PROLOGUE

Gary Taylor finds a poem

On 24 November 1985 purchasers of the *Sunday Times* found their break-
fast reading enlivened by a challenging question: 'Is this by Shake-
speare?'. The work referred to was a poem printed on page 3 of that
issue, beginning like this:

> Shall I die? Shall I fly
> Lovers' baits and deceits,
>   sorrow breeding?
> Shall I tend? Shall I send?
> Shall I sue, and not rue
>   my proceeding?
>   In all duty her beauty
> Binds me her servant for ever.
>   If she scorn, I mourn,
> I retire to despair, joying never.

How did this 'discovery' come about? In the words of Gary Taylor, to
whom the 'discovery' was credited: 'on the evening of Nov. 14' while
'routinely checking references in the Bodleian Library, I came across an
item I did not recognize', and 'asked for the manuscript to be fetched'.
Next day, at first view, he was already convinced:

I found the literary equivalent of Sleeping Beauty, a nameless poem awakening
from the ancient sheets in which it had lain undisturbed for centuries, a poem
without a critical history.[1]

Within a week, a little week, 'with the help and advice of my senior
colleague' on the Oxford Shakespeare project, Stanley Wells, Taylor 'had
subjected the poem to every accepted test of authenticity; the results were
all positive and we could think of nothing else to check' (Taylor 1985a,
p. 11). Once the poem had been published on both sides of the Atlantic,
Taylor claimed, 'public reaction to the discovery has been generous
and enthusiastic; I have been overwhelmed by a tidal wave of curiosity.

Academic reaction to the poem has been mixed' (p. 11). 'Mixed' is a
nice way of putting it, for apart from Stanley Wells's loyal advocacy, it
is a remarkable fact that no other scholar has endorsed Taylor's claim.
The public, led by journalists keen on a story, may have been 'generous
and enthusiastic', but scholars who have spent many years working on
Shakespeare and Elizabethan literature have been uniformly dismissive.
To them it is not so much a Sleeping Beauty as the frog that did not turn
into a prince.

The case that Taylor made was based on external and internal
evidence. The external evidence consisted solely of the fact that the
unknown scribe who compiled the manuscript-miscellany known as
Rawlinson poet. MS. 160, having copied out the poem, subscribed it
'William Shakespeare'. Taylor mentioned several scholars known to have
inspected the manuscript which contains this poem – E. K. Chambers,
the Oxford editors of Ben Jonson (C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn
Simpson), Falconer Madan, who catalogued it, and Margaret Crum,
who included it in her *Index*[2] of the Bodleian's manuscript poetry, and
there were surely many others who looked at it – but Taylor was the
first to take seriously its ascription to Shakespeare. Although he knew
nothing about the scribe, Taylor proclaimed his belief that the copyist
could have had 'no motive for lying about the authorship of a poem',
and claimed that 'his other attributions [in this miscellany] are reliable'.[3]
But, as any reader can see, the question of the scribe's honesty is irrel-
evant: all that is at stake is his knowledge, and that seems to have been
not infallible, to judge from the dubious or demonstrably wrong attribu-
tions found elsewhere in this collection. In any case, manuscript verse
anthologies are in one respect like autograph albums today: to have the
signature of someone really famous increases the collection's kudos, and
its exchange value. Taylor recognized this point as it applies to plays,
commenting that all the works excluded from the First Folio (1623) 'were
first attributed to Shakespeare early in the seventeenth century, when
his reputation created incentives to dishonesty, and before the Folio it-
self ended the market for such fraudulence by providing the public with
a reliable dramatic canon'.[4] Surely the same considerations apply to
manuscript material. Donald Foster once disclosed that he had found
the initials 'W. S.' subscribed to over a hundred poems in Jacobean and
Caroline verse-miscellanies.[5] Is it mere coincidence that these are Shake-
speare's initials? When Taylor penned this assertion of the Rawlinson
scribe's reliability, he was sure that no other copy of the poem survived,
either 'in the major manuscript collections at the British Library' or six

other libraries, including Yale. But, by one of those coincidences so fre-
quent once a supposedly unique artefact has been identified, within a
few weeks a second copy of the poem had been located in the Beinecke
rare books collection at Yale, having long been listed in their annotated
copy of Margaret Crum's *Index*. This time we know quite a bit about the
scribe who compiled the Yale miscellany, a precocious teenager called
Tobias Alston (1620–c. 1639), who had connections with Cambridge
poets in the 1630s.[6] It is significant that his text, which differs in over
twenty readings from the Rawlinson one, is not ascribed to Shakespeare.

