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## The Development of Criticism of Shakespeare's Comedies

### 1590–1660

Contemporary mentions of Shakespeare are thin on the ground. It is striking – and salutary – for an historical account of early Shakespearian criticism to have its starting-point in Robert Greene's disparaging remark about the young playwright as 'an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers' (1592), but perhaps Greene's animosity was prompted by emerging jealousy of the newcomer's literary powers. By the time Shakespeare's narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) had been published their author was routinely included in lists of eminent Elizabethan authors. Francis Meres's commonplace book *Palladis Tamia* (1598) praises Shakespeare's generic versatility:

As *Plautus* and *Seneca* are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for comedy witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loves Labours Lost*, his *Loves Labours Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream* and his *Merchant of Venice*: for tragedy his *Richard the 2.* *Richard the 3.* *Henry the 4.* *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*. (Meres, 1598: 282)

In 1602 the law student John Manningham reported on a performance of *Twelfth Night* at the Middle Temple, noting: 'a good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady, in general terms telling him what she liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, etc., and then when he came to practise, making him believe they took him to be mad' (Schoenbaum, 1975: 156).

Ben Jonson was less impressed by Shakespeare's comic style: the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) asserts that its author 'is loth to make Nature afraid

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in his plays, like those that beget *Tales*, *Tempests*, and such like drolleries' in an apparent reference to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. At the end of *The New Inn* (1629) there is a scathing reference to 'some mouldy tale / Like *Pericles*'. Jonson's work is characterized by its frequent use of prefatory material often containing literary commentary: this is almost non-existent in Shakespeare's canon, although the 1609 quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* carries an – apparently unauthorial – Epistle to the reader which identifies the play as a comedy:

this author's comedies, that are so framed to the life, that they serve for the most common Commentaries of all the actions of our lives, showing such a dexterity and power of wit, that the most displeas'd with plays are pleas'd with his comedies. And all such dull and heavy-witted wordlings, as were never capable of the wit of a comedy, coming by report of them to his representations, have found that wit there that they never found in themselves, and have parted better wittied than they came: feeling an edge of wit set upon them, more than ever they dream'd they had brain to grind it on . . . It deserves such labour as well the best comedy in Terence or Plautus.

Other scattered references in the period exist, but the first substantial act of memorializing and shaping of Shakespeare's critical reputation was the publication in 1623 of a substantial folio volume collecting together thirty-six plays as *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (often known as the First Folio, or abbreviated to F). The title of the work reveals one of its most significant critical legacies: in dividing the plays into three genres in its catalogue, the First Folio established the major critical categories still in use today: 'comedies', 'histories' and 'tragedies'. Thus the plays listed as comedies in 1623 are, in their order, *The Tempest*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, and *The Winter's Tale*. To these are often added *Pericles*, and the collaboration with John Fletcher *Two Noble Kinsmen*, not included in the Folio, and some assessments of comedy, following the quarto epistle, have also included *Troilus and Cressida*.

John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow-actors and the men responsible for the publishing of his collected plays, addressed their prefatory epistle 'To the Great Variety of Readers':

It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished, that the Author himself had lived to have set forth, and overseen his own writings; But since it hath been ordained otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envy his Friends, the office of their care, and pain, to have collected

and published them; and so to have published them, as where (before) you were abused with diverse stolen, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors, that exposed them: even those, are now offered to your view cured, and perfect of their limbs; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them. Who, as he was a happy imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers. But it is not our province, who only gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that read him. And there we hope, to your diverse capacities, you will find enough, both to draw, and hold you: for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Read him, therefore; and again, and again: And if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can be your guides: if you need them not, you can lead yourselves, and others. And such Readers we wish him. (Wells and Taylor, 1986: xlv)

The playwright Ben Jonson contributed an elegy:

He was not of an age, but for all time!  
And all the Muses still were in their prime,  
When like Apollo he came forth to warm  
Our ears, or like a Mercury to charm!  
Nature herself was proud of his designs,  
And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines!  
Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,  
As since, she will vouchsafe no other wit.  
The merry Greek, tart Aristophanes,  
Neat Terence, witty Plautus, now not please;  
But antiquated and deserted lie  
As they were not of nature's family.

(Wells and Taylor, 1986: xlv)

In his *Timber, or Discoveries*, first published in 1640, Jonson again addressed Shakespeare's reputation, referring back to Heminges and Condell's 'To the Great Variety of Readers':

I remember the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing, whatsoever to be penned, he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand'; which they thought a malevolent speech. I had not told posterity this but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by wherein he most faulted; and to justify mine own candour: for I loved the man, and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any. He was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fantasy, brave notions, and gentle expressions; wherein he flowed with that facility that sometime it was necessary

he should be stopped. ‘*Sufflaminandus erat*’ [‘Sometimes he needed the brake’], as Augustus said of Haterius. His wit was in his own power, would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things, could not escape laughter: as when he said in the person of Caesar, one speaking to him, ‘Caesar, thou dost me wrong’; he replied ‘Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause’; and such like: which were ridiculous. But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned. (Donaldson, 1985: 539–40)

## 1660–1720: ‘Good in Parts’ – Texts in Print and on Stage

It is to post-Restoration culture that we need to look to see the establishment of many now-familiar preoccupations and approaches to Shakespeare. As Michael Dobson notes, in his study of the ‘extensive cultural work that went into the installation of Shakespeare as England’s National Poet’ between 1660 and 1769:

so many of the conceptions of Shakespeare we inherit date not from the Renaissance but from the Enlightenment. It was this period, after all, which initiated many of the practices which modern spectators and readers of Shakespeare would generally regard as normal or even natural: the performance of his female roles by women instead of men (instigated at a revival of *Othello* in 1660); the reproduction of his works in scholarly editions, with critical apparatus (pioneered by Rowe’s edition of 1709 and the volume of commentary appended to it by Charles Gildon the following year); the publication of critical monographs devoted entirely to the analysis of his works (an industry founded by John Dennis’s *An Essay upon the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, 1712); the promulgation of the plays in secondary education (the earliest known instance of which is the production of *Julius Caesar* mounted in 1728 ‘by the young Noblemen of the Westminster School’), and in higher education (first carried out in the lectures on Shakespeare given by William Hawkins at Oxford in the early 1750s); the erection of monuments to Shakespeare in nationally symbolic public places (initiated by Peter Sheemaker’s statue in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey, unveiled in 1741); and the promotion of Stratford-upon-Avon as a site of secular pilgrimage (ratified at Garrick’s jubilee in 1769). (Dobson, 1992: 3)

Ben Jonson’s half-praise, half-sneer in his elegy about Shakespeare’s classical knowledge – ‘small Latin, and less Greek’ – was an early suggestion of one of the obstacles to Shakespeare appreciation in post-Restoration culture. The Restoration aesthetics of neoclassicism favoured poetry as imitation of classical, especially Roman, authors, and the idea of the writer as educated craftsman following ancient generic rules. Thus Thomas Fuller identifies Shakespeare among *The Worthies of England* in 1662, but is preoccupied with his subject’s education, or lack of it:

