SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

16

EDITED BY
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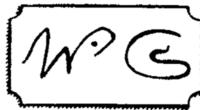
Issued under the Sponsorship of

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE THEATRE

THE SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1963

PUBLISHED BY
THE SYNDICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bentley House, 200 Euston Road, London, N.W. 1
American Branch: 32 East 57th Street, New York 22, N.Y.
West African Office: P.O. Box 33, Ibadan, Nigeria

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge
(Brooke Crutchley, University Printer)

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AN OBLIGATION TO SHAKESPEARE AND THE PUBLIC

BY

LOUIS B. WRIGHT

To assert that Shakespeare's position in the world of literature is universal and unique is to utter a commonplace. To assert that his significance as a writer and dramatist is increasing in our world, despite the divisions and difficulties of modern society, is also to reiterate what we all know and are constantly saying. The very convening of this distinguished body of scholars from many nations is proof of Shakespeare's importance in the cultures of each of our countries. We do not need to belabour the point that Shakespeare is of enormous interest to the peoples of every continent. But perhaps it might be profitable for us to contemplate for a few moments the problems, the responsibilities, and the obligations that this vast interest imposes upon us, an accredited body of scholars, whose presumed duty it is to make Shakespeare better understood and appreciated by the multitudes who read him or see his plays acted on the stage.

Since I represent the Folger Shakespeare Library, I inevitably find myself in the role of a kind of broker of information, and it is in that capacity that I, seeking help, want to appear before you. Like any other type of broker, whether his stock-in-trade is shares on the exchange or tangible commodities, we at the Folger have clients and customers who are inquisitive and clamorous for information. Some of our clients are professional scholars like yourselves; some are teachers; some are students; a surprising number can be classified as the general public. They are concerned with Shakespeare and his meaning on various levels of understanding. And they all ask questions that we find it hard to answer.

Although the Folger Library is primarily an institution devoted to research in the whole of Tudor and Stuart civilization, rather than just Shakespeare, the founder, Henry Clay Folger, had a profound interest in Shakespeare and hoped that his library would become a fountain of information about the dramatist, a place where scholars would come to study him and then make their knowledge available to the general public, who, he supposed, eagerly awaited the latest and most learned interpretations of the poet of Stratford. Folger, who had risen to wealth as president of the Standard Oil Company of New York, was himself not a professional scholar, though he acquired an amazing knowledge about Shakespeare and his times. It cannot be supposed that Folger intended to create a library which would become a temple for a special priesthood forever chanting litanies to themselves. As a business man and one of the general public—albeit a worshipper of Shakespeare—he hoped that his library would disseminate knowledge about Shakespeare and the history of that age and broaden the appreciation and understanding of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. It is natural therefore for the administrators of Folger's trust to feel a responsibility to a public that extends beyond academic walls. It is fitting that we ask ourselves whether we are achieving all that we ought in the illumination of an intelligent audience of non-specialists. It is also natural for us to inquire whether the specialists are achieving

everything that they ought in this same endeavour, and whether we all might do more to enlighten one another and the lay brethren just outside our doors.

It may be objected that the specialist already has too much to do to become a 'popularizer'—an invidious term with which to damn a man. We all know how hard it is to keep up with the stream of scholarship today. But if scholars do not accept the responsibility for making knowledge available to non-specialists, they should not complain when the job is done badly by amateurs and the less competent.

The diligence and devotion of Shakespearian scholars in our generation probably cannot be surpassed in any period. Contemplation of the quantity and the quality of research focused upon Shakespeare always leaves me with a sense of awe and wonder. The activities of Shakespearian specialists are not confined to the English-speaking peoples, of course, but extend to most of the languages of the civilized world. This fact in itself raises a problem almost insuperable to the average scholar who worries along with two or three languages at most. Much of the scholarship in unknown languages must remain a closed book to him. Perhaps that is just as well, for he finds more than he can digest written in his own tongue.