A careful scholar's provisional conclusion would be that an attribution
by one unknown scribe, probably writing in the late 1630s,[7] has no claim
to be considered reliable external evidence. Gary Taylor, however, at his
first interviews with journalists from the *New York Times*, within a week
of finding it, categorically declared: 'this poem belongs to Shakespeare's
canon and, unless somebody can dislodge it, it will stay there'.[8] Talking
to the *Sunday Times* at the same time, he recorded that as soon as he
had 'finished copying the poem down . . . I felt it in my guts that it was
Shakespeare, but it is very easy to talk yourself into such things, so I started
running around like a nut trying to prove that I was wrong. Now the onus
is on people to prove that it isn't Shakespeare.'[9] In his own more studied
writings Taylor was just as categorical, asserting that 'the poem must be
regarded as Shakespeare's until proved otherwise'; and again, 'unless this
document's attribution can be disproved, this poem must be included in
any edition of Shakespeare's works that claims to be "complete" ' (Taylor
1985a, p. 14). The best answer to such absolute assertiveness is to recall the
sober restatement of some fundamental principles in authorship studies
made by M. W. A. Smith, a leading scholar in the use of statistics to
determine authorship,

the most important of which are:
1. The onus of proof lies entirely with the person making the ascription.
2. The argument for adding something to an author's canon has to be vastly
   more stringent than for keeping it there.
3. If doubt persists, an anonymous work must remain anonymous.
4. Avoidance of a false attribution is far more important than failing to recognise
   a correct one.[10]

The internal evidence – using 'every accepted test of authenticity',
Taylor claimed – consists merely of a series of verbal parallels that Taylor
found, within a few weeks' work on concordances, between the poem and
Shakespeare. Or, as he put it, in a mixture of assertion and speculation,

'Its vocabulary, imagery, style – everything scholarly jargon lumps to-
gether as internal evidence – are at least compatible with Shakespeare's
authorship, and, if one gives them the most weight they will bear, they
suggest that it could hardly have been written by any other known poet'
(Taylor 1985a, p. 12). Well, you may call these categories 'scholarly
jargon' if you are writing in a non-scholarly journal, such as the *New
York Times Book Review*, but you had better be sure you master them
when you write for scholars. When Taylor rewrote this article for the
much more scholarly *Times Literary Supplement* a few days later, he re-
vised the second half of that sentence, now claiming that the internal
evidence is 'at most independently suggestive' that the poem could have
been written by no one else (1985b, p. 1447). Gone is the phrase de-
scribing his own method – 'if one gives them the most weight that they
will bear' – but even the 'more interesting verbal parallels' adduced in
both versions of the article applied more weight than the evidence bore
out, as several well-informed scholars soon complained. Taylor's inter-
nal evidence failed to persuade at least eight experienced scholars who
wrote in the *TLS*, *New York Times*, and elsewhere.[11] I shall pick out from
this debate the issues most pertinent to the methodology of authorship
studies.

READING THE POEM

The initial, and most basic issue concerns the text itself, as a poem
on the page. The first printed versions, in the *Sunday Times* and the
TLS, reproduced the Rawlinson text, as modernized by Taylor, following
him in seeing it as consisting of nine ten-line stanzas. Both newspaper
versions set the short third and sixth lines of each stanza full out at
the right hand margin, at least leaving open the possibility that they
formed part of lines 2 and 5. However, in Taylor's own text, as printed
in the Oxford *Complete Works* (1986, p. 883), these part-lines are firmly
set in the middle of the page, as if they formed distinct units of verse.
An examination of the manuscript shows that the scribe transcribed the
poem within two ruled lines, occupying just over half of the page, and
added ornamental arabesques inside the left margin on the first page, so
reducing the available space still further. He decided to divide the long
second and fourth lines of each stanza after the internal rhyme, and did
so consistently. The sixth line in the stanza, which has no internal rhyme,
he set full out to the left margin in the first three stanzas (in the following
transcript lines 6, 14, 22), but neglected to do so in the fourth verse

