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ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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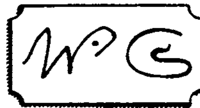

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CHIDING THE PLAYS: THEN TILL NOW

BY

CHARLES R. CROW

'Shakespeare is a dead issue.' Thus T. J. B. Spencer concludes his 1959 British Academy lecture. 'The resistance to his magnificent tyranny is over....'[1] And Spencer would seem to be right on the grounds of his argument. Whether Shakespeare's work, taken as a whole, is worth the attention it has come to compel, the influence it has exerted is not now a matter for much disagreement. Even the long-fought war on Shakespeare's language, so tellingly reviewed by Spencer, has ended in something like our surrender. We hear, now, much about what Shakespeare's words are doing, little about their 'conceited' badness. Utter detraction on these and on the other classic grounds has gone, detraction, that is, of Shakespeare. But not of Shakespeare's plays.

The distinction is a just one. Issues of judgment on particular Shakespeare plays are not dead. Critics do not ordinarily go to 'Shakespeare'. They go to *Troilus and Cressida* or *Othello* or *The Winter's Tale*, and they still find fault. Often they find fault with interpretations of other critics, not the play. When they do, they may exhibit the 'shadow-boxing of rival bardolaters', as Spencer says.[2] But where they make judgments against the play, or something in the play, the boxing is real. They do make such judgments, and not only against the earliest plays. There are the standard issues still active: the rejection of Falstaff, the death of Cordelia, the moral ambiguities of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Such matters are widely defended, subtly interpreted, and yet not settled. Shakespeare's handling of them, and not merely some critic's interpretation of it, is still questioned. In an age that likes to hold off explicit critical judgment, cultivates interpretation, sees interpretation indeed as an act of judgment, we may be less aware that these adverse judgments go on. They do, and in tones and manners not notably different from those of past centuries.

To display some of these tones and manners, then and now, is the object of this paper: the manners of critics as they show an enduring human willingness to find fault where fault seems to be in a Shakespeare play. There will be no examination of critical arguments, no analysis of their justice. Such undertaking would be too vast, of course, if it were to mean anything, and anyway not to the present purpose. For to look only at the arguments is to watch for the answers to them by other critics and probably to support the impression, given by some surveys of Shakespeare criticism, that there is a grand progression towards seeing the Shakespeare plays as faultless. It is good to check this impression by looking at critical manners that keep alertness to the faults alive. That is what will be done here. A rough grouping of kinds of manners, of tones taken towards the 'fault' in the play, will serve to bring past and present critics together for what may be some interesting likenesses. All the critics are well known. To yoke them by their manners will be to violate not only the separations of time but of contexts, with much loss of discrimination. The manners may stand out instructively nevertheless.

We start at the bottom of a scale of willingness to find fault, and look at a hesitant critical manner. Among considerable critics of Shakespeare it is not easy to locate except in one

conspicuous place. Surprisingly it shows up for a sentence or two, no doubt as a ceremonious gesture, in John Dennis, a critic not noted for timidity. He has found *Coriolanus* wanting in certain respects of 'poetical art' and is offering his own 'alteration' of the play: 'I humbly conceive therefore that this want of Dramatical Justice in the Tragedy of *Coriolanus* gave occasion for a just Alteration, and that I was oblig'd to sacrifice to that Justice *Aufidius* and the Tribunes, as well as *Coriolanus*.'[3] The humility is little more than perfunctory. It is perhaps genuine when Dennis turns to *Julius Caesar*, and, after suggesting improvements on Shakespeare's way of presenting Caesar, including a sketch for a scene that Shakespeare did not write, says: 'I will not pretend to determine here how that Scene might have been turn'd; and what I have already said on this Subject, has been spoke with the utmost Caution and Diffidence.'[4] Still, it *has* been spoken, and firmly. This countering of a firm objection by a gesture of humility turns dramatic when we find it in Swinburne as he looks at *Measure for Measure*:

In short and in fact, the whole elaborate machinery by which the complete and completely unsatisfactory result of the whole plot is attained is so thoroughly worthy of such a contriver as 'the old fantastical duke of dark corners' as to be in a moral sense, if I dare say what I think, very far from thoroughly worthy of the wisest and mightiest mind that ever was informed with the spirit or genius of creative poetry.[5]

Here we do need the context. Those words about 'the wisest and mightiest mind' are not in the vein of Rymer or Shaw: they are earnestly meant. The 'if I dare say what I think' is wrenched out against them. Yet Swinburne has said what he thinks.