At this point, I should like to pay a tribute that we must all feel to Allardyce Nicoll and the imaginative concept which led him to establish the *Shakespeare Survey*. It is hard to imagine how scholars managed in the period before this useful, informative, and stimulating instrument was available. The value of the special articles summarizing the state of knowledge on particular topics cannot be overestimated. For that extraordinary section in each volume, 'The Year's Contribution to Shakespearian Study', every harried and harassed scholar ought to sing hosannas. This section provides needed guidance to the student of literature or history who cannot devote himself exclusively to Shakespearian studies. From the beginning, the quality of this annual summary of Shakespeare scholarship has remained high, and we can all be thankful for the judicious and judicial appraisals that the authors of those essays have provided over the years.

The analyst of Shakespearian studies, however, must be haunted from time to time with the suspicion too that much of the stuff that he reads is rubbish, or at best, the printed result of misapplied energy. Nicoll himself in his excellent British Academy lecture in 1952[1] alluded incidentally to the pessimism that many scholars feel about the mass of minute and highly technical studies on Shakespeare that defy assimilation and coherent use. Recently Patrick Cruttwell, reviewing a mass of books about Shakespeare, commented with some asperity that 'We have too many Shakespearians. We have too few critics who can take Shakespeare in their strides as one writer among other great writers. My own prescription for the professional "Shakespearian" would be five years' reading of anything else. We are inclined to use our Shakespeare as a bible of texts from which to preach our religions. And we lack direction—the kind of direction which cannot come from Departments or Institutes but only from one great mind.'[2] Other scholars have suggested a moratorium on publication to provide a period of contemplation and digestion.

The realities of academic life being what they are, a period of quiet contemplation and assimilation has no more chance of success than the King of Navarre's academy in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Nor are we likely to persuade Shakespearians to turn to other subjects in order to broaden their outlook and deepen their perceptions, as Cruttwell recommends. That is not to say, however, that we ought to despair and resign ourselves to suffocation under a heap of jumbled

off-prints. Nicoll and his colleagues of the *Shakespeare Survey* have at least provided an escape hatch.

As an individualist and an advocate of free enterprise, I would think it both unwise and impracticable to try to curtail or regiment the activities of Shakespearian scholars. They ought to be free to follow their own inclinations and to write as wisely or as foolishly as their capacities and judgements permit. But I believe that the wise men in the profession can and should exert a more vigorous influence to produce positive results of benefit to both the specialist and the non-specialist. This influence can be exerted in many ways and on several levels: by example and precept, by direction of graduate studies, by reviews, and by syntheses of knowledge that should be undertaken. We may also hope that the great minds desired by Cruttwell may emerge to provide the interpretation and criticism that each new generation requires. In my opinion the greatest need of Shakespeare today is first-class minds in each department of Shakespearian studies to sift the scholarship, appraise it with Olympian justice, and provide an analysis of its quality and usefulness. Let me hasten to say that in some of its essays, the *Shakespeare Survey* has made a beginning, but only a beginning. We need to go farther, for even the Shakespeare specialist finds himself wandering in chaos when he strays a mite beyond his own small field of penetration.

As a broker whose clients demand information that we cannot always supply, I hope you will permit me to make a few fairly specific suggestions of the kind of guides that we need. Someone is certain to remark: 'Why, that has been done by Professor *X*.' But Professor *X* may not have been entirely successful. I do not want to single him out for criticism. No good can come of treading on toes. Each Shakespeare specialist can supply his own footnotes for the paragraphs that follow.

Several years ago, the then American Ambassador to the United Kingdom telephoned me from New York with a request that I recommend a book about Shakespeare. He was flying back to London the next day and he had to make a speech at Stratford almost immediately on his arrival. He wanted a single volume that would explain to him the amazing appeal that Shakespeare retains for the mid-twentieth century and the significance that Shakespeare has for our generation. Perhaps it was my own ignorance, but not even the resources of the Folger Library enabled me to recommend a single book that would fully answer the Ambassador's needs. Since he was a Trustee of my own institution, I felt doubly embarrassed. Ever since then I have been wondering why, with all the energy that we have devoted to Shakespeare, somebody has not attempted that sort of book in language that an Ambassador of cultivation and intelligence could comprehend.