*Plautus*, who was an exact Comaedian, yet never any Scholar, as our Shakespeare (if alive) would confess himself. Add to all these, that though his Genius generally was *jocular*, and inclining him to *festivity*, yet he could, (when so disposed), be *solemn* and *serious*, as appears by his Tragedies, so that *Heracitus* himself (I mean if secret and unseen) might afford to smile at his Comedies, they were so *merry*, and *Democritus* scarce forbear to sigh at his Tragedies they were so *mournful*. He was an eminent instance of the truth of that Rule, *Poeta no fit, sed nascitur*, one is not *made* but *born* a Poet. Indeed his Learning was very little, so that as *Cornish diamonds* are not polished by any Lapidary, but are pointed and smoothed even as they are taken out of the Earth, so *nature* it self was all the *art* that was used upon him. (Fuller, 1662: 126)

The introduction of nature as a term of cultural valorization to balance against art is key to the recuperation of Shakespeare in this period. When, for example, Margaret Cavendish defends Shakespeare in one of her *Sociable Letters* of 1664, she argues that it is the vitality of his characters that is crucial to his success:

So well he hath expressed in his plays all sorts of persons, as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described; and as sometimes one would think he was really himself the clown or jester he feigns, so one would think, he was also the King and Privy Counsellor . . . nay, one would think he had been metamorphosed from a man to a woman, for who could describe Cleopatra better than he hath done, and many other females of his own creating, as Nan Page, Mrs Page, Mrs Ford, the Doctor's Maid, Beatrice, Mrs Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and others, too many to relate? (Thompson and Roberts, 1997: 12–13)

Early in this process of recuperating Shakespeare for the Restoration period is John Dryden's important statement of neoclassical aesthetics, his essay *Of Dramatic Poesie* (1668). Dryden's essay takes the form of a discussion between four interlocutors: Eugenius, Crites, Lisedeius and Neander, generally believed to represent Dryden himself. While others of the conversationalists praise Ben Jonson as 'the greatest man of the last age' because of his adherence to classical rules, particularly the unities of time, place and action (Dryden, 1969: 14), Neander favours Shakespeare for his untutored but instinctive, intuitive expression. Shakespeare is to be praised for his natural learning, despite his flaws:

he was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily: when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learn'd; he needed

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not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he look'd inwards, and found her there. (Dryden, 1969: 47–8)

In the comparison with Ben Jonson – and in particular with his comedy *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*, considered an especially perfect dramatic construction – which was to be the touchstone for the nascent literary criticism of Shakespeare in the Restoration period, Neander's emotional loyalties are clear: 'If I would compare [Jonson] with *Shakespeare*, I must acknowledge him the more correct Poet, but *Shakespeare* the greater wit. *Shakespeare* was the *Homer*, or Father of our Dramatic Poets; *Johnson* was the *Virgil*, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love *Shakespeare*' (Dryden, 1969: 50). Elsewhere in his works, Dryden twice praises *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for its plotting and structure, and that play enjoyed particular popularity in the Restoration theatre.

In his preface to the first scholarly edition of Shakespeare's works (1709–10), the poet laureate and tragedian Nicholas Rowe advocates a more historically informed appreciation of Shakespeare's apparent divergence from classical precepts:

as Shakespear lived under a kind of mere light of nature, and had never been made acquainted with the regularity of those written precepts, so it would be hard to judge him by a law he knew nothing of. We are to consider him as a man that lived in a state of almost universal license and ignorance: there was no established judge, but every one took the liberty to write according to the dictates of his own fancy. (Rowe, 1709–10: xxvi)

Rowe argues that writing outside the constraints of literary tradition allows Shakespeare's imagination free rein:

I believe we are better pleased with those thoughts, altogether new and uncommon, which his own imagination supplied him so abundantly with, than if he had given us the most beautiful passages out of the Greek and Latin poets, and that in the most agreeable manner that it was possible for a master of the English language to deliver them. (1709–10: iv)

He also recognizes the generic hybridity of many, even the majority, of Shakespeare's plays:

His plays are properly to be distinguished only into comedies and tragedies. Those which are called histories, and even some of his comedies, are really tragedies, with a run or mixture of comedy amongst them. That way of tragic-comedy was the common mistake of that age, and is indeed become so agreeable to the English taste, that though the severer critics among us cannot bear

it, yet the generality of our audiences seem to be better pleased with it than with an exact tragedy. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, are all pure Comedy; the rest, however they are called, have something of both kinds. 'Tis not very easy to determine which way of writing he was most excellent in. There is certainly a great deal of entertainment in his comical humours; and though they did not then strike at all ranks of people, as the satire of the present age has taken the liberty to do, yet there is a pleasing and a well-distinguished variety in those characters which he thought fit to meddle with. In *Twelfth Night* there is something singularly ridiculous and pleasant in the fantastical steward Malvolio. The Parasite and the Vain-glorious in Parolles, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, is as good as any thing of that kind in Plautus or Terence. Petruchio, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, is an uncommon piece of humour. The conversation of Benedick and Beatrice, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, have much wit and sprightliness all along. His clowns, without which character there was hardly any play writ in that time, are all very entertaining. . . . To these I might add, that incomparable character of Shylock the Jew, in *The Merchant of Venice*; but though we have seen that play received and acted as a comedy, and the part of the Jew performed by an excellent comedian, yet I cannot but think it was designed tragically by the author. (1709–10: xvii–xx)

A final, seventh volume appended to the series in 1710 added a more extensive critique of the dramatic qualities of the plays in 'An Essay on the Art, Rise and Progress of the Stage in Greece, Rome and England' by Charles Gildon. Gildon, like many of his contemporaries, is particularly concerned with Shakespeare's tragedies and with defending the playwright against the charges of neoclassical critics, although he does add a short commentary on comedy:

Comedy participates in many things with the rules of tragedy, that is, it is an imitation both of action and manners, but those must both have a great deal of the ridiculum in them. . . . Ben Jonson is our best pattern, and has given us this advantage, that though the English stage has scarce yet been acquainted with the shadow of tragedy, yet have we excelled all the ancients in comedy.

There is no man has had more of this *vis Comica* than our Shakespear, in particular characters and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he has given us a play that wants but little of a perfect regularity. (1709–10: lvii)

In the end, Gildon's view of Shakespeare is mixed:

Shakespeare is indeed stor'd with a great many Beauties, but they are in a heap of Rubbish; and as in the Ruines of a magnificent Pile we are pleas'd with the Capitals of Pillars, the Basso-relievos and the like as we meet with them, yet how infinitely more beautiful, and charming must it be to behold them in their proper Places in the standing Building, where every thing answers the other, and

one Harmony of all the Parts heightens the Excellence even of those Parts.  
(1709–10: 425)

Gildon expanded this view in his book *The Complete Art of Poetry* (1718), in which the final chapter offers ‘Shakespeariana: or Select Moral Reflections, Topicks, Similies and Descriptions from Shakespear’ – the first book of Shakespearian quotations.