Conspicuously it is Coleridge who hesitates, and on glorious principle. Shakespeare's judgment is equal to his genius. The organic poem obeys its own strict laws, not laws imposed upon it by the critic. The critic attends its unfolding into full growth. And when the critic is balked he turns, sometimes, upon himself. Coleridge's turns are remarkable. Of the Brutus soliloquy 'It must be by his death...' he says:

This is singular—at least I do not at present see into Shakespeare's motive, the *rationale*—or in what point he meant Brutus's character to appear. For surely (this I mean is what I say to myself, in my present quantum of insight, only modified by my experience in how many instances I have ripened into a perception of beauties where I had before descried faults), surely nothing can seem more discordant with our historical preconceptions of Brutus, or more *lowering* to the intellect of this Stoico-Platonic tyrannicide, than the tenets here attributed to him.... What character does Shakespeare mean *his* Brutus to be?[6]

Reluctance to blame the play could hardly be more pronounced. The critic must distrust himself. His 'quantum of insight' may increase, or better, in an access of the organic metaphor to himself, perception may 'ripen' as it has done before. However inconclusive, the attitude is consistent with the Coleridge principles. And in the observation about Brutus it does give an airing to at least a provisional objection. We may be glad, nevertheless, that Coleridge on other occasions was more decisive about blemishes in the plays, even when, as with the Porter scene, we think his perception and his explanation dead wrong.

To go up the scale from hesitation towards deliberate appraisal of faults has not been hard for many a Shakespeare critic. There is a way to do it that has been a favourite from the

eighteenth century until almost now: the way that expresses or implies regret but gets down to business. Thomas Whately remarks of the 'careless strokes' he has found in *Richard III*: 'After every reasonable allowance, they must still remain blemishes ever to be lamented....'[7] Joseph Warton laments and censures in one breath: 'I always lament that our author has not preserved this fierce and implacable spirit in Calyban, to the end of the play; instead of which, he has, I think, injudiciously put into his mouth, words that imply repentance and understanding....'[8] Even Johnson can take something of this manner. Of Enobarbus' final speech he says: 'The pathetic of Shakespeare too often ends in the ridiculous. It is painful to find the gloomy dignity of this noble scene destroyed by the intrusion of a conceit so far-fetched and unaffecting.'[9] Coleridge's pain is more intense, a very real thing, when he looks at *Measure for Measure*, and this time his aim is as quick and as direct as Johnson's:

> This play, which is Shakespeare's throughout, is to me the most painful—say rather, the only painful—part of his genuine works....[T]he pardon and marriage of Angelo not merely baffles the strong indignant claim of justice (for cruelty, with lust and damnable baseness, cannot be forgiven, because we cannot conceive them as being *morally* repented of) but it is likewise degrading to the character of woman....Of the counterbalancing beauties of the *Measure for Measure* I need say nothing, for I have already said that it is Shakespeare's throughout.[10]

'Shakespeare's throughout': the repetition twists the regret.

Hazlitt laments more mildly but with direct hits at the same play. He finds it 'as full of genius as it is of wisdom'. Yet he must say that 'there is an original sin in the nature of the subject, which prevents us from taking a cordial interest in it...'. He cannot like Isabella's 'rigid chastity'. And he says why. 'We do not feel the same confidence in the virtue that is "sublimely good" at another's expense, as if it had been put to some less disinterested trial.'[11] This play has drawn notable strains of regret from the critics, whatever the defences of its 'genius' and its 'wisdom'. Alfred Harbage says of III, i, 152–261: 'What follows is less in need of explication than apology'.[12] Charles Williams ends a series of questions about the play's 'cessation of all concern' with Angelo by sighing, 'It was not to be'. And his sigh comes to this conclusion: '*Measure for Measure*, then, remains poetically, like *Troilus*, an abandoned play. There may be every kind of noble lesson in it, but they have not been discovered by poetry.'[13] Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch even manages to transfer the sigh to Shakespeare. He says of the Mariana scene, 'Is it extravagant to suppose that Shakespeare invented this remote and exquisite scene, with its sob of the lute, on realizing that Isabella had failed, and was henceforth issueless, to deliver the spirit of his dream?'[14]

