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978-0-521-13651-8 - The School of Shakespeare: The Influence of Shakespeare on English Drama 1600-42

David L. Frost

Excerpt

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## I

The Reputation and Influence of  
Shakespeare 1600–42

Shakespeare who (taught by none) did first impart  
To Fletcher wit, to labouring Jonson art.

DRYDEN, Prologue to *The Tempest: or The  
Enchanted Island* (1670), ll. 5–6

There could be no greater indictment of the aesthetic and intellectual pretensions of an age than to say that it failed to appreciate Shakespeare. The question of his reputation in the early seventeenth century has an importance beyond that of an academic quibble. For if the Jacobeans, who for understanding were naturally in a position towards which we can only struggle, were so deafened by Jonson that they failed to value the wares of his contemporary, it must indeed be true that the great artist is ignored in his own day. But the prophet was *not* without honour; and it will be found that a belief that the artist is necessarily at odds with his society, the assumption of a French Romantic heresy, has in our century resulted in a selecting of evidence and warping of the truth.

If it be true that Shakespeare was in fact admirable to his contemporaries and successors, there is a certain illogicality in discussing the Jacobean and Caroline dramatists with a perhaps major influence safely kennelled up. In grouping Shakespeare with Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, Jonson was right, for genius has more in common with its peers than its contemporaries; while a line drawn between Shakespeare and the other Jacobeans has saved them from being unjustly overshadowed. But it will be the purpose of this study in the first place to record the many occasions on which they borrowed from Shakespeare, and chiefly to show that they make better sense if seen in his light: some as writing by his inspiration,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

others misunderstanding and misapplying his techniques, and yet more reacting against his viewpoint and feeling towards an independent insight. If the study is to proceed, Shakespeare's reputation in his age must first be established.

Apart from Webster's graceful salute in his Preface to *The White Devil* (1612), where Shakespeare is listed with six other playwrights, there is little or no direct evidence that the major dramatists thought of him as a master. But this need not be conclusive; for although several writers acknowledge their debt to Jonson, Ben had gathered a coterie about him, and the delicate subject of influence is one on which an author cannot, without prompting, be expected to be very forthcoming. Moreover, since our evidence is so fragmentary, no conclusions ought to be drawn from a lack of it. The point is best illustrated by a document only recently discovered in the library of Balliol College, Oxford.<sup>1</sup> The accepted opinion has been that while Shakespeare's narrative poems were vastly popular after his death, his sonnets made little or no impression; his own complaints in the course of one of them have been adduced to show that their style was old-fashioned, unacceptable to those used to the Metaphysical mode. But in a volume of the *Sonnets* of Lope de Vega published in Madrid in 1613, and sent from Spain by James Mabbe, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, to a friend at the University, there is scribbled a fly-leaf note by Leonard Digges, a fellow Oxonian and Spanish scholar, who was with Mabbe at the time:

Will Baker: Knowinge  
that Mr Mab: was to  
sende you this Booke  
of sonets, w<sup>ch</sup> with Spaniards  
here is accounted of their  
lope de Vega as in Englande  
wee sholde of o<sup>r</sup>: Will  
Shakespeare. I colde not

<sup>1</sup> Paul Morgan, "'Our Will Shakespeare' and Lope de Vega: An Unrecorded Contemporary Document', *Shakespeare Survey*, 16 (1963), pp. 118 ff.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## SHAKESPEARE'S REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

but insert thus much to  
 you, that if you like  
 him not, you must neuer  
 neuer reade Spanishe Poet

LEO: DIGGES

This scrawled message is the only surviving evidence of Shakespeare's supreme reputation in the Jacobean period as a sonnet writer, a reputation which Digges assumes without question. On such shreds the artifact of history depends; in their absence we may only surmise.

But if nothing can be stated, much may be inferred of the attitude of the dramatists to Shakespeare from his lasting popularity on the stage, in print, and with influential figures. His techniques may well have seemed a formula for success, and it is reasonable to suppose that dramatists attached to the King's Men saw the bulk of Shakespeare's work in rehearsal and in performance. Writers seem to have supervised rehearsals of their own plays, and when Middleton made additions to *Macbeth* after Shakespeare's death,<sup>1</sup> he may well have overseen the whole production. Certainly, Shakespeare's plays were part of the author's consciousness, from Beaumont's parody in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* through to Massinger, borrowing Shakespeare's situations and paraphrasing his lines, and Ford, using *Romeo and Juliet* to point the horrors of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.