It is easy to see how the idea of a Shakespeare good in parts also reflects contemporary stage practice. What Gildon is attempting critically – the sifting of worthy from unworthy elements of the plays – scores of stage-plays attempted dramatically, in adapting, rewriting and recombining Shakespeare’s works to suit the tastes of new audiences. These adaptations are themselves works of criticism; often, in prefatory material and epilogues, explicitly so, although, again, it is Shakespeare’s tragedies which attract most interest during the period. Among the comedies, *The Tempest* is a favourite subject with adaptations by John Dryden and William Davenant in 1667 and Thomas Shadwell in 1674; John Lacy produced *Sauny the Scot, or, the Taming of the Shrew* in 1667; George Granville adapted *The Merchant of Venice* as *The Jew of Venice* in 1701; and John Dennis adapted *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1702, correcting its ‘strange defects’ of style and plotting, since ‘in comedy, which is an image of common life, everything which is forced is abominable’ (Vickers, 1974: II, 163). Dennis also wrote an extensive criticism of Shakespeare in his *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear*, published in 1712, in which he argues that ‘Though *Shakespeare* succeeded very well in comedy, yet his principal talent and his chief delight was tragedy’ (Dennis, 1712: 27).

By the second decade of the eighteenth century, therefore, both Shakespearian textual scholarship in the form of Rowe’s edition of 1709–10, and literary criticism in the contributions of Gildon and Dennis, were both established and contested fields. Divergent impulses towards the canonizing and concretizing of the Shakespearian text, on the one hand, and towards disintegration on the other, are key to eighteenth-century approaches.

### 1720–1765: Editions and Editors

Alexander Pope’s edition of 1725 described itself on its title page as ‘Collated and Corrected by the former Editions’. Pope’s ‘Preface of the Editor’ evades the task of the critic in favour of that of the new, humanist textual scholar, the editor. Rather than entering ‘into a Criticism upon this Author’, Pope sets out to ‘give an account of the fate of his Works, and the disadvantages under which they have been transmitted to us. We shall hereby extenuate many faults which are his, and clear him from the imputation of many which are not’ (Pope and



Rowe, 1725: I, i–ii). Pope also acquits Shakespeare of the charges that neoclassical critics had laid at his door: ‘To judge therefore of Shakespear by Aristotle’s rules, is like trying a man by the Laws of one Country, who acted under those of another’ (1725: I, vi). Rather, Pope repeats the critical orthodoxy that Shakespeare ‘is not so much an Imitator, as an Instrument, of Nature; and ’tis not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks thro’ him’ (1725: I, ii), and makes a particular feature of Shakespeare’s characterization:

His Characters are so much Nature her self, that ’tis a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as Copies of her . . . Every single character in Shakespear is as much an Individual, as those in Life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike; and such as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be Twins, will upon comparison be found remarkably distinct. To this life and variety of Character, we must add the wonderful Preservation of it; which is such throughout his plays, that had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply’d them with certainty to every speaker. (1725: I, ii–iii)

Pope praises Shakespeare’s ‘Power over our Passions’ (I, iii), and also his intellectual control of ‘the coolness of Reflection and Reasoning’ (I, iv).

Many of Shakespeare’s perceived faults are in fact, Pope proposes, errors of the printing and publication process. He surmises that Shakespeare did not authorize or check those of the plays that were published in quarto editions during his lifetime, and that therefore:

how many low and vicious parts and passages might no longer reflect upon this great Genius, but appear unworthily charged upon him? And even in those which are really his, how many faults may have been unjustly laid to his account from arbitrary Additions, Expunctions, Transpositions of scenes and lines, confusion of Characters and Persons, wrong application of Speeches, corruptions of innumerable Passages by the Ignorance, and wrong Corrections of ’em again by the Impertinence, of his first Editors? (I, xxi)

In 1726, a volume appeared with the descriptive title *Shakespeare Restored: or, a Specimen of Many Errors, as well Committed, and Unamended, by Mr Pope in his Late Edition of this Poet: designed not only to correct the said Edition, but to restore the true Reading of Shakespeare in all the Editions ever published. By Mr Theobald*. Its author, Lewis Theobald, proposed numerous new readings and emendations, particularly of *Hamlet*, many of which were plagiarized by Pope for his second edition which appeared in 1728. Pope pilloried Theobald in the first edition of his mock-epic poem the *Dunciad* published a few months later, mocking his pedantry in footnotes wondering whether ‘Dunciad’ should be spelt ‘Dunceiad’ and pitying ‘hapless Shakespear, yet of Tibbald sore, / Wish’d

he had blotted for himself before'. Theobald's riposte was his own Shakespeare edition of 1733, *The Works of Shakespeare: in Seven Volumes. Collated with the Oldest Copies, and Corrected; With notes, Explanatory and Critical*.

Theobald's style is effusive:

No Age, perhaps, can produce an Author more various from himself, than Shakespeare has been universally acknowledg'd to be. The Diversity in Stile, and other Parts of Composition, so obvious in him, is as variously to be accounted for. His Education, we find, was at best but begun: and he started early into a Science from the Force of Genius, unequally assisted by acquir'd Improvements. His Fire, Spirit, and Exuberance of Imagination gave an Impetuosity to his Pen: His Ideas flow'd from him in a Stream rapid, but not turbulent; copious, but not ever overbearing its Shores. The Ease and Sweetness of his Temper might not a little contribute to his Facility in Writing: as his Employment, as a Player, gave him an Advantage and Habit of fancying himself the very Character he meant to delineate. (Theobald, 1733: I, xv)

His view of his predecessor and literary rival Pope is clear; Shakespeare studies has its first real personality clash: 'He has acted with regard to our Author, as an Editor, whom Lipsius mentions, did with regard to Martial; *Inventus est nescio quis Popa, qui non vitia ejus, sed ipsum, excidit*. He has attacked him like an unhandy Slaughterman; and not lopped off the errors, but the Poet' (1733: I, xxxv–xxxvi). Theobald's is not, however, the last word in this particular bibliographic and personal spat. In 1747 Pope, together with his collaborator William Warburton, brought out an edition to trump Theobald: *The Works of Shakespear in Eight Volumes. The Genuine Text (collated with all the former Editions, and then corrected and emended) is here settled: Being restored from the Blunders of the first Editors, and the Interpolations of the two Last: with A Comment and Notes, Critical and Explanatory*.

Theobald's edition establishes and promulgates his own theory of the editor's task. This covers three activities: 'the Emendation of corrupt Passages; the Explanation of obscure and difficult ones; and an Inquiry into the Beauties and Defects of Composition' (1733: I, xl). He elaborates on his editorial principles:

Where-ever the Author's Sense is clear and discoverable, (tho', perchance, low and trivial;) I have not by any Innovation tamper'd with his Text; out of an Ostentation of endeavouring to make him speak better than the old Copies have done.

Where, thro' all the former Editions, a Passage has labour'd under flat Nonsense and invincible Darkness, if, by the Addition or Alteration of a Letter or two, I have restored to Him both Sense and Sentiment, such Corrections, I am persuaded, will need no Indulgence.

