

Doubtful Plays of Shakespeare

We shall give for the satisfaction of the reader what the celebrated German critic, Schlegel, says on this subject, and then add a very few remarks of our own.

‘All the editors, with the exception of Capell, are unanimous in rejecting *Titus Andronicus* as unworthy of Shakespeare, though they always allow it to be printed with the other pieces, as the scapegoat, as it were, of their abusive criticism. The correct method in such an investigation is first to examine into the external grounds, evidences, &c., and to weigh their worth; and then to adduce the internal reasons derived from the quality of the work. The critics of Shakespeare follow a course directly the reverse of this; they set out with a preconceived opinion against a piece, and seek, in justification of this opinion, to render the historical grounds suspicious, and to set them aside. *Titus Andronicus* is to be found in the first folio edition of Shakespeare’s works, which it was known was conducted by Heminge and Condell, for many years his friends and fellow-managers of the same theatre. Is it possible to persuade ourselves that they would not have known if a piece in their repertory did or did not actually belong to Shakespeare? And are we to lay to the charge of these honourable men a designed fraud in this single case, when we know that they did not show themselves so very desirous of scraping everything together which went by the name of Shakespeare, but, as it appears, merely gave those plays of which they had manuscripts in hand? Yet the following circumstance is still stronger: George Meres, a contemporary and admirer of Shakespeare, mentions *Titus Andronicus* in an enumeration of his works, in the year 1598. Meres was personally acquainted with the poet, and so very intimately, that the latter read over to him his Sonnets before they were printed. I cannot conceive that all the critical scepticism in the world would be sufficient to get over such a testimony.

This tragedy, it is true, is framed according to a false idea of the tragic, which by an accumulation of cruelties and enormities degenerates into the horrible, and yet leaves no deep impression behind: the story of Tereus and Philomela is heightened and overcharged under other names, and mixed up with the repast of Atreus and Thyestes, and many other incidents. In detail there is no want of beautiful lines, bold images, nay, even features which betray the peculiar conception of Shakespeare. Among these we may reckon the joy of the treacherous Moor at the blackness and ugliness of his child begot in adultery; and in the compassion of Titus Andronicus, grown childish through grief, for a fly which had been struck dead, and his rage afterwards when he imagines he discovers in it his black enemy; we recognize the future poet of *Lear*. Are the critics afraid that Shakespeare’s fame would be injured, were it established that in his early youth he ushered into the world a feeble and immature work? Was Rome the less the conqueror of the world because Remus could leap over its first walls? Let any one place himself in Shakespeare’s situation at the commencement of his career. He found only a few indifferent models, and yet these met with the most favourable reception, because men are never difficult to please in the novelty of an art before their taste has become fastidious from choice and abundance. Must not this situation have had its influence on him before he learned to make higher demands on himself, and by digging deeper in his own mind, discovered the richest veins of a noble metal? It is even highly probable that he must have made several failures before getting into the right path. Genius is in a certain sense infallible, and has nothing to learn; but art is to be learned, and must be acquired by practice and experience. In Shakespeare’s acknowledged works we find hardly any traces of his apprenticeship, and yet an apprenticeship he certainly had. This every artist must have, and especially in a period where he has not before him the example of a school already formed. I consider it as extremely probable, that Shakespeare began to write for the theatre at a much earlier

period than the one which is generally stated, namely, not till after the year 1590. It appears that, as early as the year 1584, when only twenty years of age, he had left his paternal home and repaired to London. Can we imagine that such an active head would remain idle for six whole years without making any attempt to emerge by his talents from an uncongenial situation? That in the dedication of the poem of *Venus and Adonis* he calls it “the first heir of his invention”, proves nothing against the supposition. It was the first which he printed; he might have composed it at an earlier period; perhaps, also, he did not include theatrical labours, as they then possessed but little literary dignity. The earlier Shakespeare began to compose for the theatre, the less are we enabled to consider the immaturity and imperfection of a work as a proof of its spuriousness in opposition to historical evidence, if we only find in it prominent features of his mind. Several of the works rejected as spurious may still have been produced in the period betwixt *Titus Andronicus* and the earliest of the acknowledged pieces.

‘At last, Steevens published seven pieces ascribed to Shakespeare in two supplementary volumes. It is to be remarked, that they all appeared in print in Shakespeare’s lifetime, with his name prefixed at full length. They are the following:

‘1. *Locrine*. The proofs of the genuineness of this piece are not altogether unambiguous; the grounds for doubt, on the other hand, are entitled to attention. However, this question is immediately connected with that respecting *Titus Andronicus*, and must be at the same time resolved in the affirmative or negative.

‘2. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. This piece was acknowledged by Dryden, but as a youthful work of Shakespeare. It is most undoubtedly his, and it has been admitted into several of the late editions. The supposed imperfections originate in the circumstance, that Shakespeare here handled a childish and extravagant romance of the old poet Gower, and was unwilling to drag the subject out of its proper sphere. Hence he even introduces Gower himself, and makes him deliver a prologue entirely in his antiquated language and versification. This power of assuming so foreign a manner is at least no proof of helplessness.

‘3. *The London Prodigal*. If we are not mistaken, Lessing pronounced this piece to be Shakespeare’s, and wished to bring it on the German stage.

‘4. *The Puritan; or, the Widow of Watling Street*. One of my literary friends, intimately acquainted with Shakespeare, was of opinion that the poet must have wished to write a play for once in the style of Ben Jonson, and that in this way we must account for the difference between the present piece and his usual manner. To follow out this idea, however, would lead to a very nice critical investigation.

‘5. *Thomas, Lord Cromwell*.

‘6. *Sir John Oldcastle—First Part*.