*The reputation of Shakespeare on the stage*

Since the time of Malone, it has been maintained that after Shakespeare's retirement the public forsook his plays for the titillation and surprises of Beaumont and Fletcher. That taste degenerated cannot be denied; but Fletcher's late plays were written twenty years or more after *Hamlet* and *Othello*, in an age when the Prologue preceded a stale play with red-faced apologies. Our fragmentary evidence for stage productions does

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 3, 'The Interpolations in *Macbeth*: their Relation to Middleton's *Witch*: the Date of *The Witch*'.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

not support a theory of wholesale desertion.<sup>1</sup> From the period 1600 to 1642 there survive records of 73 performances of Shakespeare, spread among twenty-seven different plays. Up till 1613 there are 31 recorded performances, and in 1613, the year of Shakespeare's final retirement, we know of 11, thanks to the chance survival of an account. But after this date records of 31 more stagings exist, 18 in the last twelve years before the closing of the theatres. Moreover, it is significant that Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, who was granted a benefit by the players on the second day of a revived play, and of whom every record suggests a rapacious business acumen, elected to take his benefits in 1629 and 1631 on *Othello* and *Richard II*, and again in 1631 on *Pericles*. Plays by other authors were also chosen as benefits and seem to have paid rather better, though we know little of the circumstances; but Herbert must at least have estimated that Shakespeare's plays were likely to draw the crowd.

That this was so is attested by Leonard Digges, in verses prefixed to an edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* (1640). His remarks are applicable to Shakespeare as a dramatist rather than poet, and I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that they were an expansion of his lines in the 1623 Folio of *Shakespeare's Works*, and probably intended for the 1632 edition, but withdrawn because of their unflattering references to Jonson, whose spleen was then rising as his popularity sank. Digges died in 1635, but the verses were used by the publisher in 1640, two years after Jonson's school had celebrated their late master in *Jonsonus Virbius* (1638). It is highly unlikely that these friends would have let Jonson's reputation go undefended; but we know of no one contradicting Digges, and the supposition must be that his statements could not be denied. Digges maintained that the King's Men supported themselves in hard times on the proceeds of Shakespeare's plays: that even Jonson's *Alche-*

1 See Appendix 1, 'Records of Shakespearean Productions, 1600-42', where performances are tabulated by year, and references listed.

2 David L. Frost, 'The Reputation of Shakespeare in the Seventeenth Century', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, xvi (1965), p. 84 n.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## SHAKESPEARE'S REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

*mist* barely defrayed expenses, while Shakespearean revivals were an outstanding financial success:

But oh! what praise more powerfull can we give  
 The dead, then that by him the Kings men live  
 His Players, which should they but have shar'd the Fate,  
 All else expir'd within the short Termes date;  
 How could the Globe have prospered, since through want  
 Of change, the Plaies and Poems had growne scant. . .

(ll. 19-24)

Of the poets Digges says:

I doe not wonder when you offer at  
 Blacke-Friers, that you suffer: tis the fate  
 Of richer veines, prime judgements that have far'd  
 The worse, with this deceased man compar'd.  
 So have I seene, when Cesar would appeare,  
 And on the Stage at halfe-sword parley were,  
*Brutus* and *Cassius*: oh how the Audience  
 Were ravish'd, with what wonder they went thence,  
 When some new day they would not brooke a line,  
 Of tedious (though well laboured) *Catilines*;  
*Sejanus* too was irkesome, they priz'de more  
 Honest *Iago*, or the jealous Moore.  
 And though the Fox and subtill Alchemist,  
 Long intermitted could not quite be mist,  
 Though these have shamed all the Ancients, and might raise,  
 Their Authours merit with a crowne of Bayes.  
 Yet these sometimes, even at a friends desire  
 Acted, have scarce defrai'd the Seacole fire  
 And doore-keepers: when let but *Falstaffe* come,  
*Hall*, *Poines*, the rest you scarce shall have a roome  
 All is so pester'd: let but *Beatrice*  
 And *Benedicke* be seene, loe in a trice  
 The Cockpit Galleries, Boxes, all are full  
 To hear *Malvoglio*, that crosse garter'd Gull. . .

(ll. 37-60)

Digges' evidence is the more interesting in that it confirms the evidence drawn from stage performance in the case of the three Falstaff plays and *Othello*. Between them, the Falstaff plays muster ten known productions, besides innumerable references

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

to the characters in contemporary documents, while there are eight recorded performances of *Othello*, and extensive imitation of the play by Jacobean and Caroline dramatists.

The popularity of Shakespeare was not restricted to London or to the audience of the King's Men, who themselves had taken *Hamlet* to the University towns of Oxford and Cambridge in 1603.<sup>1</sup> Oxford had a performance of *Othello* in September 1610, while in the same year a troupe of country actors were giving from printed books performances of *King Lear* and *Pericles* at large houses.<sup>2</sup> But advantages not merely financial accrued from the performance of Shakespeare. One William Keeling, captain of a ship bound for the East Indies but becalmed off Sierra Leone,

envited Captain Hawkins to a ffishe dinner,  
and had Hamlet acted aboard me: which I  
permitt to keepe my people from idleness  
and unlawful games, or sleepe.

