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Edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander

Excerpt

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CATHERINE M. S. ALEXANDER

Introduction

Ordering works by the date of their composition is a common taxonomic principle, evident in the numerical classification of many art forms. The Shakespearean canon is frequently considered chronologically (that is to say, in the order in which it is assumed the plays were written although revision theories can thwart the ostensible simplicity of such an organising principle) and editions of the Complete Works sometimes arrange the plays in such a way. But writing about six plays from a large canon of work, gathered according to the probable date of their composition, would be an odd, indulgent and even pointless activity if the only reason for grouping them was the concluding place they occupied in the chronological output of their author. When does a last period begin? Why not the last eight (which in this case would accommodate *Coriolanus* and *Lear*) or the middle six? Grouping 'last' works together is usually predicated on two assumptions: that there is discernible difference from what has gone before, and in that difference is an identifiable progression or change – in style, subject matter and ideas, the use of language or the constituents of the work and, in the case of a dramatic piece, of stagecraft. It has been the fate of the Shakespeare's last plays to have their dates attached to specific biographical readings that identify 'meaning' or account for subject matter in ways that plays from other periods of the author's life have escaped. The persona that has been extrapolated from the art, covering the period between 1608 and 1612, has been characterised variously as religious and mystical, perhaps mentally unstable, probably cynical and disillusioned and with, at its emotional heart, an intense attachment to a daughter (it is never specified which one). It is such reading that is responsible for the erroneous belief that *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's final play and is a work of autobiography in which, disguised as Prospero, he bids farewell to the stage and his craft. The elision is evident as early as 1669 in the Prologue to Davenant's and Dryden's adaptation *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island*, where Prospero's power becomes 'Shakespear's Magick' and the 'Enchanted Isle' a synonym for the playwright's work.

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It was in response to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biographical readings that Lytton Strachey made his notorious comment on the author of the last plays (alluded to by Russ McDonald on p. 91), 'It is difficult to resist the conclusion that he was getting bored himself. Bored with people, bored with real life, bored with drama, bored, in fact, with everything except poetry and poetical dreams.'¹ Strachey had already pointed out the fallacy of suggesting that a character in a play can be 'a true index to the state of mind of the dramatist composing it' (p. 41) but played with the idea, and reached his different and not wholly serious conclusion after quoting from Dowden (whose arguments are considered by McMullan on pp. 6–7) and from Furnivall's description of Shakespeare's later years:

the gloom which weighed on Shakespeare (as on many men) in later life, when, though outwardly successful, the world seemed all against him, and his mind dwelt with sympathy on scenes of faithlessness of friends, treachery of relations and subjects, ingratitude of children, scorn of his kind; till at last, in his Stratford home again, peace came to him, Miranda and Perdita in their lovely freshness and charm greeted him, and he was laid by his quiet Avon side. (p. 42)

Biographical readings cast a long shadow: they were implicit in Daniel Mesguich's *La Tempête* for the Comédie-Française in 1998, where Prospero was indistinguishable in dress and manner from Shakespeare and the visions presented to Ferdinand and Miranda during the masque were characters and scenes from other Shakespeare plays. Biography is the starting point, too, for the opening essay in this volume, 'What is a "late play"', in which Gordon McMullan begins his provocative exploration of Shakespearian classification with Edward Said's work on lateness.

Part of the difficulty in resisting biographical readings lies in the adult nature of the last plays, not in the x-rated sense but in their insistent focus on the problems of maturity: parenting (particularly the relationship between fathers and daughters), succession, inheritance, ageing and loss. They are pervaded by a sense of experience (of life and playwriting) that, for many, seems beyond the capacity of a youthful dramatist, however gifted. So while this volume is not driven by biography it remains a useful starting point because of its implicit recognition of difference. While Strachey's assessment, 'bored', might seem seriously outmoded, risible even, it is clearly a response to the question that might follow McMullan's – 'why are the plays as they are?' – that serves to point to perceptions of dissimilarity. Identifying and explicating distinguishing features is part of the function of this present volume. The last plays are relocated in the period of their composition; in Jacobean performance culture (David Lindley); in the literary and dramatic conventions of the period (Charles Moseley) and in the contexts of politics, religion and travel

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(Karen Britland). Russ McDonald explores the distinctive features of the plays' language.