And whenever I have taken a greater Latitude and Liberty in amending, I have constantly endeavoured to support my Corrections and Conjectures by parallel Passages and Authorities from himself, the surest Means of expounding any Author whatsoever . . . Some Remarks are spent in explaining Passages, where the Wit or Satire depends on an obscure Point of History: Others, where Allusions are to Divinity, Philosophy, or other Branches of Science. Some are added to shew, where there is a Suspicion of our Author having borrow'd from the Antients: Others, to shew where he is rallying his Contemporaries; or where He himself is rallied by them. And some are necessarily thrown in, to explain an obscure and obsolete Term, Phrase, or Idea. (1733: I, xliii–xliv)

Further editions, including those by Hamner and Capell, appeared throughout the eighteenth century as each editor claimed to be improving on the text of his predecessors.

Shakespeare's most significant and influential eighteenth-century mediator was editor and critic Samuel Johnson, whose annotated edition appeared in 1765. Johnson sets out 'to inquire, by what peculiarities of excellence *Shakespeare* has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen' (Johnson, 1765: I, viii). The answer, for Johnson is that:

*Shakespeare* is above all writers . . . the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. (1765: I, viii–ix)

For Johnson, Shakespeare is a philosopher and teacher, filled with 'practical axioms and domestick wisdom', but he argues strongly against the recent tendency to find Shakespeare's greatness in particular passages: 'he that tries to recommend him by select quotations, will succeed like the pedant in *Hierocles*, who, when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen' (1765: I, ix). Verisimilitude, the quality of creating recognizable individuals, dialogue and scenarios, is key to Johnson's appraisal of Shakespeare's work. Thus '*Shakespeare* has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion', he 'approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful', and his reader can benefit from 'reading human sentiments in human language' (1765: I, xi–xii).

Johnson's approach to Shakespeare's genres is radical:

*Shakespeare's* plays are not in the rigorous or critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind, exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and benefits are done and hindered without design. (1765: I, xiii)

While this, Johnson admits, is 'a practice contrary to the rules of criticism', 'there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature'. Unlike the classical authors set as exemplars by neoclassical critics, '*Shakespeare* has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition' (I, xiv). Johnson defines genres historically, so that, for Shakespeare's audience: 'An action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents, in their opinion constituted a comedy. This idea of a comedy continued long amongst us, and plays were written, which, by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies to-day and comedies to-morrow' (I, xiv). Johnson exonerates him from the charge of neglecting the classical unities, arguing that spectators are not so literal-minded as to require the stage to represent a single place or continuous time: 'the truth is, that spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and that the players are only players . . . Where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first *Athens*, and then *Sicily*, which was always known to be neither *Sicily* nor *Athens* but a modern theatre?' (I, xxvii).

Unlike Dennis, Johnson sees Shakespeare's true talent as for comedy:

In tragedy he often writes, with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comic, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature. In his tragic scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and the language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct. (I, xvii)

Johnson's awareness of Shakespeare's 'excellencies' makes him equally clear about his failings. Shakespeare's tragic plots prompt moral objections, in his comedies he 'is seldom very successful when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contest of sarcasm; their jests are commonly gross

and their pleasantry licentious' (I, xxi). Shakespeare is rebuked for the violation of chronology and his use of anachronisms, and for occasionally strained or wearisome rhetoric, but Johnson reserves his most lengthy, and famous, censure for Shakespeare's wordplay:

A quibble is to *Shakespeare*, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchaining it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it. (I, xxiii–xxiv)

Like previous commentators, Johnson allows for a mixture of good and bad qualities in Shakespeare's work: 'he has scenes of undoubted and perpetual excellence, but perhaps not one play which, if it were now exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to its conclusion.' Rather, Johnson argues, 'it must be at last confessed, that as we owe everything to him, he owes something to us; that, if much of his praise is paid by perception and judgement, much is likewise given by custom and veneration' (I, xlvi).

### 1765–1800: Stage and Page

Johnson's interest in the texts of the plays did not extend to an interest in their theatrical performance. Sandra Clark describes the eighteenth century's preference for adapted Shakespeare on the stage as a 'paradox whereby Shakespeare's works achieved the status of "classics" in the study while for a long period on the stage the divine Bard (as he came to be called) was often represented by plays only a small proportion of which he actually wrote' (Clark, 1997: xliii). Shakespeare's position in the theatre during the eighteenth century was largely dependent on his tragedies, with *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and various adaptations of *The Tempest* and *The Taming of the Shrew* lagging behind *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III* and *1 Henry IV* in relative performance figures (see Hogan, 1952: II, 715–16). Bell's Acting Edition of 1774, dedicated to David Garrick, 'the best illustrator of, and the best living comment on, Shakespeare' (Bell, 1969: I, 3), presents itself as 'a companion to the theatre' (I, 8) rather than

a critical edition. It prints the texts with the standard performance cuts and emendations, proposing that these changes allow 'the noble monuments he has left us, of unrivalled ability, [to] be restored to due proportion and natural lustre, by sweeping off those cobwebs, and that dust of depraved opinion, which Shakespeare was unfortunately forced to throw on them' (I, 6). Bell's edition also presents itself as an alternative to the increasingly scholarly and specialized writing on Shakespeare, as a forerunner to self-consciously pedagogic or introductory volumes popular in the twentieth century:

it has been our peculiar endeavour to render what we call the essence of Shakespeare, more instructive and intelligible; especially to the ladies and to youth; glaring indecencies being removed, and intricate passages explained; and lastly, we have striven to supply plainer ideas of criticism, both in public and private, than we have hitherto met with.

A general view of each play is given, by way of introduction.

Though this is not an edition meant for the profoundly learned, nor the deeply studious, who love to find out, and chase their own critical game; yet we flatter ourselves both parties may perceive fresh ideas started for speculation and reflection. (Bell, 1969: I, 9–10)

The edition's particular stress is on theatrical representation, and it finds many of the plays wanting. *The Winter's Tale* is prefaced: 'that Shakespeare was particularly right in his choice of a title for this piece, very imperfect criticism must allow, for it has all the improbabilities and jumble of incidents, some merry, and some sad, that constitute Christmas stories; there are many beauties even in wildness; it is a parterre of poetical flowers sadly choked with weeds' (1969: I, 151); *Twelfth Night* is 'in its plot very complicate, irregular, and in some places incredible. The grave scenes are graceful and familiar: the comic ones full charged with humour; but rather of the obsolete kind . . . Action must render it more pleasing than perusal' (I, 315); *The Comedy of Errors* does not very obviously produce a moral, but we may deduce from it, that Providence can happily regulate the most perplexed and unpromising circumstances, and change a temporary apparent evil, into a real and lasting good. Patience and submission are herein justly and properly inculcated' (I, 81).

