, is due to Shakespeare's similar disposition to that of Petrarch – regarding the integration of historical events in his literature. As J. Leeds Bartoli writes of; 'Shakespeare's 'Caesar' plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, [which] have as their setting the last and major cycle in the series of the Roman civil wars'.⁹ One such event reflected is the penultimate action of the war, and also 'Antony and Cleopatra' – the Battle of Actium, where Cleopatra deserts her lover's forces in the face of Octavian, ultimately dooming their conquest; 'their fleets clashed at Actium in Greece. After heavy fighting, Cleopatra broke from the engagement and set course for Egypt with 60 of her ships [...] the disheartened fleet that remained surrendered to Octavian'.¹⁰ This is reflected when Enobarbus, exclaims; 'Naught, naught, all naught! / I can behold no longer! / Th'Antoniad, the Egyptian admiral, / With all their sixty, fly and turn the rudder'.¹¹ The flight of Cleopatra from the field of battle is not the only central section of plot directly lifted from history, at the end of the play we see Octavius act as he did in reality when he 'annexed Egypt and retained it under his direct control [...] and made him finally master of the entire Greco-Roman world.' – this is similarly reflected by Shakespeare, in the final moments of the play; 'Our army shall / In solemn show attend this funeral, / And then to Rome. Come, Dolabella, see / High order in this great solemnity.'^{12 13}

The reach of history into the core of the work of Petrarch isn't restricted to the realm of plot – Petrarch was devout in his zealous emulation of the Classical style – as Andrew Laird states; 'Petrarch's detailed knowledge of Virgil's entire oeuvre facilitates far more direct imitation of him in Latin'.¹⁴ The element of historical writers impacting the work of future artists is core to the relationship history has with literature, this can be seen in the reflection of the last line of Virgil's 'The Aeneid', which reads; 'His Soul fled murmuring to the Shades below' – this is reflected in Book Five of the 'Africa', when it is written that a 'Violent spirit seeks the Tartarean shades.'¹⁵¹⁶ As may be

⁸ Petrarch, 'Africa' p.27

⁹ Bartoli, J. Leeds, 'Shakespeare and Roman History' in *The Modern Language Review* (United Kingdom: Modern Humanities research Association: 1958) 53:03, p.327

¹⁰ [Anon], '31BC, September 02: the Battle of Actium', *History.com* < <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-battle-of-actium> > [accessed: 13/04/2020]

¹¹ Shakespeare, William, 'Antony and Cleopatra' in *Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works* Ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury: 2013) Act 3: Scene 10, p. 142

¹² Grant, Michael, 'Augustus: Roman Emperor', *Encyclopedia Britannica* < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor> > [accessed: 13/04/2020]

¹³ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5: Scene 2, p. 159

¹⁴ Laird, Andrew, 'Re-Inventing Virgil's Wheel: The Poet and His Work from Dante to Petrarch' in *Classical Literary Careers and their Perception* Ed. by Phillip Harris, Helen Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010) p.146

¹⁵ Virgil, 'The Aeneid' in *The Works of Virgil, Translated into English Verse* Ed. and Trans. By Sir Richard Maitland (London: Printed for Bernard Lintoti: 1709) p.396

¹⁶ Francesco Petrarch, 'Africa' in *Petrarch's Africa* Ed. and Trans. By Thomas Goddard Bergin, Alice S. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1977) Book V, line 773

apparent however, this is not a solid comparison, the line written by Petrarch is noticeably altered while still retaining core facets of the original. Colin Burrow comments that Petrarch ‘deliberately serves away from these words [...] [he] does not simply rewrite the line, but does so [...] in a way, that is designed to call to mind the words that are *not* there’.¹⁷

Similar to Petrarch’s integration of lines, Shakespeare took great inspiration in his depiction of Cleopatra from Sir Thomas North’s 1579 work ‘Plutarch’s Lives’ – the similarities to which were commented on by the Royal Shakespeare Company themselves, they wrote of ‘the many parallels between Shakespeare’s writing and that of his source demonstrat[ing] the closeness of his reading of North’s translation’.¹⁸ This can be seen most clearly in Scene 2 of the Second Act, North’s translation of Plutarch states that Cleopatra’s vessel’s ‘poop whereof was gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver [...] she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture, and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys appareled as painters do set forth god Cupid’.¹⁹ At first, this may seem like a detailed scenario – one which is particular to the writing of North, however on a reading Shakespeare’s equivalent scene, written around 30 years later, we see the relationship between history and literature bloom, with the appearance described similarly; ‘the poop was beaten gold; / Purple the sails [...] O’er picking that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature. On each side her / stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling cupids’.²⁰ Shakespeare was not simply an artist of imitation however, for he took core aspects of style from historical examples, and implemented them himself – this resulted in his work ‘focusing, as it does, not only on battles and political treaties but also the looks and demeanor of his subjects and the complexities of their personalities’.²¹ Plutarch’s penultimate scene of his tale of Antony and Cleopatra appears as having ‘Cleopatra stark dead, laid upon a bed of gold, attired and arrayed in her royal robes’ – in which, ‘Shakespeare ‘found the clue for the equally histrionic self-display in the final scene’.²² This is reflected in Shakespeare’s Cleopatra ordering her servants to gather her finest clothing, allowing her to dress in preparation for death; ‘go fetch / My best attires; - I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony [...] when thou hast done this chore, I’ll give thee leave / To play till doomsday. – Bring our crown and all’.²³

