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

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# THE SCHOOL OF SHAKESPEARE

*The Influence of Shakespeare on  
English Drama 1600-42*

BY

DAVID L. FROST

*Fellow of St John's College  
Cambridge*



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*For Norman Howlings*

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## Preface

*Enter a Beefeater*

*Beefeater.* *Perdition catch my soul but I do love thee.*

*Sneer.* Haven't I heard that line before?

*Puff.* No, I fancy not—Where pray?

*Dangle.* Yes, I think there is something like it in Othello.

*Puff.* Gad? now you put me in mind on't, I believe there is—but that's of no consequence—all that can be said is, that two people happened to hit on the same thought—And Shakespeare made use of it first, that's all.

(Sheridan, *The Critic*, ed. R. C. Rhodes, vol. II, p. 233)

If Puff was a rogue, the principle is, I think, a good one. It would be odd if Shakespeare in his portrayal of humanity did not occasionally coincide with other dramatists, particularly since he shared with his immediate contemporaries a common culture and the same literary tradition. In consequence, I have not added extensively to those parallels in plot, incident, characterisation, thought, image and word which have been discovered over the past three hundred years; to do so at this late stage would invite a justified suspicion. My debt to a large number of studies is recorded in the bibliography. On this level the originality of the work consists mainly in wholesale and silent rejection: so often Shakespeare has galvanised a stock character or incident, a commonplace idea or image, and later dramatists merely persist with the conventional. Only in the case of Massinger, where scholarly opinion seemed seriously mistaken, have I offered a detailed refutation of any supposed borrowing from Shakespeare. The arguments there adduced are generally applicable.

In attempting to relate the Jacobean and Caroline dramatists to Shakespeare through their borrowings, in trying to assess their reaction to his work and to discover what use they made of him, I have had only limited help. Very little has been done beyond the mere assembly of parallel passages. For example, the

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nature of Middleton's debt to Shakespeare has never before been defined, nor has any attempt been made to discuss the purpose and effect of the known borrowings of Ford. Most critical comparisons are my own, though for the judgements on authors which underlie them I am gratefully indebted to many critics. Since the bulk of material has necessitated selection, I have thought it right to discuss only borrowings from Shakespeare which seemed interesting, and in general only those in the more important authors. Dekker, Heywood, Shirley and a number of lesser dramatists all owe something to Shakespeare, but are mentioned only in passing, the studies listed in the bibliography containing fuller accounts of parallels and verbal echoes.

My eventual conclusions are reflected in the title of this book; but in labelling certain Jacobean and Caroline dramatists a 'School of Shakespeare' I would not be taken to mean that they are slavish followers. I believe there are good reasons to see Shakespeare as master to the age: Chapter 1 sets out some external evidence, and I argue later that the genres both of Revenge tragedy and of stage Romance were revived by Shakespeare. But only in the megalomaniac's dream does a teacher stamp out patterns of himself, and the Jacobeans show the wide variation of those who are pupils chiefly by temporal accident. Thomas Middleton is one of the few radically changed by Shakespeare; Webster and Ford, temperamentally opposed, absorb what they can use and discard the rest, while Massinger's limited capacity seems to have precluded him from any but occasional benefits. Others pervert good learning to bad ends, and some are content simply to mimic a few superficial mannerisms.

In general, the pervasive influence of Shakespeare explains much in the works of these dramatists that has hitherto been puzzling, and a comparison and contrast with him illuminates their individuality, their merits and faults. Throughout, I have argued for a more profound influence than can be demonstrated from parallel passages; but where these were convincing I have referred to them, as confirmatory evidence which ought to be



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collected in one place. For the sake of uniformity quotations from the plays have been modernised.

It remains to record individual kindnesses. Professor M. C. Bradbrook guided and advised throughout; Mr George Watson read the first draft and offered generous encouragement and detailed comment. At a later stage, the criticisms of Professor Terence Spencer and Dr Anne Richter were most helpful. Professor Harold Jenkins when very busy found time to reply at length to questions on *Hamlet*. Mr Buck and his assistants at St John's College Library were always helpful, not to say indulgent; while Mr John Crook was the legendary college tutor, himself sufficient justification of a system which confers unrivalled benefits. My greatest debt is to the teacher to whom this work is dedicated: a 'kindler of fire'.

D.L.F.

C A M B R I D G E

*January 1968*