It was a remedy he had twice used in the previous year, for he records in his journal that his companions had acted *Hamlet* and *Richard II* on the 5th and 7th September, 1607, respectively.

<sup>1</sup> References for performances of Shakespeare are listed in the notes to the table, Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that English actors performed *The Jew of Venice* at Halle in 1611, while John Green's company acted *Romeo und Julietta*, *Julio Cesare*, *Hamlet a Prince in Dennemarck*, and *Lear King in Engelandt* at Dresden in 1626. There is further evidence of early performances in Germany of an *Othello*, a *Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night* and a 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. In Poland, John Green's troupe gave at least five 'Shakespeare' plays in 1607, and another in Warsaw on 11 November 1611, probably *The Taming of the Shrew*. The company returned in 1616 and 1618 with a repertoire expanded to include *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar*, and within four years they were followed by Aaron Asken's troupe with *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Though performances until about 1620 were in English, the originals were very mutilated and there is doubt as to the exact connection of some of them with Shakespeare. Nevertheless, it is striking that actors facing a language barrier felt Shakespearean material to be their best armament. See E. and H. Brennecke, *Shakespeare in Germany, 1590-1700* (Chicago, 1964), A. Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London and Berlin, 1865), and Josephine Calina, 'Shakespeare in Poland', *Polish Review*, vi (1946).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## SHAKESPEARE'S REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

But these evidences of Shakespeare's wide-flung popularity in his lifetime are not as impressive as the history of the Red Bull players after his death. For this obscure group, in attempting to establish itself after 1625, appears to have supplemented a meagre repertoire with the works of Shakespeare, drawn perhaps from the 1623 Folio. Other play-books might have been had, and other authors stolen. But the company seem to have thought that the financial reward from playing Shakespeare, even to the rabble which made up a Red Bull audience, outweighed the dangers of collision with the powerful King's Men. They, however, moved to defend their assets; and Henry Herbert, after being sweetened by a payment from the treasurer of the King's company, issued a prohibition, which he records thus:

(Received) from Mr Hemming, in their company's name, to forbid the playing of Shakespeare's plays, to the Red Bull Company, this 11 of April, 1627—£5. 0. 0.<sup>1</sup>

In his standard reference work on the period<sup>2</sup> Professor G. E. Bentley labours to square this document with his general thesis of the pre-eminent popularity of Fletcher on the stage. His evidence is drawn chiefly from surviving lists of plays given at Court, which show a heavy preponderance of works from the Beaumont and Fletcher canon. He is, in particular, impressed that some of these were as much as fifteen years old. But his arguments are open to an obvious objection, that Court taste is not necessarily public taste. Moreover, Massinger rewrote a number of Fletcher's plays, and many more which appear to be collaborations between the two may be later revisions by Massinger; so that it would perhaps be better to credit these repainted versions with the youth to which they aspired.<sup>3</sup>

Bentley thus explains the apparent contradiction of his contention afforded by the Red Bull episode: 'The publication of

1 *The Dramatic Records of Sir Henry Herbert*, ed. J. Q. Adams (New Haven, 1917), p. 64.

2 G. E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (5 vols., Oxford, 1941-56), *passim*.

3 See Cyrus Hoy, 'The Beaumont and Fletcher Canon', a series of papers in *Studies in Bibliography* (1956-62).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

the First Folio in 1623 not only advertised Shakespeare's plays, but it put into the hands of every purchaser the largest available collection of plays suitable for public performance.' That the players stole Shakespeare, must not, he argues, be taken to mean that they were laying claim to a share in the King's Men repertoire, for they borrowed no Fletcher, and 'Fletcher, for instance, was much more popular at the time and so would have been more tempting'.<sup>1</sup> But if Fletcher's plays were so much better received, it seems odd that the impecunious company at the Red Bull were prepared to pay about a pound for the Shakespeare Folio, when quartos of nine Beaumont and Fletcher plays might be had for sixpence apiece: among them *A King and No King* (reprinted 1625), *The Scornful Lady* (also reprinted 1625), *Philaster* and *The Maid's Tragedy* (both reprinted in 1622) and *Thierry and Theodoret* (1621). It is possible that they performed Shakespeare from quartos, as did the itinerant players of 1610, for the expense of a Folio could hardly be justified unless they were intending to perform all thirty-six plays contained in it. Eleven of Shakespeare's plays had appeared in quarto in the eight years before the incident, and if these were in fact preferred to the quarto plays of other men, it is even clearer evidence of Shakespeare's continuing favour with the public.