Of critical works about Shakespeare, our generation has been blest—if that is the word—with volumes unnumbered. We have works of excellence and learning that range from the general to the particular. A reading of Muriel C. Bradbrook's 'Fifty Years of Criticism of Shakespeare's Style: A Retrospect'[3] is highly instructive and reveals in a brief compass the amazing scope of the critical approach to Shakespeare in our time. Perhaps it is proper that most of the criticism should have been strictly professional, that is, written by scholars for scholars, for without such professional instruction, one of another, learning cannot make much progress. We should not expect each specialist in literature to reduce his findings to the level of the daily newspaper or even that of the popular magazine. That is a fallacy that hostile critics of scholarship in the humanities frequently voice.

Nevertheless, we ought to expect more criticism written to the understanding of scholars who are not technicians in the critic's particular corner of learning. It is also not too much to expect more criticism designed for the understanding of the cultivated and intelligent public that is concerned with literature in a non-professional capacity—my Ambassador, for example.

By now, I trust, we are all aware of the damage that has been done to literary study by obscurantist cults in a few academic communities, particularly in my country. For the most part, the obscurantists have been a priest-craft who, like other religions from time to time, have used a private language not always entirely lucid even to anointed members of the order. At least their commentary, even in praise of one another, has often been at cross purposes as if they did not quite comprehend what had gone before. Occasionally one has a hunch that some of this criticism possesses dark profundities, valuable if only an ordinary brain could plumb its depths. Much of it, of course, as Ben Jonson might have said, is writ in no language at all. As other literary fads had their day and vanished, so obscurantist criticism is no longer in fashion. A few ageing apostles in American academic communities still deliver their sermons, but disciples are few and less influential than their masters. For a number of years, however, this fad absorbed the interest and energies of young scholars, including many in the field of Shakespeare, who might have made useful contributions to interpretation and appreciation if they had had better direction. It remains for a new generation to repair a disaster that left a dearth of wise critics.

The field of Shakespearian criticism today is so vast and has such a ramification of specialized topics, from aesthetic appreciation to Freudian analysis, that non-specialist literary scholars, much less other folk, find it difficult to sort out the significant from the trivial. For scholars, we need a guide more explicit and more magisterial than any yet written that will analyse the work in print and give more extensive value judgements than are now available. Miss Bradbrook has made an excellent beginning and has pointed the way to further work in this area.

For the general reader, we need a simpler guide that will discover for him the critical works that have value and good sense, works that will not lead him astray to follow some will-o'-the-wisp of the critic's fancy. He needs an explanation without technical jargon of the place that recent critical works have in the stream of criticism from Coleridge to Bradley and beyond. He deserves some explanation of critical fashions from generation to generation and the part these fashions have played in the interpretation of Shakespeare in the study and on the stage. Such a book ought to be written by a scholar who has the gift of clarity and the wisdom not to be condescending.

Many battles have raged in our generation between the various schools of criticism, and in these wars during the last two or three decades, the historical critic has come off worst. He was vulnerable because of the excesses of some of his kind. Students complained that they lost sight of Shakespeare in the fog of background studies. They forgot, or never learned, for instance that *Love's Labour's Lost* was intended to be an amusing entertainment with a large amount of burlesque and slapstick, because they were so busy studying about the Elizabethan grammar school that Holofernes travestied. Such students were a little like the Latin pupils who spent their time building a model of Caesar's bridge across the Rhine instead of learning to read the *Gallic Wars*. A natural reaction followed, and we academics did what we frequently do: we threw the baby out with the bath. We gave over historical criticisms and rushed to something else, and presently one pedantry led to another, perhaps an even more barren pedantry: criticism

without a knowledge of the milieu from which a work grew often represented nothing more than a web spun from the critic's brain, and that was not sufficiently interesting to warrant our attention.