While Shakespeare criticism looks to be a male preserve, women were also increasingly involved. Elizabeth Montagu's *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets* (1769) was extensively reprinted and translated. Montagu scorned as narrow-minded critics who criticized Shakespeare's learning:

For copying nature he found it in the busy walks of human life, he drew from an original, with which the literati are seldom well acquainted. They perceive his

portraits are not of the Grecian or of the Roman school: after finding them unlike to the celebrated forms preserved in learned museums they do not deign to enquire whether they resemble the living persons they were intended to represent. (Montagu, 1970: 17)

It is Shakespeare's facility in drawing recognizable characters that Montagu most admires: he 'seems to have had the art of the Dervise, in the Arabian tales, who could throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation' (1970: 37). Elizabeth Griffith, in her *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* (1775), described Shakespeare as a 'Philosopher' whose 'anatomy of the human heart is delineated from *nature*, not from *metaphysics*; referring immediately to our intuitive sense and not wandering with the schoolmen' (Griffith, 1971: ix), and thus, perhaps, uniquely accessible and applicable to contemporary women largely denied a classical education. Like Montagu, Griffith is able to claim authority to write on Shakespeare by wresting him from the enervating grasp of the scholar and reinstating him as the poet of everyday life.

Character study was to be the dominant theme of Romantic criticism of Shakespeare. There were, however, other, now familiar strands emerging. In 1794 Walter Whiter published *A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeare. Containing I. Notes on As You Like It. II. An Attempt to Explain and Illustrate various passages on a new principle of criticism, derived from Mr Locke's doctrine of The Association of Ideas*. Whiter explained John Locke's idea of 'association' as 'the combination of those ideas, which have no natural alliance or relation to each other' (Whiter, 1972: 65). Whiter argued that critics had hitherto been preoccupied by discovering:

the *direct*, though sometimes perhaps obscure allusions, which the poet has *intentionally* made to the customs of his own age, and to the various vices, follies, passions and prejudices, which are the pointed objects of his satire or his praise. But the commentators have not marked those *indirect* and *tacit* references, which are produced by the writer with *no* intentional allusion; or rather they have not unfolded those trains of thought, alike pregnant with the materials *peculiar* to his age, which often prompt the combinations of the poet in the wildest exertions of his fancy, and which conduct him, unconscious of the effect, to the various *peculiarities* of his imagery or his language. (1972: 71–2)

Whiter's careful exposition of linguistic details – his use of analogues from contemporary writing and from elsewhere in Shakespeare's lexicon – marks an early example of something twentieth-century critics as diverse as Caroline Spurgeon and Patricia Parker (see chapter 3 on Language) have developed.

**1800–1840: Romantic Critics – Schlegel, Coleridge, Hazlitt**

Whereas one major current in eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism was to sift the plays for their beauties and point out their weaknesses, Romantic critics such as August von Schlegel argued for their ‘organic unity’, a structural organization intrinsic to the literary work which ‘unfolds itself from within’ and is not imposed by a framework of rigid classical aesthetics. As Bate (1992) argues, the continuing influence of this method, taken up by I. A. Richards as ‘practical criticism’, can still be seen in the many educational contexts in which close reading aimed at uncovering organic form is taught and examined (Bate, 1992: 5). In his lectures, translated into English in 1846, Schlegel identifies characterization as one of Shakespeare’s most dominant qualities:

Never, perhaps, was there so comprehensive a talent for characterization as Shakspeare. It . . . grasps every diversity of range, age and sex, down to the lisplings of infancy . . . the king and the beggar, the hero and the pickpocket, the sage and the idiot, speak and act with equal truthfulness; not only does he transport himself to distant ages and foreign nations . . . He gives us the history of minds; he lays open to us, in a single word, a whole series of their anterior states. (Schlegel, 1846: 363–4)

His characterization is ironic:

Shakspeare makes each of his principal characters the glass in which the others are reflected, and by like means enables us to discover what could not be immediately revealed in us . . . Nobody ever painted so truthfully as he has done the facility of self-deception, the half self-conscious hypocrisy towards ourselves, with which even noble minds attempt to disguise the almost inevitable influence of selfish motives in human nature. This secret irony of the characterization commands admiration as the profound abyss of acuteness and sagacity; but it is the grave of enthusiasm. (Schlegel, 1846: 369)

Schlegel praises the comedies’ ‘powerful impression on the moral feeling’ while avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality or invective (1846: 384). His discussion of individual plays brings out some interesting observations: he judges the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* ‘more remarkable than the play itself’ (1846: 382); in *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Parolles is seen as second only to Falstaff in Shakespeare’s comic characterization; and of *Measure for Measure*: ‘The piece properly takes its name from punishment; the true significance of the whole is the triumph of mercy over strict justice; no man being himself so free from errors as to be entitled to deal it out to his equals.’ ‘The most beautiful embellishment of the composition’ is the character of Isabella; the Duke ‘unites in his person the wisdom of the priest and the prince’ (1846: 387–8).



Schlegel's enjoyment of the subtleties of Shylock's 'light touch of Judaism in everything he says or does' as he directs his revenge at 'those Christians who are actuated by truly Christian sentiments' requires 'the finished art of a great actor' (1846: 389). *As You Like It* has little plot, 'or rather, what is done is not so essential as what is said', but 'whoever affects to be displeased, if in this romantic forest the ceremonial of dramatic art is not duly observed, ought in justice to be delivered over to the wise fool [Touchstone], to be led gently out of it to some prosaical region' (1846: 391, 392). Schlegel considers *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together: Caliban is judged 'in his way, a poetical being; he always speaks in verse' (1846: 395). *The Winter's Tale* Schlegel glosses as:

one of those tales which are peculiarly calculated to beguile the dreary leisure of a long winter evening, and are even attractive and intelligible to childhood, while animated by a fervent truth in delineation of character and passion, and invested with the embellishments of poetry lowering itself, as it were, to the simplicity of the subject, they transport manhood back to the golden age of imagination. (1846: 396)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's important observations on Shakespeare are scattered through his papers and the extant accounts of his lectures. In his 'Notes on the Tragedies of Shakespeare', Coleridge argued that the unities of time and place are unnecessary inconveniences which can be dispensed with, and that 'a unity of feeling pervades the whole of his plays' (Hawkes, 1969: 112). Coleridge argues that generic labels based on classical drama are inappropriate in connection with Shakespeare's plays, which are 'in the ancient sense neither tragedies nor comedies, nor both in one, but a different genus, diverse in kind, not merely different in degree – romantic dramas, or dramatic romances' (Hawkes, 1969: 58). Shakespeare's strength is seen in his verisimilitude of character: 'The ordinary reader, who does not pretend to bring his understanding to bear upon the subject, often feels that some real trait of his own has been caught, that some nerve has been touched; and he knows that it has been touched by the vibration he experiences – a thrill which tells us that, by becoming better acquainted with the poet, we have become better acquainted with ourselves' (Hawkes, 1969: 99). This recognition is perhaps epitomized in Coleridge's own claim to 'have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so' (1969: 158).