There is little more sighing as we go up the scale of faultfinding and reach a manner that says 'Let's face these faults with aplomb'. It goes especially well with historical or vocational accountings for Shakespeare's lapses. Johnson devotes five paragraphs to an examination of witchcraft and enchantment as his first note on *Macbeth* and concludes thus: 'Upon this general infatuation Shakespeare might be easily allowed to found a play, especially since he has followed with great exactness such histories as were then thought true; nor can it be doubted that the scenes of enchantment, however they may now be ridiculed, were both by himself and his audience thought awful and affecting.'[15] With this attitude might be compared that recommended by Harbage: 'Gaunt's extended punning upon his name, and his stichomythic wit-

combat with Richard, proves offensive to some readers, and understandably so. It is unnecessary to rationalize into a virtue every detail in these plays, which, like Renaissance art in general, sometimes lapse into the bizarre.'[16] Sir Walter Raleigh, turning to the facts of a busy writer's life at any time, decries the 'superstition which refuses to assign to Shakespeare any hasty or careless work'. And he urges a truer view:

Yet he was a purveyor to the public stage, and surely must have been pressed, as the modern journalist is pressed, to supply needed matter. Many authors who have suffered this pressure have settled their account with their conscience by dividing their work into two kinds. Some of it they do frankly as journey-work, making it as good as time and circumstances permit. The rest they keep by them, revising and polishing it to satisfy their own more exacting ideals. Shakespeare did both kinds of work, and the bulk of his writing has come down to us without distinction made between the better and the worse.[17]

Raleigh can then calmly face *All's Well that Ends Well* as presumably 'journey-work': 'The principal characters...are designed for their parts in the intrigue, but not even Shakespeare's skill can unite the incompatible, and teach them how to do their dramatic work without weakening their claim on our sympathies.'[18] In similar vein Quiller-Couch watches Shakespeare the workman, though now the earnest workman: 'Thus in *The Winter's Tale* the gap between Acts III and IV comes of honest failure to do an extremely difficult thing, yet a thing well worth doing, which Shakespeare essayed again and again until at length, in *The Tempest*, he mastered it.'[19]

Take away the extenuating air and we arrive at the cool 'There it is: no bones about it' manner, useful to critics who are summarizing in brief space or who want to get on to something else. Here Johnson is the grand exemplar. 'This play', he says of *Richard II*, 'is one of those which Shakespeare has apparently revised; but as success in works of invention is not always proportionate to labour, it is not finished at last with the happy force of some other of his tragedies nor can be said much to affect the passions or enlarge the understanding.'[20] Coming at the end of Johnson's notes on the play, this sentence may seem too curt a dismissal; but these manners are prized in Johnson. His 'General Observation' that ends the notes on *Hamlet* is of course more ample. Its final paragraph is an unperturbed enumeration of faults until it surprises with a flourish of feeling:

The poet is accused of having shown little regard to poetical justice and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer is abated by the untimely death of Ophelia, the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.[21]

Nowadays our critics, when they like, manage a cool faultfinding without the Johnson edge. Derek Traversi rises from deep immersion in *Cymbeline* to look at what has seemed wrong:

Once more...we are faced with a discrepancy, frequent in *Cymbeline* and perhaps the fundamental problem of the play, between expression and effectiveness. The language, concise and compact, is that of the mature tragedies, and the sentiments expressed are related, by means of it, to that exploration of moral realities which is characteristic of Shakespeare at his best; but the themes stated are not

adequately developed, fail to make themselves felt in the course of an action that remains basically conventional. Nowhere is the provisional quality of the inspiration of *Cymbeline* more clearly apparent.[22]