The time has come to adjust the balance and to realize that Shakespeare is infinitely richer in meaning if we know what he himself intended to say, not what we want him to say. Many fine monographs have been written in the past quarter of a century to show how Shakespeare's works reflect his infinite interest in the world about him, and how an understanding of that world helps us to interpret words, passages, and large significances of his plays. We should welcome continued probing into the social background of the Elizabethan period because all the information that we can gather helps toward a deeper comprehension of Shakespeare's genius.

Social history as an adjunct of Shakespearian study is a field that is attracting many students; it is small wonder that it should, for social history like archaeology brings us in contact with reality. For example, a study of medical theory and practice in the late sixteenth century is not a mere antiquarian pursuit for the Shakespearian. We forget that in Shakespeare's England, as in colonial America, a patient with an ache or pain frequently had to be his own doctor, and everybody had a wider knowledge of the medical theory of the day than we have of ours. A familiarity with medical theory and terminology enabled a scholar recently to settle neatly and conclusively, it seems to me, that Hamlet meant to say precisely 'too solid flesh' rather than 'sullied' or something else.[4]

An understanding of the social background that Shakespeare is reflecting removes his plays from the realm of the abstract to the concrete and gives them greater life and vividness. Why the literary scholar should object to this, as he sometimes does, baffles me. Perhaps realistic interpretation in the light of contemporary meaning is too destructive of pet theories that we would prefer to deduce out of thin air.

In the area of social history, the literary historian could profitably use guides, preferably written by someone above the tumult of argument that unhappily plagues certain historical quarters. One of the distressing developments in recent years is the substitution of controversy for truth among some of the younger historians—with a consequent deterioration of good manners. Why anyone should imagine that doctrinaire arrogance is a useful quality in a historian passes understanding. What the student of Shakespeare would like to have are discussions of current fashions and trends in historical research, with objective appraisals of the most enlightening works on such problems as the religious establishment in Shakespeare's England, the rise of Puritanism, the social structure and problems of class status, economic dislocations, and all of the variety of shifts and changes that affected day-to-day life when Shakespeare was producing his plays in London.

We should be mindful that history like criticism has its moods and fads, and what is cried up today may be scoffed at tomorrow. Social history is not an easy tool for the literary scholar to use, and he must be aware of its limitations. Shakespeare was an eclectic genius with an enormous capacity for assimilating this and that from the world around him. Yet we are inclined to see Shakespeare the dramatist as an image of ourselves, working as we would work. Let us remember that he was not a university professor. He did not go to the library and create *Hamlet* as a treatise on melancholy, however much he may have known about the contemporary medical theory of melancholy.

Textual criticism and scientific bibliography are fields in which we have seen enormous progress in recent years. Indeed, the ingenuity and skill demonstrated in this area have revolutionized older concepts of the preparation of texts. The annual descriptions in *Shakespeare Survey* by James G. McManaway of textual studies are an extraordinary and sometimes terrifying exhibition of human ingenuity struggling to get a glimpse of Shakespeare's manuscripts.

Modern bibliographic and textual studies had their beginning in the early work of those giants of our generation, Sir Walter Greg and R. B. McKerrow. We still miss their incisive criticism as well as their positive contributions to bibliographical knowledge.

In our country, Fredson Bowers at the University of Virginia has produced a group of younger disciples who have been trained to apply an exact and exacting method of textual analysis to the printed work of any author, but the emphasis has been on the Elizabethan period. Among the most constructive and useful studies that have come out of this school are the contributions by Charlton Hinman of the University of Kansas. Hinman, a brilliant technician, as all in this company must be aware, has completed the collation of all the First Folios in the Folger Library, and the publication of his findings by the Oxford University Press will be an event of the first magnitude for Shakespearian textual criticism. His work will settle definitively problems of the printing of the First Folio that have been a matter of speculation and conjecture. Though his discoveries may not alter substantially the readings of Shakespeare's text, his analysis of the quality of the work of each printer who set copy for the Folio will provide guidance for emendations. These discoveries will enable scholars in the future to give a better evaluation of the Folio text than has been possible heretofore.