Coleridge argues that whereas for other writers the main character is also the main agent of the plot, 'In Shakespeare so or not so, as the character is itself calculated or not calculated to form the plot. So Don John, the main-spring of the plot, is merely shown and withdrawn' (Hawkes, 1969: 115). He distinguishes between the titles of the tragedies and those of the comedies, 'when the total effect is produced by a co-ordination of the characters, by a

wreath of flowers' (1969: 159). Writing on individual plays, he considers *Love's Labour's Lost* a 'juvenile drama' with characters 'either impersonated out of his own multiformity, by imaginative self-position, or of such as a country town and a school-boy's observation might supply' (1969: 125). He reserves high praise for *The Tempest* as a 'specimen of romantic drama':

It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty; and though the illusion may be assisted by the effect on the senses of the complicated scenery and decorations of modern times yet this sort of assistance is dangerous. For the principal and only genuine excitement ought to come from within – from the moved and sympathetic imagination; whereas, where so much is addressed to the mere external senses of seeing and hearing the spiritual vision is apt to languish, and the attraction from without will draw the mind from the proper and only legitimate interest which is intended to spring from within. (Hawkes, 1969: 224)

*Measure for Measure* is 'the single exception to the delightfulness of Shakespeare's plays. It is a hateful work, although Shakespearian throughout. Our feelings of justice are grossly wounded in Angelo's escape. Isabella herself contrives to be unamiable, and Claudio is detestable' (1969: 274).

William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* published in 1817 sets out to extend Schlegel's analysis and to illustrate Pope's remarks on Shakespeare's distinctive characterization: 'every single character in Shakespear, is as much an individual as those in life itself' (Hazlitt, 1998: I, 85). His accounts of individual plays cover comedies as well as tragedies: 'Shakespeare's comedy is of a pastoral and poetical cast. Folly is indigenous to the soil, and shoots out with happy, unchecked luxuriance. Absurdity has every encouragement afforded it; and nonsense has room to flourish in' (I, 222). Discussing *Twelfth Night*, Hazlitt suggests that it is 'perhaps too good-natured for comedy. It has little satire, and no spleen. It aims at the ludicrous rather than the ridiculous. It makes us laugh at the follies of mankind, not despise them, and still less bear any ill-will towards them' (I, 221). But it is the serious aspects of comedy that engage Hazlitt most: 'if his inclination to comedy sometimes led him to trifle with the seriousness of tragedy, the poetical and impassioned passages are the best parts of his comedies'. 'Much as we like catches and cakes and ale', Viola is 'the great and secret charm' of *Twelfth Night* (I, 222). Of *The Merchant of Venice* Hazlitt feels 'the desire of revenge is almost inseparable from the sense of wrong', and that we can 'hardly help sympathising' with Shylock (I, 228); *The Winter's Tale* is 'one of the best-acting of our author's plays' (I, 233); the interest of *All's Well that Ends Well* is 'more of a serious than of a comic nature' (I, 237); the chapter on *Love's Labour's Lost* begins: 'if we were to part with any of the author's comedies, it should be this' (I, 240). Hazlitt judges *Much Ado About Nothing* the height of the 'middle point of comedy . . . in which the ludicrous blends with the tender, and our follies, turning round against themselves

in support of our affections, retain nothing but their humanity' (I, 246). *As You Like It* emerges as an essentially Romantic drama, in which 'the very air of the place [Arden] seems to breathe a spirit of philosophical poetry: to stir the thoughts, to touch the heart with pity, as the drowsy forest rustles to the sighing gale. Never was there such beautiful moralising, equally free from pedantry or petulance' (I, 247). *The Taming of the Shrew* is the only play to have a 'downright moral': 'how self-will is only to be got the better of by stronger will, and how one degree of ridiculous perversity is only to be driven out by another still greater' (I, 250).

Like many Romantic critics, Hazlitt did not have a high regard for the plays in performance, arguing that 'We do not like to see our author's plays acted' (I, 148), and illustrating this with an account of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Bottom's head in the play is a fantastic illusion, produced by magic spells: on the stage it is an ass's head and nothing more; certainly a very strange costume for a gentleman to appear in. Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted; and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine* . . . When ghosts appear at mid-day, when apparitions stalk along Cheapside, then may the *Midsummer Night's Dream* be represented without injury at Covent-garden or at Drury-lane. The boards of a theatre and the regions of fancy are not the same thing. (I, 158)

However, in Hazlitt's dramatic criticism published as *A View of the English Stage* (1818), a number of Shakespearian productions are discussed, including Edmund Kean's performance of Shylock, a 'travestie' (Hazlitt, 1998: III, 64) of *The Tempest* at Covent Garden, and a production of *Measure for Measure* which prompts him to reflect that Barnadine is 'what he is by nature, not by circumstance . . . he is Caliban transported to . . . the prisons of Vienna' (III, 115). This repeats, almost word for word, his comments in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*: here and elsewhere criticism of performance and text cross-fertilize.

Also concerned with characterization is Anna Jameson's *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (1832), although, as the title of her book suggests, its aims extend beyond Shakespeare criticism and to a defence of female character *per se*. Her first set of heroines are described as 'characters of intellect' (I, 68), including Portia, Isabella, Beatrice and Rosalind. In the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia 'shines forth all her divine self. Her intellectual powers, her elevated sense of religion, her high honourable principles, her best feelings as a woman, are all displayed' (I, 77). Among characters of 'passion and imagination', Jameson includes Helena, whose idolization of a man unworthy of her would be untenable 'if it never happened in real life' (I, 213); Miranda is a combination of 'the purely natural and the purely ideal' (I, 283); Hermione is one of the 'characters of the affections'. Throughout,

Jameson is sympathetic to the heroines' plight, willing to see them as moral exemplars, as accurate portraits, and sometimes, ideally, both.

### 1840–1905: Bardolatry, Biography and the Division of the Comedies

The worship of Shakespeare's powers which George Bernard Shaw would later dub 'Bardolatry' had its most famous mid-century expression in Thomas Carlyle's 'The Hero as Poet', a chapter in his influential *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840): 'here, I say, is an English King, whom no time or chance, Parliament or combination of Parliaments, can dethrone! This King Shakspeare, does not he shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying-signs; indestructible' (Carlyle, 1993: 97). Like his Romantic predecessors, Carlyle stresses Shakespearian characterization:

it is in what I called Portrait-painting, delineating of men and things, especially of men, that Shakspeare is great. All the greatness of the man comes out decisively here. It is unexampled, I think, that calm creative perspicacity of Shakspeare. The thing he looks at reveals not this or that face of it, but its inmost heart and generic secret: it dissolves itself as in light before him, so that he discerns the perfect structure of it. Creative, we said: poetic creation, what is this too but *seeing* the thing sufficiently? The *word* that will describe the thing follows, of itself, from such clear intense sight of the thing. And is not Shakspeare's *morality*, his valour, candour, tolerance, truthfulness; his whole victorious strength and greatness, which can triumph over such obstructions, visible there too? Great as the world! No *twisted*, poor convex-concave mirror, reflecting all objects with its own convexities and concavities; a perfectly *level* mirror. (Carlyle, 1993: 97)

In 1844, Matthew Arnold wrote in his sonnet 'Shakespeare': 'Others abide our question. Thou art free. / We stand and ask – Thou smilest and art still, / Out-topping knowledge.' As the Victorian period continued, there were different attempts to escape Arnold's sense of the ultimate unknowability of Shakespeare, and instead to explicate aspects of his writing. Many of these were influenced by the new quasi-scientific methods of bibliographic scholarship expounded by the New Shakspeare Society, founded in 1874. The society's aims were set out by its director, F. J. Furnivall, in the prospectus:

To do honour to Shakspeare [Footnote: This spelling of our great Poet's name is taken from the only unquestionably genuine signatures of his that we possess . . . Though it has hitherto been too much to ask people to suppose that Shakspeare knew how to spell his own name, I hope the demand may not prove

too great for the imagination of the Members of the new Society], to mark out the succession of his plays, and thereby the growth of his mind and art; to promote the intelligent study of him, and to print Texts illustrating his works and his times, this *New Shakspeare Society* is founded. (Furnivall, 1874: n.p.)