Here, to be sure, is no need for brevity, no temptation of that sort to be curt. Traversi has, presumably, all the space he wants and he uses it for careful discrimination. Given less space, Kenneth Muir, in an introduction to an edition of *Richard II*, makes a precise judgment without brusqueness:

Shakespeare was only just beginning to portray character by varying the verse. He did this brilliantly with Juliet's Nurse and in the contrast between Richard and Bolingbroke in the abdication scene. But his touch was still uncertain. The Gardener scene (III, iv) was admirably conceived as a commentary by the common man on the state of England, and as a parabolic statement, which links up with Gaunt's description of England as 'this other Eden'. But the execution of the scene falls far short of the conception. The Gardener, speaking in formal blank verse, indistinguishable from that used by royal and aristocratic characters, never really emerges from his role as a chorus. It would have been better, perhaps, to have written the scene in prose; but, for some reason, Shakespeare avoided prose altogether. Perhaps he was trying to please his new aristocratic friends.[23]

In this manner that subdues the critic to his task, much of the solid writing about Shakespeare has been done.

At its most helpful, the cool manner is scrupulous in getting things down exactly as the critic sees them. It need not do so in single-mindedness of judgment. There is an extension of it that becomes a dialectic of scruples. In finding fault it says, 'Here is a fault to be defined only by precise analytic argument against its being a virtue'. We expect such arguments in the more finespun efforts of modern criticism. In Shakespeare criticism they go back to Coleridge perhaps, and certainly to Bradley. To Bradley—and thus for some mockery these days. There are the smiles at Bradley's solemn scrupulousness. Is it that he looks at the wrong things rather than that his manner is wrong? For the manner is not only his, though he gives it his own serious vibration partly by direct reference to his feelings. Here it is:

When I read *King Lear* two impressions are left on my mind, which seem to answer roughly to the two sets of facts. *King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play. And I find that I tend to consider it from two rather different points of view. When I regard it strictly as a drama, it appears to me, though in certain parts overwhelming, decidedly inferior as a whole to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. When I am feeling that it is greater than any of these, and the fullest revelation of Shakespeare's power, I find I am not regarding it simply as a drama, but am grouping it in my mind with works like the *Prometheus Vinctus* and the *Divine Comedy*, and even with the greatest symphonies of Beethoven and the statues in the Medici Chapel.[24]

The problem in perception and in judgment is then drawn to its contradiction:

But (not to speak of defects due to mere carelessness) that which makes the *peculiar* greatness of *King Lear*...interferes with dramatic clearness even when the play is read, and in the theatre not only refuses to reveal itself fully through the senses but seems to be almost in contradiction with their reports.[25]

There follow the pages that poise the elements of the contradiction through Bradley's two lectures on *King Lear*. Whatever their value as criticism, they exhibit a manner of address (quite apart from the decried emphasis on 'character') that is still with us.

It is a manner that sees both sides and all around, that will not have things one simple way where the matter is not simple as a judgment of fault. What is 'faulty' about *King Lear* as drama is precisely its '*peculiar* greatness' from another perspective; but the flaws remain flaws from the dramatic perspective. The attitude and the manner are shown crisply by Harbage as he ends his scene-by-scene guide into *Othello*:

If there is a defect in this play, it lies not in the stature of the tragic hero. There is not the same thorough integration of theatrical fiction and dramatic vision, of action and idea, that there is in the other great tragedies. Although the proven effectiveness of the play on the stage renders somewhat irrelevant both attacks and defenses of its plot, the concession must be made that it is more 'plotty' than need be in respect to its great theme. The machinations of Iago, fascinating though they are to watch, give us too much of a good thing, with the excess at the expense of a better thing. There lacks a perfect balance of emphasis upon what Iago does and what he is: his mystery is submerged in the intrigue. Perhaps this was inevitable since Iago is, after all, nothing. His answering snarl *What you know, you know*...to Othello's incredulous *Why* is all we can ever expect to get when we ask Evil to explain itself.[26]