In the hands of technicians as skilful, patient, and meticulous as Bowers and Hinman, textual and bibliographical analysis can be an instrument of enormous value to the Shakespearian scholar. In the hands of bumbling, careless, or second-rate practitioners, the method can be misleading and confusing because it may give the illusion of scientific accuracy which it actually lacks. It may also be deceptive because few will be willing to go through the labour necessary to check conclusions submitted with a panoply of data and statistics that on the surface may look convincing.

The principal danger in the excellent instrument that Bowers and Hinman have fashioned lies in too great a faith that the innocent and the naïve may put in it. Accurate as they are in some of their conclusions about printing practices, no analysis can be so detailed or accurate that it will answer all the questions that arise. When speculating about the actions of human beings, we should remember that they will not always react the same way under the same set of circumstances, or perform the same operation in the same manner each time. We shall only fool ourselves if we think we can reduce Elizabethan printing practices to an exact 'science'.

In my youth I was a professional proof-reader on a newspaper and dealt directly with a large group of printers. It was an instructive and revealing experience which I recommend to all textual analysts before they become too dogmatic about the invariable practice of printers in any period. The best printer in this particular outfit, the man who always set the leading editorials, had two distinct personalities: one drunk and one sober. Even one drink changed the quality of his work so that we frequently had to get someone else to set the editorials. Another printer whom I recall vividly did excellent work at the beginning of his stint, but occasionally, nearing the end of the day's run, his proofs were spotted with misread words and other typographical

errors. Obviously his eyes tired or muscular fatigue took its toll. Because of the vast range of intangible influences that affect human behaviour, I am sceptical of too much certitude about what any printer saw in his copy when he picked up the type to fit in his stick. Much nonsense has been written by neophytes who have studied Elizabethan handwriting and can tell positively whether a printer saw an *e* or a *d*, let us say. Of all people in my experience, a printer is the last person about whom one can speak with assurance.

Valuable as have been the contributions of the best of the analytical bibliographers, they have not always given their gospel with the saving grace of common sense. We all now know that no two Elizabethan books may be precisely identical. But to tell the historian that he must spend years collating the texts of Bacon's *History of Henry the Seventh*, for example, before he dares quote from it, is to take leave of one's wits. It is true that in some instances collation of many copies of an edition will reveal the correction of a key word that might distort meaning in a critical passage, but to follow this technique to its ultimate conclusion is to achieve a *reductio ad absurdum*. It will be a pity if good scholars should be so terrified by the exactions of the new science of analytical bibliography that they will desert literature for mathematics or physics where the conclusions—and the rewards—may be more satisfying.

As in other fields of Shakespearian scholarship, we need a judicial appraisal of textual and bibliographical scholarship that goes beyond the annual surveys and gives value judgements on what it has accomplished, what it can accomplish, and what are its limitations. For the inexperienced and the naïve—and there are more than we might wish in this category—we particularly need an assessment of the limitations of this technique.

In recent years, textual critics have shown an increasing tendency to neglect linguistics and overlook the study of the language as a key to the solution of many cruxes. We suffer here from the general neglect of the study of language. Since the great period of philological investigation in the nineteenth century, we have fallen on evil days. Some incredible gaffes are being made by textual critics simply because they do not know enough about the structure of the language, about the fluidity of the language in Shakespeare's day, and especially about the variety of dialectal usage. If we could encourage a return to linguistic study we might ensure wiser textual conclusions.