As aforementioned, Petrarch not only lauded, but in some instances downright copied, his classical inspiration yet also took great effort to distance himself from such implementation of reference. Petrarch’s ‘tendency to flinch from imitation’ running parallel to his ‘attempt to reproduce the poetic achievements of Virgil in his own Latin

¹⁷ Burrow, Colin, *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2019) p.158

¹⁸ [Anon], ‘Dates, Sources, and Historical Context: The Origins of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra’, *The Royal Shakespeare Company* (2006) << <https://www.rsc.org.uk/antony-and-cleopatra/about-the-play/dates-and-sources> > [accessed: 11/04/2020]

¹⁹ North, Sir Thomas, *Plutarch’s Lives* (London: JM Dent & Sons: 1899) pp.273-274

²⁰ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 2: Scene 2, p. 131

²¹ [Anon], *The Royal Shakespeare Company*

²² Neill, Michael, ‘Introduction’ in William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (Oxford: Oxford University press: 2013) p.14

²³ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5: Scene 2, p. 157

epic based on Roman history’ may be a result of expressing the “historical solitude” of a European writer who feels tragically cut off and isolated from the unredeemable glory of classical civilization.^{24 25 26}

In comparison, Shakespeare – while an imitator of North and, through him, Plutarch – was never as devout a follower of the Classical style as Petrarch, even with his tendency to ‘flinch’. It appears that he made conscious efforts to be divergent from the classics, as Johnathan Bale wrote; ‘when Shakespeare was attacked [...] in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was on the grounds that [...] he disregarded every recommendation of the Greeks, broke every decorum in the classical book’.²⁷ He distanced himself from the historical literary tradition not by ‘making every right turn, when told to go left’, but by cleverly creating a conflict of literary proportions within the factions of his own work. Maurice Charley wrote that Shakespeare offers an ‘illustrative contrast between a carefully limited and controlled ‘Roman’ style [...] and a hyperbolical and expansive ‘Egyptian’ style’.²⁸ A clear example of such an ‘illustrative contrast’ can be seen in Scene two from Act two, where; ‘from the barge / A strange invisible perfume hits the sense [...] th’air which, but for vacancy, / had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / and make a gap in nature’ – an overwhelmingly positive description, representative of a non-Classical style. In response to such a display, the Romans present – representative of the Classical literary style erupt, proclaiming; ‘Royal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed. / He ploughed her and she cropped’^{29 30} Andrew Dickson details this comparison, noting that ‘Egypt is repeatedly portrayed as exotic, feminized, shifting and sexily sensual, while Rome is the hardened opposite: a world of chilly, chiseled masculine certainties’.³¹

In conclusion, while the relationship between history and literature may at first seem clear-cut and definitive, due to the interconnected nature of such a relationship no such answer can be given. However, with regards to the writing of Francesco Petrarch and William Shakespeare – the father of humanism, and the ‘planet’s most famous playwright’ respectively – they are simultaneously dissimilar and running parallel to one another.³² Both writers – in their works, the ‘Africa’ and ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ – incorporate into their relationship with history an integration of historical event in the makeup of their writing, in terms of plot. Both also incorporate quotation and stylings of historical writers’ work in their own, while simultaneously making conscious efforts to balance that with their own writing and beliefs as individuals.

²⁴ Burrow, *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* p.157

²⁵ Ascoli, Albert Russel, ‘Blinding the Cyclops: Petrarch after Dante’ in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition* Ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski, Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press: 2009) p.145

²⁶ Simpson, James, ‘Subjects of Triumph and Literary History: Dido and Petrarch’s Africa and Trionfi’ in *Journal of medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35;03 (2005) p.489

²⁷ Bale, Johnathan, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Picador: 2008) p.164

²⁸ Charley, Maurice, ‘Shakespeare’s Style in Julius Caesar and Cleopatra’ in *English Literary History* 26:03 (1959) p. 367

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 2: Scene 2, p. 131

³⁰ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 2: Scene 2, p. 131

³¹ Dickson, Andrew, ‘What the Romans did for Shakespeare: Rome and Roman values in Shakespeare’s plays’, *The British Library* < <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/what-the-romans-did-for-shakespeare-rome-and-roman-values-in-shakespeares-plays> > (15/03/2016) [accessed: 11/04/2020]

³² Dickson, Andrew, ‘Why Shakespeare is the world’s favourite writer’, *BBC Culture* (21/10/2014) < <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140422-shakespeare-the-worlds-writer> > [accessed: 15/04/2020]

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