Carried to its utmost possibilities, the manner we are looking at needs much space to work itself out. Mary Lascelles devotes a whole book to *Measure for Measure*. At the end she summarizes the exactions the play has imposed upon the critic's impulses to find fault:

Indeed, any hasty interpretation of *Measure for Measure*, or any which hardens into formula, is likely to approach misconstruction. By nothing short of resolutely sustained attention can both these besetting errors be warded off: that which will make of every anomaly to be found in it a sort of treachery on the dramatist's part, and that which will remove every such anomaly out of sight. Neither representation gives a true portrait of this great, uneven play; for neither allows us to recognize that in its very complexity is to be found the proof of its integrity.[27]

This, probably, is as far as we can go up a scale of faultfinding manners, from the hesitant to the complexly deliberate, before critical patience explodes. Patience *has* been stretched in that last manner, stretched by fine critics over worthy dilemmas in perception and in judgment. If the problems seem not worthy at all, but affronts, the critic lets go. He may be a critic ungiven to restraint, or anyone in a moment of rebellion. He lets go and gives us the spectacular manners, the high jinks of detraction. Naturally we remember them. Is it more for what they tell us about the critic than about the play? Not always.

Distinctions of manners in these situations are not easy, but we can try. There is the 'In all honesty the thing deserves this drubbing' manner. It rings with earnest indignation. Johnson tries for one sentence to be charitable with *Cymbeline* and then gives up. 'To remark the folly of the fiction', he says, 'the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation.'[28] We watch him do the predictable, let fly with one of his favourite indignations, when he says of *Romeo and Juliet*, 'His comic scenes are happily wrought, but his pathetic strains are always polluted with some unexpected depravations. His persons, however distressed, *have a conceit left them in their misery, a miserable conceit*.'[29] The italics are Johnson's, to press even that style of his beyond its considerable powers. Or is he laughing at his own fury? This manner

runs to memorable quips. Mark Van Doren wraps a whole play into one blunt sentence: 'If Aristotle was right when he called plot the soul of tragedy, "Timon of Athens" has no soul.'[30] To follow a passage by Van Doren is to get the manner in full cry:

The style of 'Troilus and Cressida' is loud, brassy, and abandoned. The world which Chaucer had left so tenderly intact explodes as if a mine had been touched off beneath it, while a host of characters, conceived partly in doubt and partly in disgust, rave at the tops of their never modulated voices. All of them are angry, all of them are distrustful and mendacious; and the tone of each is hardened to rasping by some unmotivated irritation. One is tempted to suppose that the irritation was in the author before it was in them. For once he cannot write with respect either for his subject or for their styles.[31]

Here is eloquent evidence of a sensibility affronted, the critic's sensibility. The passage is an honest attempt to say just that, with apt aid from the art of rhetoric.

In other hands the manner shades into downright gusto: drubbing is a pleasure. We think of undergraduate essays in this vein, and we think of Thomas Rymer. The Rymer hilarity, at least about *Othello*, has, to be sure, met guarded approval in our time. Plainly it gave Rymer much satisfaction. Not his over-familiar words, however, but some recent ones of William Empson may bring the gusto of detraction into full view. Empson is writing of Shakespeare's last plays. He begins his essay with an anecdote of Hugh Kingsmill's epic laughter in the Blackwall Tunnel over the pious ejaculations of Cleomenes and Dion about the oracle in *The Winter's Tale*. Though Empson does not laugh heartily at that particular passage, he finds other targets quickly enough. There is the conversation of the gentlemen leaving the brothel in *Pericles*. 'Here', says Empson, 'we meet a thrilling extremity of bad taste; plainly it was screwed up by the hand of the master.'[32] And there is 'the delicious heroine herself, protesting her innocence'. She gets the full treatment: 'The narrator Esther in *Bleak House* arouses the same electric nausea; it is done by implying "I'm such a good girl that I don't even *know* how good I am". In short, this is tear-jerks at their most reeking; Dickens is the only other prominent author who can go so far too far.'[33] As it turns out, of course, the Empson laughter has method. It wants to clear the critical air, blow away what Empson thinks to be pretentious current readings by laughing not only at the critics but at spuriously solemn things in the last plays.