That Shakespeare's plays continued to be performed in the lean years before the final closing of the theatres is witnessed by James Shirley. His prologue to *The Sisters* (1642) reproaches the audience with their desertion; even those tried favourites, Shakespeare, Fletcher and Jonson, draw only a handful, and until there is an improvement he can promise no fresh play or living author. Perhaps the order in which he invokes his epitomes of excellence is significant. But even if Shakespeare is awarded pre-eminence merely because he was the first to die, it is important that he is still, with his two longer-lived contemporaries, a major stand-by of the King's Men:

I'll promise neither Play nor Poet live  
Till ye come back, think what ye do, you see  
What audience we have, what Company

<sup>1</sup> Bentley, p. 22 n. 2.



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[More information](#)

## SHAKESPEARE'S REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

„To Shakespear comes, whose mirth did once beguile  
 „Dull hours, and buskind, made even sorrow smile,  
 „So lovely were the wounds, that men would say  
 „They could endure the bleeding a whole day:  
 He has but few friends lately, think o' that  
 Hee'l come no more, and others have his fate.  
 „Fletcher the Muses darling, and choice love  
 „Of Phoebus, the delight of every Grove;  
 „Vpon whose head the Laurel grew, whose wit  
 „Was the Times wonder, and example yet,  
 'Tis within memory, Trees did not throng,  
 As once the story said to Orpheus song.  
 „Johnson, t'whose name, wise Art did bow, and Wit  
 „Is only justified by honouring it:  
 „To hear whose touch, how would the learned Quire  
 „With silence stoop? And when he took his Lyre,  
 „Apollo dropt his Lute, asham'd to see  
 „A Rival to the God of Harmonie.  
 You do forsake *him* too, we must deplore  
 This fate, for we do know it by our *door*. (ll. 16–38)

Fletcher and Jonson call out the language of panegyric; but the seal of Shakespeare's greatness was the reaction of his audience. With this backward glance at former giants a Caroline dramatist closes the history of his stage.

*The popularity of Shakespeare in print*

The relative fame of Shakespeare on the stage, as compared with Jonson and Fletcher, can through lack of evidence never be satisfactorily decided. But of Shakespeare's supreme popularity with the reading public, in spite of the players' reluctance to let the plays see print, there can be no doubt. The evidence is best illuminated by a comparison between publications of Shakespeare and those of his nearest rival, Jonson, set out in tabular form.

If, as Bentley<sup>1</sup> has said, Ben Jonson was more admired in

<sup>1</sup> G. E. Bentley, *Shakespeare and Jonson: their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* (2 vols., Chicago, 1945), *passim*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

## A table of play publication 1594-1642

| SHAKESPEARE                              |     |
|--|-----|
| Plays published singly, total number     | 21  |
| Editions of these plays, total number    | 73  |
| Approximate average of editions per play | 3.5 |
| Folio collections, number of editions    | 2   |
| JONSON                                   |     |
| Plays published singly                   | 13  |
| Editions of these plays, total number    | 20  |
| Approximate average of editions per play | 1.6 |
| Folio collections                        | 2   |

*Notes to the Table*

1 Among Shakespeare's plays are included *Pericles* (6 editions), *Two Noble Kinsmen* (1), *First Part of the Contention* (3), *True Tragedy* (3), and *A Shrew* (3). *The Troublesome Reign* (3) is excluded.

2 Among Jonson's plays are included *Eastward Ho* (3) and *The Case is Altered* (2). Fourteen masques by Jonson were printed in the period, none achieving more than one edition. These are excluded because they were not public drama, because there is no parallel activity on Shakespeare's part, and because the printings seem to have been made for Court performances and circulated privately. Excluded also is *Rollo, Duke of Normandy*, a collaboration in which Jonson had a minor share, and which was published twice in the period and attributed to Beaumont and Fletcher.

the period than his contemporary, he must explain why Shakespeare tops the sales sheet by a margin of fifty-three quarto editions. Of the size of these printings there is no evidence; probably they varied with the calculations of individual publishers.<sup>1</sup> But the quality and sales of the 1632 Shakespeare Folio caused even William Prynne to turn aside from his texts out of the Fathers and Councils of the Church, with which he was beating stage-players, and make almost the only contemporary reference in his thousand odd pages:

<sup>1</sup> Rules of the Stationers' Company in 1587 limited editions from any one setting of type to 1,250 or 1,500 copies, save in some special cases; in 1635 ordinary editions of 1,500 or 2,000 were allowed, and special editions of 3,500, 5,000 and even 6,000. Individual printers sometimes ignored such restrictive practices; but these figures are a guide to the likely maximum number of copies per edition. See W. W. Greg, *London Publishing Between 1550 and 1650* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 15-16.