‘7. *A Yorkshire Tragedy*.

‘The three last pieces are not only unquestionably Shakespeare’s, but in my opinion they deserve to be classed among his best and maturest works. Steevens admits at last, in some degree, that they are Shakespeare’s, as well as the others, excepting *Locrine*, but he speaks of all of them with great contempt, as quite worthless productions. This condemnatory sentence is not, however, in the slightest

degree convincing, nor is it supported by critical acumen. I should like to see how such a critic would, of his own natural suggestion, have decided on Shakespeare's acknowledged masterpieces, and what he would have thought of praising in them, had the public opinion imposed on him the duty of admiration. *Thomas, Lord Cromwell*, and *Sir John Oldcastle*, are biographical dramas, and models in this species: the first is linked, from its subject, to *Henry the Eighth*, and the second to *Henry the Fifth*. The second part of *Oldcastle* is wanting; I know not whether a copy of the old edition has been discovered in England, or whether it is lost. *The Yorkshire Tragedy* is a tragedy in one act, a dramatized tale of murder: the tragical effect is overpowering, and it is extremely important to see how poetically Shakespeare could handle such a subject.

'There have been still farther ascribed to him: 1st. *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, a comedy in one act, printed in Dodsley's old plays. This has certainly some appearances in its favour. It contains a merry landlord, who bears a great similarity to the one in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*. However, at all events, though an ingenious, it is but a hasty sketch. 2nd. *The Accusation of Paris*. 3rd. *The Birth of Merlin*. 4th. *Edward the Third*. 5th. *The Fair Emma*. 6th. *Mucedorus*. 7th. *Arden of Feversham*. I have never seen any of these, and cannot therefore say anything respecting them. From the passages cited, I am led to conjecture that the subject of *Mucedorus* is the popular story of Valentine and Orson; a beautiful subject which Lope de Vega has also taken for a play. *Arden of Feversham* is said to be a tragedy on the story of a man, from whom the poet was descended by the mother's side. If the quality of the piece is not too directly at variance with this claim, the circumstance would afford an additional probability in its favour. For such motives were not foreign to Shakespeare: he treated Henry the Seventh, who bestowed lands on his forefathers for services performed by them, with a visible partiality.

'Whoever takes from Shakespeare a play early ascribed to him, and confessedly belonging to his time, is unquestionably bound to answer, with some degree of probability, this question: who has then written it? Shakespeare's competitors in the dramatic walk are pretty well known, and if those of them who have even acquired a considerable name, a Lilly, a Marlow, a Heywood, are still so very far below him, we can hardly imagine that the author of a work, which rises so high beyond theirs, would have remained unknown'—*Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, vol. ii, page 252.

We agree to the truth of this last observation, but not to the justice of its application to some of the plays here mentioned. It is true that Shakespeare's best works are very superior to those of Marlow, or Heywood, but it is not true that the best of the doubtful plays above enumerated are superior or even equal to the best of theirs. *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, which Schlegel speaks of as an undoubted production of our author's, is much more in the manner of Heywood than of Shakespeare. The effect is indeed overpowering, but the mode of producing it is by no means poetical. The praise which Schlegel gives to *Thomas, Lord Cromwell*, and to *Sir John Oldcastle*, is altogether exaggerated. They are very indifferent compositions, which have not the slightest pretensions to rank with *Henry V* or *Henry viii*. We suspect that the German critic was not very well acquainted with the dramatic contemporaries of Shakespeare, or aware of their general merits; and that he accordingly mistakes a resemblance in style and manner for an equal degree of excellence. Shakespeare differed from the other writers of his age not in the mode of treating his subjects, but in the grace and power which he displayed in them. The reason assigned by a literary friend of Schlegel's for supposing *The Puritan; Or, the Widow of Watling Street*, to be Shakespeare's, viz. that it is in the style of Ben Jonson, that is to say, in a style just the reverse of his own, is not very satisfactory to a plain English understanding. *Lochrine*, and *The London Prodigal*, if they were Shakespeare's at all, must have been among the sins of his youth. *Arden of Feversham* contains several striking passages, but the passion which they express is rather that of a sanguine tem-perament than of a lofty imagination; and in this respect they approximate more nearly

to the style of other writers of the time than to Shakespeare's. *Titus Andronicus* is certainly as unlike Shakespeare's usual style as it is possible. It is an accumulation of vulgar physical horrors, in which the power exercised by the poet bears no proportion to the repugnance excited by the subject. The character of Aaron the Moor is the only thing which shows any originality of conception; and the scene in which he expresses his joy 'at the blackness and ugliness of his child begot in adultery', the only one worthy of Shakespeare. Even this is worthy of him only in the display of power, for it gives no pleasure. Shakespeare managed these things differently. Nor do we think it a sufficient answer to say that this was an embryo or crude production of the author. In its kind it is full grown, and its features decided and overcharged. It is not like a first imperfect essay, but shows a confirmed habit, a systematic preference of violent effect to everything else. There are occasional detached images of great beauty and delicacy, but these were not beyond the powers of other writers then living. The circumstance which inclines us to reject the external evidence in favour of this play being Shakespeare's is, that the grammatical construction is constantly false and mixed up with vulgar abbreviations, a fault that never occurs in any of his genuine plays. A similar defect, and the halting measure of the verse are the chief objections to *Pericles of Tyre*, if we except the far-fetched and complicated absurdity of the story. The movement of the thoughts and passions has something in it not unlike Shakespeare, and several of the descriptions are either the original hints of passages which Shakespeare has engrafted on his other plays, or are imitations of them by some contemporary poet. The most memorable idea in it is in Marina's speech, where she compares the world to 'a lasting storm, hurrying her from her friends'.

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