The gibes of George Bernard Shaw come to mind, though they carry far less responsibility to Shakespeare's meanings or none at all. Contempt professes to edge the raillery. 'How anybody over the age of seven can take interest in a literary toy so silly in its conceit and common in its ideas as the Seven Ages of Man passes my understanding.'[34] Of Orlando's 'If ever you have looked on better days', Shaw comments: 'I shall really get sick if I quote any more of it. Was ever such canting, snivelling, hypocritical unctuousness exuded by an actor anxious to shew that he was above his profession, and was a thoroughly respectable man in private life?'[35] 'Electric nausea' again! There is, to be sure, another side to such criticism in Shaw: his raillery claims to be distinguishing the gold from the tinsel in Shakespeare. The manner of distinguishing is drastic:

When a flower-girl tells a coster to hold his jaw, for nobody is listening to him, and he retorts, 'O, you're there, are you, you beauty?' they reproduce the wit of Beatrice and Benedick exactly. But put it this way. 'I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.' 'What!

my dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?' You are miles away from costerland at once. When I tell you that Benedick and the coster are equally poor in thought, Beatrice and the flower-girl equally vulgar in repartee, you reply that I might as well tell you that a nightingale's love is no higher than a cat's. Which is exactly what I do tell you, though the nightingale is the better musician.[36]

The manner triumphs for its moment, until we catch our breath and ponder that word 'musician'. Still, the Shaw manners on this particular subject do not stand quite alone. Quiller-Couch, writing on *Much Ado* for the New Shakespeare edition, blasts away in earnest at Shakespeare's wit in general. 'If we could rid ourselves of idolatry and of cant when we talk about Shakespeare, we should probably admit that his "wit"...is usually cheap, not seldom exasperating, and at times...merely disgusting.'[37] And 'we advance the business of criticism by announcing the stuff for rubbish'.[38]

With these blunt words a review of faultfinding manners might stop. There is much else to say, and there are hundreds of other critics whose manners offer variations on what we have looked at. Some of these variations are not clear-cut. They may or may not suggest faultfinding. One of them is worth a final glance.

It is the manner that simply resorts to silence or relative silence. It may of course mean lack of interest or lack of space, but it may mean avoidance of trouble. What some critics do with Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* is an example, and perhaps because Johnson has thrown down a challenge. His general observation on the play has essentially two sentences: 'This play, as Dr. Warburton justly observes, is, with all its absurdities, very entertaining. The character of Autolycus is very naturally conceived and strongly represented.'[39] The 'very naturally', the 'strongly', and the fact that the character gets fully one-half of Johnson's total attention in the comment, make it difficult to see how Autolycus could be avoided in anyone's account of the play. Yet there has been silence about him. Traversi, in the shorter of his two examinations of the play, makes not a single reference to Autolycus in the twenty-three pages of the chapter, and Autolycus does not show up in the index.[40] With other critics the silence is not quite absolute, but Autolycus gets a barest minimum of their attention. Van Doren's chapter on the play has one reference: 'the surpassing roguery of Autolycus'.[41] Baldwin Maxwell, in an introduction to the play that runs to eight pages, has two references, one incidental and one complimentary: 'That engaging rogue Autolycus is, as is also the Shepherd's clownish son, wholly Shakespeare's'.[42] Frank Kermode, also in an introduction, this one running to fifteen pages, mentions Autolycus once, and in parentheses. What he says is significant: 'The mood [of Act IV] is of innocence (even Autolycus contributes to this, partly by establishing rustic virtues as opposed to those of the court—an old pastoral theme, and one paralleled by the debates between Corin and Touchstone in *As You Like It*)....'[43] Here Autolycus is not seen or cherished as a character 'strongly represented' but as a contributor to the theme that Kermode names. Is there implication that Autolycus has been a bother in the play, that only the 'theme', when one looks hard at it, validates him? These critics, all of them except Johnson, find the serious movement of the play to be remarkably significant without Autolycus. They are not quite saying so, but they seem by their silence or their offhand remarks to wish that Shakespeare had not brought him so prominently into that fourth act for the diversions that delighted Johnson.