(line 30), an oversight which forced him to divide the line at the word 'us'. He remembered to observe his previous layout in the remaining five stanzas (lines 38, 46, 54, 62, 70). As for the concluding line, he divided it in the first four stanzas (lines 8, 16, 24, 32), but changed the layout for the remaining five, setting the line full out left, as he had done with the sixth line (lines 40, 48, 56, 64, 72). Such inconsistencies within his own system suggest that the line-division reflects scribal practice rather than authorial composition.[12] That such variations were often made by scribes is shown, appropriately enough, by Tobias Alston, compiler of the Yale miscellany, who 'treats each stanza as consisting of only four (long) lines', as Taylor recorded (*TxC*, p. 451). In the same breath Taylor added that the Bodleian copyist 'generally divides each stanza into ten (mostly short) lines. (For exact details see the Lineation Notes.)' Whoever tracks down this appendix (*TxC*, p. 650) will find that it records what I have pointed out, the fact that four of the poem's nine stanzas divide the final line, so making – on Taylor's logic – eleven-line stanzas, an obvious absurdity. When the late Jeremy Maule, an outstanding palaeographic scholar, wrote a joint letter (with Erica Sheen) to the *TLS* pointing out the poem's affinity with song-lyrics, they 'treat[ed] the poem as composed of eight-line stanzas'.[13]

This conclusion can be strengthened by examining the grammar and syntax of the second and fourth lines, which in each case form a semantic unit, having no innate reason to be divided. Both points suggest that the poem more correctly consists of nine eight-line stanzas. Its proper form is represented by this layout:

> Shall I die? Shall I fly
> Lovers' baits and deceits, sorrow breeding?
> Shall I tend? Shall I send?
> Shall I sue, and not rue my proceeding?
> In all duty her beauty
> Binds me her servant for ever.
> If she scorn, I mourn,
> I retire to despair, joying never.

The difference is not negligible. Taylor's arrangement gives us a ten-line stanza of which six lines have an internal rhyme, but only four lines rhyme at the line-ending ('breeding/proceeding', 'ever/never'). The rhyme-scheme, then, would be notated *abcdecfghg*, giving a highly unusual predominance of five unrhymed lines (*bdefh*), and the syllable-count would be 6 6 4 6 6 4 8 8 6 10 (later stanzas, as we will see, have difficulty

keeping to this measure). With my corrected arrangement we have an eight-line stanza, with four rhymed, four un-rhymed lines, giving the rhyme-scheme *abcbdefe*, and a syllable-count of 6 10 6 10 8 8 6 10. The first arrangement is unsymmetrical and awkward; the second falls tidily into two groups of four lines. The study of stanza-patterns in English Renaissance poetry is in its infancy, with a few honourable exceptions. William Ringler, in his excellent edition of Sidney's poetry, listed all the verse forms that Sidney used, from which we can see that the poet preferred eight-line to ten-line stanzas, and that in both forms he made every line rhyme (the preferred schemes beginning *abab*, then permutating *bcbcdd*, *bcdcdd*, etc.).[14] David Norbrook and Henry Woudhuysen, in their ground-breaking anthology of English Renaissance poetry, include an 'Index of Metrical and Stanzaic Forms', in which eight-line stanzas out-number ten-line ones by a total of 18 to 5; here again, with one exception (the second line of a refrain repeated through six verses) every line forms part of a rhyme-scheme.[15] Similarly, the detailed survey carried out in a recent and pioneering dissertation by M. A. Absi, which deserves to be published, suggests that in the period 1570 to 1630 eight-line stanzas were much more common than those of ten lines.[16] There is no reason to follow Taylor's arrangement, and in the subsequent discussion I have restored the eight-line stanza form.

It may be convenient at this point to have a complete text of the poem, transcribed from the Rawlinson MS. in which it appears,[17] with oblique strokes marking the line divisions:

1

1   Shall I dye, shall I flye
           lovers baits, and deceipts / sorrow breeding
           Shall I tend shall I send
           shall I shewe, and not rue / my proceeding
5   In all duty her beawty
      Binds me her servant for ever
           If she scorne I mourne
           I retire, to despaire / Ioying never.