In his British Academy lecture that I have already mentioned, Allardyce Nicoll yearned for a modern 'Authorized Version' of Shakespeare that would utilize the best of modern scholarship and supplant the old Globe, which has stood the test of time with such distinction. Obviously much new learning has become available in the time since the editors of the Globe prepared their text. Some new readings can and should be accepted. But in the present state of knowledge and opinion, it is doubtful whether an 'Authorized Version' would be desirable, even if it were possible. For one thing, what Sanhedrin of scholars could make their authority stick? We do not have a French Academy of Shakespearians who can impose their will upon editors. A convocation of textual critics would argue longer and louder than delegates to the United Nations—and arrive at solutions probably just as unsatisfactory.

The most acceptable modern text must be one that makes use of all the knowledge that can be mustered: literary, linguistic, historical, bibliographical, and analytical. In the end it must be subjective and represent the best intelligence of the individual editor or editors. It must be subjective because many of the solutions are not capable of scientific certainty. Our best efforts in many instances must remain educated guesses.

I wonder if this ought to make us grievously unhappy. Shakespeare, great as he is, did not compose Holy Writ. Our salvation or damnation does not turn on a word. Furthermore, we can never be sure that what we are reading represents the poet's own reasoned choice of diction. Anybody who has ever had anything to do with working playwrights and actors knows what happens to the most meticulously composed work. In production, passages may be changed, words altered, scenes slashed, characterizations modified, and a happy ending provided. Prompt copies are scribbled on and overwritten. The text is not sacred, even when the author is sitting on the sidelines objecting. When he is a manager and director, as Shakespeare was, he wants the play to succeed and he will not let a sacred word or scene come between him and profit. *Hamlet* as it stands in print is obviously too long for stage production. How the uncut version happened to be embalmed in print will remain a matter of scholarly conjecture and discussion.

My point is that we cannot be certain beyond peradventure that the surviving texts, even those texts selected by Heminge and Condell for the Folio, are precisely as Shakespeare wrote them down. Ingenious as our guesses are, they remain guesses about the method of transmission from playhouse to printer. There is no fool-proof method of knowing whether some of the passages over which we agonize represent the author's carelessness, the scribbling of a prompter, manager, or play doctor, the misreading of a printer, or heaven knows what chance alteration. Unless a miracle produces some of Shakespeare's manuscript or some revelation is vouchsafed us concerning the transmission of his texts, we are likely to remain in our present state of puzzlement.

In the past three decades, much ingenuity has gone into an exploration of the Elizabethan stage, and we have some excellent studies, a few of which have come to completely divergent conclusions. One scholar will defend the Swan drawing as a veritable representation of what the stage of the public theatres was like; another will submit good reasons to believe that the artist, sketching from memory, was inaccurate. One scholar will assert that Shakespeare's plays were designed for a stage 'in the round'. Another will point out the impossibility of this concept. Whether the public theatre had an inner stage, doors set at an angle or flat against the wall, what properties were available and how used, and sundry other problems of the physical arrangements of the stage are matters of controversy.

Some of the discussions of the physical construction of the stage sound as if the authors thought all stages were identical and underwent no changes until the Restoration. Perhaps we have allowed the Swan drawing to dominate too much of our thinking about stage construction. Perhaps we ought to realize that the Elizabethans were an ingenious and inventive people and that Elizabethan theatrical managers had some of the capacity for adaptation to special situations characteristic of all theatrical folk. Because Burbage and company used timbers from The Theatre in the erection of the first Globe, that is no proof that they made no changes and improvements. To assume that the owners of the Globe had learned nothing and merely duplicated the old Globe after the unfortunate fire of 1613 is to deny Elizabethan theatrical people much intelligence. To believe that people ingenious enough to arrange the elaborate machinery and spectacles of court shows and masques never carried over any of their ideas into plays performed in the public theatres is to believe that they lacked both imagination and professional aptitude. But we should not go to the other extreme and argue that because Shakespeare's company may have put on a play in some great hall 'in the round', they carried over that method to the Globe or Blackfriars. If students of the theatre depended less upon ruminations in their studies and