The use of 'last' rather than 'late' in the title of this *Companion* is determined, in part, by the connotations in the word of survival and endurance – Shakespeare's *lasting* plays – and one of the characteristics shared by these works, prompted perhaps by their difference and the experimental nature of their stagecraft, is their rich afterlives evident not only in criticism, textual and authorship studies but in the imaginative responses that they have generated on the stage and in new media. The presence in the plays of unexpected sounds and visual elements (deities, personifications, animals, statues, banquets, dance)² has inspired or licensed new work. From the Dryden/Davenant adaptation of *The Tempest* onwards the plays have attracted musical treatments: Carlo Barbieri's *Perdita* (1865), Max Bruch's *Hermione* (1872), Arthur Sullivan's incidental music for *Henry VIII* (1878), Arne Eggen's *Cymbeline* (1951), Michael Tippett's *Tempest*-derived *Knot Garden* (1970) and the rock musical *Marina Blue* (2002) up to Thomas Adès' *The Tempest* that premièred at Covent Garden in February 2004. The second half of this volume is devoted to the life of the plays in the 400 years after their composition. Undoubtedly it is *The Tempest* that has the highest reputation and most varied legacy (might this be because of biographical readings again?) and not only in music: its afterlife in art from Hogarth and Hayman onwards is probably the richest in the canon and it has spawned countless adaptations in new media. Its legacy is even evident in science: triggered perhaps by the sci-fi film derivative *Forbidden Planet* (1956) 'Prospero' was the name of the satellite launched into orbit in 1971 as Britain entered the space-race. Critically *The Tempest* is the play that has received the most attention of the group, particularly following the disintegration of the liberal humanist consensus, with theoretical readings that draw on analyses of race, gender and class/power leading to significant revisions in the reading of character and context. Prospero has been subject to the greatest reassessment with a shift of interpretation from a benign duke, god or magician to a malign manipulator, a change of emphasis that has created more sympathetic readings of Caliban – a victim of colonialism rather than a rapacious ingrate. It is Prospero's art, central to any reading of the play, that is the impetus for Virginia Mason Vaughan's essay on the afterlife of *The Tempest* as she focuses on the literary appropriations that are responses to those elements of the play that explore the role of art in human consciousness. The other essays are obliged, in part, to write about an afterlife that is less consistent and sustained: reception is patchy and responses have sometimes been hostile and all the authors are required to acknowledge the poor or problematic reception of their plays at some point. Patricia Tatspaugh focuses on the performance

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of *The Winter's Tale* and the reclamation of the play – on stage and page – over the last fifty years; Catherine Alexander considers the enduring effect of Johnsonian criticism and the strategies employed to make *Cymbeline* playable; Eugene Giddens writes of the checkered stage and critical history of *Pericles*; Suzanne Gossett explores the problems of co-authorship, tone and genre before considering the recent reclamation of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*.

This volume reflects the recent growth of interest in the last plays, singly and as a group, but is not simply a reaction to trends in criticism, textual studies and performance. It recognises that there are gaps in accessible scholarship, that the Jacobean age is less well known than the Elizabethan period, that co-authored plays are as worthy of study as single-authored works, and that the 'afterlife' of these extraordinary creations – on page, stage or beyond – is an important area of scholarship. In the last scene of *Cymbeline* the king, ignorant of the identities of Belarius, Guiderius and Arviragus, rewards their valiant efforts in the battle against the Romans:

Arise my knights o'th'battle. I create you
Companions to our person, and will fit you
With dignities becoming your estate. (5.4.20–22)

The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays makes no claim for dignity (which is hardly a quality of the eclectic plays themselves) but it does aim to 'fit' the reader with an enjoyable, challenging and high quality encounter with these extraordinary creations.

NOTES

1. Lytton Strachey, *Books and Characters: French and English* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928), p. 52.
2. For the visual culture of the plays see Frederick Kiefer's *Shakespeare's Visual Theatre: Staging the Personified Characters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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I

GORDON McMULLAN

What is a 'late play'?

I

At the end of his life, Edward Said, one of the most influential cultural critics of the later twentieth century, wrote, appropriately enough, about last works. *On Late Style*, which was published posthumously, rejects the presumption that old age equals creative decline, endorsing instead the critical counter-argument that, for certain major writers, artists and composers, the last few years of life, far from tracing a gradual and irreversible process of decay, in fact mark a period of renascent creativity, a coherent, if brief, burst of artistic energy embodying a return to the engagements of the artist's youth which functions at the same time as a prophecy of subsequent developments in his chosen form.¹ In the late stylists Said admired – Strauss, Lampedusa, Beethoven – lateness manifests itself as a raging against the dying of the light, a resistance or obtuseness quite different from the resigned, serene abstraction more usually associated with the art of old age. For Said, the 'prerogative of late style' is to 'render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them', and he argues that

[w]hat holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile'.²

'[L]ate-style Beethoven', Said argues, citing his single most admired late stylist, is music in 'a somewhat unattractive, not to say repellent, idiom'; it 'is not, as one might expect, all about reconciliation and a kind of restful summing-up of a long, productive career' – which is at best a second-tier kind of lateness, one that can be found, according to Said, 'in Shakespeare's late romances like *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, or in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, where, to borrow from another context, ripeness is all'.³ Shakespeare, for Said, is thus a key instance of the version of late style he

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disliked – work manifesting a sense of calm resignation or resolution in old age and lacking the edge, the jaggedness, the difficulty that, for him, marks true lateness.