2

           Yet I must, vent my lust
10   and explaine, inward paine / by my loue breeding
           If she smiles, she exiles
           all my moane, if she frowne / all my hopes deceaving
           Suspitious doubt, oh keepe out
      For thou art my tormentor

15   Fly away, pack away
        I will loue for hope / bids me venter

                        3
        T'were abuse to accuse
        my faire loue, ere I prove / her affection
        therefore try her reply
20   gives thee Ioy or annoy / or affliction
        Yet how ere, I will beare
    Her pleasure with patience for beawty
            sure wit not seeme to blot,
            her deserts wronging him, / doth her duty.

                        [4]
25   In a dreame it did seeme
        but alas dreames doe passe / as doe shaddowes
        I did walke, I did talke
        with my loue, with my dove / through faire meadows
        Still we past till at last
30   we sate to repose vs / for o^r pleasure
        being set lips mett
        armes twin'd & did bind / my hearts treasure

                        5
        Gentle wind sport did find
        wantonly to make fly / her gold tresses
35   As they shooke, I did looke
        but her faire, did impaire / all my senses
        As amaz'd I gaz'd
    On more then a mortall complection
            then that loue, can prove
40 Such force in beawties inflection

                        6
        Next her haire forehead faire
        Smooth and high next doth lye / without wrinckle
        Her faire browes vnder those
        starlike eyes win loues prize / when they twinckle
45   In her cheekes, whoe seekes
    Shall find there displaid beawties banner
            Oh admiring, desiring
    breeds as I looke still vpon her

                        7
        Thin lips red, fancies fed
50   with all sweets when he meets / and is granted

8   *Prologue. Gary Taylor finds a poem*

           There to trade, and is made
           happy sure, to endure / still vndaunted
           Pretty chinne, doth winne
       Of all thats cald comendations
   55   Fairest neck, noe speck
       All her parts meritt high admiracõns

                          8
           A pretty bare, past compare
           parts those plotts (which besots) / still asunder
           It is meet, nought but sweet
   60   should come nere, that soe rare / tis a wonder
           Noe mishap, noe scape
       Inferior to natures perfection
           noe blot, noe spot
       Shees beawties queene in election

                          9
   65   Whilst I dream't, I exempt
           for all care seem'd to share / pleasures in plenty
           but awake care take
           for I find to my mind / pleasures scanty
           Therefore I will trie
   70   to compasse my hearts cheife contenting
           To delay, some saye
       In such a case causeth repenting

                          William Shakespeare

   Of the poem's several curious features we note first its lack of thematic
unity. The first three stanzas develop the idea of a conventional Petrar-
chan lover agonizing over whether to declare his love, and risk rejection,
or to suffer on in silence. The remaining six stanzas, however, combine a
dream-vision with a blazon, the catalogue of a woman's beauty that con-
ventionally moved from head to toe, or reversed, itemizing her bodily
charms in sequence. Each part is typical of many poems of the period,
but it was not a good idea to put them together. Muriel Bradbrook causti-
cally described the 'incongruity of the *topoi*' in the two halves: 'Medieval
cooks would have termed it a cockatrice, made by sewing half a capon
to half a sucking pig'.[18] The opening three stanzas, as Peter Beal pointed
out, form a self-contained unit, and could have been used as a song in
a Jacobean or Caroline play, which might explain how Shakespeare's
name got attached to it.[19] But the mixture of the two genres is so clumsy
that one cannot imagine Shakespeare perpetrating it at any stage of his
career. Whoever reads the narrative poems that he had written by the

mid-1590s (the date that Taylor wishes to give the poem) will find two
wonderfully unified works, derived from very brief historical sources,
which boldly incorporate major 'digressions'(such as the tapestry in *The
Rape of Lucrece* depicting the siege of Troy), showing the young poet's con-
fidence that he could sustain the narrative line without any loss of unity.
We have no instance of him leaving any work in this broken-backed state.