Furnivall made explicit the connections between this new branch of literary criticism and the scientific temper of the age:

Dramatic poet though Shakspeare is, bound to lose himself in his wondrous and manifold creations; taciturn 'as the secrets of Nature' though he be; yet in this Victorian time, when our geniuses of Science are so wresting her secrets from Nature as to make our days memorable for ever, the faithful student of Shakspeare need not fear that he will be unable to pierce through the crowds of forms that exhibit Shakspeare's mind, to the mind itself, the man himself, and see him as he was . . . (Furnivall, 1874: n.p.)

This methodology is developed in R. G. Moulton's study, first published in 1885 as *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist: A Popular Illustration of the Principles of Scientific Criticism*. Moulton argued that 'literary criticism should follow other branches of thought in becoming inductive' (1885: 1), and that 'interpretation in literature is of the nature of a scientific hypothesis, the truth of which is tested by the degree of completeness with which it explains the details of the literary works as they actually stand' (1885: 25). Moulton's study discusses *The Tempest*, *As You Like It* and *Love's Labour's Lost* as part of his thesis that criticism should aim to discover a 'Central Idea' which 'should be shown to embrace all the details of the play [and] it must be sufficiently distinctive to exclude other plays' (1885: 329). This approach would supersede generic considerations: in place of comedy and tragedy Moulton proposes 'Action-Drama' and 'Passion-Drama', arguing that 'the so-called "Comedies" of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* contain some of the most tragic effects in Shakespeare. The true distinction between the two kinds of plays is one of Movement not Tone' (1885: 372–3).

Furnivall also wrote an introduction to an influential account translated from the German of G. G. Gervinus, *Shakespeare Commentaries* (1877). Gervinus's commentaries covered all the plays. *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew* Gervinus allocates to Shakespeare's youthful apprenticeship. The 'love-plays' depict the 'many-sidedness of love and its manifold bearings and effects upon human nature' (1877: 151, 152). In order that Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* avoid the reader's 'repugnance' at 'such bold and masculine steps', the skills of 'a great actress' are required (1877: 185). Gervinus, in marked contrast to critics writing earlier in the century, urges 'the necessity of seeing Shakespeare's plays performed, in order to be able to estimate them fully' (1877: 201). Gervinus places *All's Well that Ends Well* between

*Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play in which action is motivated by 'caprice' rather than 'character and circumstance' (1877: 188). His account of *The Merchant of Venice* argues that the love affairs are peripheral to the action, which favours 'the most unselfish spiritual love' as the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio: 'for even sexual love, in its purest and deepest form, through the addition of sensual enjoyment, is not in the same measure free from selfishness as friendship is, which, as an inclination of the soul, is wholly based upon the absence of all egotism and self-love' (1877: 237). The central comedies focus on female characters who 'all have more or less something of unwomanly forwardness in their nature, something of domineering superiority; and therefore the men in contact with them play more or less a subordinate part' (1877: 421). What unites these plays is their preoccupation with 'exposing self-love, its self-deceptions and its attempts to deceive others, with unveiling the discrepancy between real and feigned character, with unmasking vanity in fancied gifts and conceit of vain ones' (1877: 374). *Measure for Measure* is the transition towards tragedy, in which the character of Isabella represents 'a type of a *complete* human nature, rendering it plain that all extreme is but imperfect and fragmentary; that moderation is not weakness and indolence; that far rather it forms in man the true moral centre of gravity, which holds him secure from all waverings and errors' (1877: 504).

As the Victorian period advanced, such commentaries on Shakespeare multiplied, and the task of accounting for and explicating not just individual plays but their progress and place in the author's career became more pressing. Following Gervinus's commentaries, a number of book-length studies of Shakespeare's work appeared, of which Edward Dowden's influential *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (1875) was pre-eminent. Eschewing the scientific methodologies advocated by Furnivall and later by Moulton, Dowden states his intention: 'To approach Shakspeare on the human side is the object of this book' (Dowden, 1875: vi). The human side is that of Shakespeare himself, as the study is concerned 'to connect the study of Shakspeare's works with an inquiry after the personality of the writer, and to observe, as far as is possible, in its several stages the growth of his intellect and character from youth to full maturity' (1875: v), and also of his characters. 'Full maturity' seems to equate to the tragedies: Dowden has little to say about the comedies of the 1590s, and rather than considering comedy as a genre, he touches on it in a chapter 'The Humour of Shakespeare'. Dowden argued that 'the humour of Shakspeare like his total genius is many-sided', but that 'mere laughter wearies him' (1875: 341–2). Both tragedy and comedy work through incongruity:

the tragic incongruity arises from the disproportion between the world and the soul of man; life is too small to satisfy the soul; the desires of man are infinite;

and all possible attainment exists under strictest limitation. The comic incongruity is the reverse of this. It arises from the disproportion between certain souls of men, and even this very ordinary world of ours. When a man's wits are so unjoined and so ill-trained that, if put into motion, they forthwith get at cross purposes with themselves, while the happy imbecile remains supremely unconscious of his incapacity, we are in the presence of an example of the comic incongruity. (Dowden, 1875: 351)

According to Dowden's account of Shakespeare's literary biography, he moves from the enjoyment of 'fun pure and simple, comic surprises and grotesque incidents' (1875: 358) to a 'tentative period' in which 'the comic and the serious, tender or sentimental elements of the drama exist side by side' (1875: 360). By the time of *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare 'had entered into vital union with the real life of the world, but . . . he had not started upon any profound enquiry concerning the deeper and more terrible problems of existence' (1875: 369). Dowden's most significant contribution to the understanding of Shakespeare's comedies was his lengthy discussion of the last plays, 'his period of large, serene wisdom'. These plays are connected by something 'spiritual', 'romantic': all are written in 'a spirit of deep or exquisite recreation' (1875: 403). Following on from the tragedies, these plays still consider 'the graver trials and tests which life applies to human character . . . the wrongs which man inflicts on man; but his present temper demanded not a tragic issue, – it rather demanded an issue into joy or peace' (1875: 406). The word which interprets the plays is 'reconciliation', rather than, as in the earlier comedies, 'dénouement'. The resolution of discord is 'not a mere stage necessity . . . Its significance here is ethical and spiritual; it is a moral necessity' (1875: 407). The last of these plays, *The Tempest*, has 'possessed this quality, of soliciting men to attempt the explanation of it, as of an enigma, and at the same time of baffling their enquiry' (1875: 425). Dowden concludes:

Let us not attenuate Shakspeare to a theory . . . Shakspeare does not supply us with a doctrine, with an interpretation, with a revelation. What he brings to us, is this – to each one, courage, and energy, and strength, to dedicate himself and his work to that, – whatever it be, – which life has revealed to him as best, and highest, and most real. (1875: 430)

Something of the popularity of Dowden's account can be traced in its frequent reissuing, going through a dozen editions by the end of the nineteenth century.

Dowden's rival for this market was the poet A. C. Swinburne, whose *A Study of Shakespeare* was first published in 1880. Swinburne had his own division of Shakespeare's writing, into a first period, 'lyric and fantastic', a second period, 'comic and historic' and a third, 'tragic and romantic'. Swinburne elab-

orates that ‘it is not, so to speak, the literal but the spiritual order which I have studied to observe and to indicate: the periods which I seek to define belong not to chronology but to art’ (Swinburne, 1880: 16). He argued against the New Shakspeare Society’s preferred scientific metrical analysis as the approach of the ‘horny eye and the callous finger of a pedant (1880: 7). Swinburne’s criticism was concerned with the change of Shakespeare’s language, the growth and development of his verse and tone, but these were modulations that ‘can only be traced by ear and not by finger’ (1880: 16). Like Coleridge, Swinburne sees traces of Shakespeare’s boyhood experience in the evocation of provincial life, this time in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1880: 118). Shakespeare’s highest achievement in comedy is described:

There is but just enough of evil or even of passion admitted into their sweet spheres of life to proclaim them living; and all that does find entrance is so tempered by the radiance of the rest that we retain softened and lightened recollections even of Shylock and Don John when we think of the *Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; we hardly feel in *As You Like It* the presence or the existence of Oliver and Duke Frederick; and in *Twelfth Night*, for all its name of the midwinter, we find nothing to remember that might jar with the loveliness of love and the summer light of life.

Against this delightful view of comedy, *Measure for Measure* appears in ‘its very inmost essence a tragedy’ (1880: 203). The late plays are ‘Shakespeare’s culminant and crowning constellation’, and queen of this stellar world is Imogen, ‘half glorified already the immortal godhead of womanhood’ (1880: 227), the divine name on which Swinburne ends his study.

Walter Pater included essays on *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Measure for Measure* among his *Appreciations* (1889). Pater connects the wordplay and themes of the earlier comedy with Shakespeare’s sonnets, and argues that ‘play is often that about which people are most serious’ (1889: 170). On *Measure for Measure* he speculates that ‘the play might well pass for the central expression of [Shakespeare’s] moral judgments’. The play combines tragedy and comedy in a ‘real example of that sort of writing which is sometimes called *suggestive*, and which by the help of certain subtly calculated hints only, brings into distinct shape the reader’s own half-developed imaginings’ (1889: 179). Pater suggests that the main interest of the play is not that of its source, Whetstone’s *Promos and Cassandra*, in which the central relationship is that of Isabella and Angelo. Rather it is Claudio and Isabella who dominate: Isabella’s ‘cold, chastened personality’ is subjected to ‘two sharp, shameful trials’ which ‘ring out of her a fiery, revealing eloquence’ (1889: 184). Claudio is likened to Hamlet, ‘with perhaps the most eloquent of all Shakspeare’s words upon his lips’ (1889: 188). Pater’s view of the play sees it presenting:



the moral judgments of an observer, of one who sits as a spectator, and knows how the threads in the design before him hold together under the surface: they are the judgments of the humourist also, who follows with a half-amused but always pitiful sympathy, the various ways of human disposition, and sees less distance than ordinary men between what are called respectively great and little things. (1889: 190–1)

The play becomes the exemplar of a moral view of literature: ‘true justice is dependent on just those finer appreciations which poetry cultivates in us the power of making’ (1889: 191).

Swinburne’s untroubled view of the comedies of the 1590s and Pater’s particular interest in *Measure for Measure* have their logical development in F. S. Boas’s *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (1896). Boas divides the comedies into four sections: early works, a group of plays called ‘The Golden Prime of Comedy’ (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*), the group of late plays now familiar as ‘dramatic romances’, and, distinctively, a separate group consisting of *All’s Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet*. The influential name, derived from contemporary categorizations of dramatists such as Ibsen, given to this group was ‘problem plays’. Boas characterized the problem plays as the bridge between ‘comedies of matchless charm and radiance’ before 1601, and plays ‘in which comedy for the most part takes the grim form of dramatic satire’ (1896: 344):

All these dramas introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness. Amidst such media abnormal conditions of brain and emotion are generated, and intricate cases of conscience demand a solution by unprecedented methods. Thus throughout these plays we move along dim and untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when, as in *All’s Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act. (Boas, 1896: 345)

This categorization is echoed by George Bernard Shaw: ‘Shakspeare’s bitter play with a bitter title, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, anticipates Ibsen: the happy ending at which the title sneers is less comforting than the end of *Romeo and Juliet*. And Ibsen was the dramatic poet who firmly established tragic-comedy as a much deeper and grimmer entertainment than tragedy’ (Wilson, 1969: 260). Shaw’s championing of these problem plays was reiterated: in a summary of his views on Shakespeare printed in a newspaper in 1905, he preferred the ‘real studies of life and character in – for instance – *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well*’, but ‘the public would not have them, and remains of the same mind still, preferring a fantastic sugar doll, like Rosalind, to such

serious and dignified studies of women as Isabella and Helena' (Wilson, 1969: 26), and later he identified these same 'unpopular plays' with a Shakespeare 'ready and willing to start at the twentieth century if the seventeenth would only let him' (1969: 266). By contrast, he argues that Shakespeare 'had no idea of comedy', and gives as his example the failure of the characterization of Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'Shakespeare, for want of comedic faculty, gets no dramatic value out of him whatever, and fails to convey to the audience anything except a disagreeable impression of a conventional hero who is driven by the mere letter of the plot' (1969: 165–6).

A companion to this volume, the *Blackwell Guide to Criticism, Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ends the section on pre-twentieth-century criticism with A. C. Bradley's monumental *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). There is no such statement in criticism of the comedies, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, were repeatedly subdivided with implicit reference to some ideal, unarticulated form of comedy. Following Boas's taxonomy of early, golden, problem and late plays, individual plays are variously idealized or pathologized: no theory of comedy as capacious as that embedded in the catalogue of the First Folio exists. All of these internal categories of comedy tend to be described in relation to the tragedies which are the teleological focus of most critics' attention. Perhaps Umberto Eco's conceit, in his medieval whodunit *The Name of the Rose* (1984), which centres on a crucially lost treatise on comedy by Aristotle, points to one reason for its relative neglect among classically trained readers and scholars: the absence of ancient critical precedent. With a few scattered exceptions, it was not until the twentieth century that the critical structures of myth, of social history and gender relations, and of psychoanalytic theories of comedy were to offer a vocabulary and a framework in which Shakespeare's comedies, severally and as a genre, could be more fully and sustainably appreciated.

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