The second odd feature of 'Shall I die?' is its rhyme-scheme. In each
eight-line stanza six of the lines contain an internal rhyme, two of which
(the second and fourth in each stanza) also rhyme at the ending, with
a double or 'feminine' rhyme: 'breeding' / 'proceeding'. The two lines
lacking an internal rhyme (the sixth and eighth) also end with a feminine
rhyme: 'ever' / 'never'. In other words, rhymes can occur every three
syllables, or even every two – 'being set lipps mett' (39) – unless we need
to make 'lipps' disyllabic, for metrical reasons. Of the 429 words in this
poem, 162 are rhyme-words, which must be some kind of record – and
certainly far exceeds any such ratio in authentic Shakespearian lyrics.
Unfortunately, the strain of finding so many rhymes left the poet no
other resource than to repeat himself: 'breeding'/'proceeding' in the first
stanza is echoed by 'breeding'/'deceiving' in the second (the latter one
of several poor rhymes to which critics have objected); line 15 reads 'Fly
away, pack away', a tautology rather than a rhyme. The self-imposed
need to echo rhymes at such a short interval has the more damaging
effect of regularly imposing heavy pauses, which break up the line:

> I did walke, I did talke
> with my loue, with my dove through fair meadows
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (27–8)

> There to trade, and is made
> happy sure, to endure still undaunted
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (51–2)

Our anonymous poet seems to revel in oblique association, analogy, and
extremely compressed statement, creating groups of words which are
isolated into little clusters by the brevity of the line-length, by the divisive
effect of the frequent internal rhymes, and by the heavily accented metre.
The verse seems to move in fits and starts, an effect perhaps designed
to give the singer of a lute-song time to take breath while the lutenist
ornamented the cadences at each point. Whatever the reason for this
peculiar combination of rhyme and metre, the strain of finding words of
one or two syllables for the needed rhyme also forces the poet to rely on
simple, not to say banal, epithets:

> Next her haire forehead faire
> Smooth and high next doth lye without wrinckle
> Her faire browes under those . . .
>
> (41–3)

and so on. Thomas Pendleton, firmly rejecting its ascription to Shake-speare, found it 'incredible that the largest poetic vocabulary in the lan-guage produced "pretty chin" in line 53 and then "pretty bare" in line 57, much less the series "fair love" (18), "fair meadows" (28), "forehead fair" (41), "fair brows" (43), and "Fairest neck" (55), not to mention "her fair" (36)'.[20] Sharing his disbelief, I would point out that the only com-parable passage in Shakespeare having so many repetitions of the word 'fair' occurs in *Troilus and Cressida*, in the scene where Pandarus visits Paris, Helen, and their entourage:

Pandarus. Fair be to you, my lord, and to all this fair company! fair desires, in all fair measure, fairly guide them! Especially to you, fair queen, fair thoughts be to your fair pillow!
Helen. Dear Lord, you are full of fair words.
Pandarus. You speak your fair pleasure, sweet queen. Fair prince, here is good broken music.
Paris. You have broke it, cousin; and by my life you shall make it whole again – you shall piece it out with a piece of your performance. (3.1.42–52)

But here the laboured puns and mindless repetitions simultaneously evoke this decadent milieu and satirize it. The poet of 'Shall I die?' is be-yond, or below parody, simply unaware of his own poverty of imagination.

Amazed at the highly demanding rhyme-scheme, readers will also have noticed the unusual metre, doggedly carried through over a far longer stretch of verse than anything we can recall in Shakespeare's au-thentic work. Defining the metre, however, is more difficult than it seems. Some readers think it to be anapestic, but others find trochaics in the sixth and eighth lines of each stanza. Donald Foster confidently pronounced that ' "Shall I die?" is written in continuous anapests, a form almost never used by Shakespeare. So far as I am aware, Shakespeare never wrote five anapests in a row', and this metre 'is rarely found in English literature prior to 1610'.[21] One may agree about the rarity of Shake-speare's use of this metre, but is it really anapestic? George T. Wright, a specialist in English metrics, expressed surprise that the controversy over the poem's authorship had largely ignored its poetic form and es-pecially its metre, since 'it is exactly the odd meter and stanzaic form that have led many readers to think it eccentric and un-Shakespearean.