In making Shakespeare his primary exemplar of the serene form of late style, Said (consciously or not) invokes the work of the late nineteenth-century critic Edward Dowden, who, while not precisely the first to ascribe a late phase to Shakespeare, was certainly the most influential.⁴ Dowden divided the life into four sections, mapped as apprenticeship ('In the workshop'), young manhood ('In the world'), mature crisis ('Out of the depths') and resolution in old age ('On the heights'). This final phase, for Dowden, writing in 1875, is characterised by

a certain abandonment of the common joy of the world, a certain remoteness from the usual pleasures and sadnesses of life, and at the same time, all the more, a tender bending over those who are like children still absorbed in their individual joys and sorrows.⁵

Thus, '[t]he spirit of these last plays is that of serenity which results from fortitude, and the recognition of human frailty; all of them express a deep sense of the need of repentance and the duty of forgiveness' (Dowden, p. 415). In the wake of the crisis which yielded unremittingly grim mid-period tragedies such as *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*, it seems, Shakespeare discovered a new lightness of heart which 'demanded not a tragic issue' but rather 'an issue into joy and peace': the 'dissonance' characteristic of the tragedies could now 'be resolved into a harmony, clear and rapturous, or solemn and profound, a reconciliation' (Dowden, p. 406). This steadily became the controlling understanding of Shakespeare's late work: a small subset of plays that post-date the major tragedies, forming a chronologically, generically and stylistically distinct group characterised by the sensibility of an old man reaching the end of an extraordinary career and ready to drown his art. 'The transition from these plays [i.e. the later tragedies] to Shakspeare's last plays', wrote Dowden, 'is most remarkable. From the tragic passion which reached its climax in *Timon of Athens*, we suddenly pass to beauty and serenity'.⁶ Dowden's influence was sustained well into the twentieth century: Robert Sharpe, for instance, writing in 1959, argued that the romances are Shakespeare's 'fourth period, of a serenity and tolerance allowing little in the way of bitter intensity, but much in that of a cosmic, almost godlike irony such as Prospero's', adding that 'Shakespeare has now made his peace with God and man'.⁷ And it is clear also in recent criticism that still defines the plays as 'romances' and assumes their 'serenity': Joe Nutt, for example, writing in 2002, suggests that '[i]f the late plays are united in a romantic concern to evoke pleasure, that pleasure appears yet again to be inescapably

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rooted in what are perceived as the superior joys of family life, forgiveness and harmony' (and, of course, the same assumptions govern Said's reading of late Shakespeare).⁸ Dowden's is, in other words, an understanding of the late plays that held sway for an astonishingly long time and that continues, to a perhaps surprising degree, to exercise a low-key influence on Shakespearean scholarship.⁹

But what are the plays in question? Which plays constitute 'late Shakespeare'? The plays that Said lists are those that Dowden groups as 'romances', the final serene, reconciliatory group:

Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest.

Critics in Dowden's wake – and especially in the 1930s and 1940s, the heyday of late-play criticism – typically addressed these three plays in this exact order, seeing *Cymbeline* as an experiment in a new style, if perhaps a not very successful one; thinking of *The Winter's Tale* as more of a success, if still a little flawed; and treating *The Tempest* as the finished product, the retirement gesture *par excellence*, after which the ageing playwright could return to the town of his birth to live the remainder of his days in peace.¹⁰ All three plays were written at roughly the same time and they all share generic similarities which are strong even as they are hard to pin down precisely: 'romance' or 'tragicomedy' or the hybrid 'romantic tragicomedy', plays in which time goes by, voyages are undertaken, storms and human sinfulness separate friends, lovers and families, yet eventually, at the last, usually over a period of a decade-and-a-half (time, that is, for daughters to grow to marriageable age), reconciliations are effected, families reconstructed and the generational future assured. Equally, they share certain stylistic features – ellipsis, asyndeton, convoluted syntax, heavy dependence on parenthesis and repetition – that Russ McDonald has recently delineated in impressive detail in *Shakespeare's Late Style*.¹¹ In all of this, it seems clear that the understanding offered in the 1930s and later by the German philosopher and critic Theodor W. Adorno of the late work of great artists as a form of *catastrophe* – that is, as discontinuity, as an ending that results from sudden change, from a distinct and marked caesura or division in the creative life – applies well to late Shakespeare. After the tragedies, in or around 1608, it seems, he shifted gear, producing three plays that share certain key characteristics and are thus unified chronologically, generically and stylistically.

Many critics, however, have chosen to add a fourth play to the mix (Dowden did so himself in his later Shakespeare 'Primer'), one which pre-dates the originary trio, producing a slightly modified group:

*Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest.*¹²

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Pericles is so similar generically to the other three plays, they argue – it is a play about a father and his daughter, involving chivalric motifs, storms and shipwrecks, wide geographical wanderings and powerful emotional wrenches, and it concludes with recognition and reconciliation – that it must be included as the first experiment in the late-play form, even though its oddly archaic language and the sheer messiness of the text – we know *Pericles* not from the First Folio, but from a quarto of 1609 (two quartos of the play were published in 1609, as it happens, plus one in 1611 and another in 1619) which is fragmentary and error-strewn – mean that critics find it relatively hard to warm to, despite the evidence of its apparent popularity when first performed (as attested by those multiple early editions) and of some magnificent and deeply moving productions in recent years.¹³ Still, for these critics, generic similarities outweigh textual uncertainties, making *Pericles* inescapably a ‘late play’: ‘The last four plays of William Shakespeare,’ announces Robert M. Adams, ‘form a distinct group, similar to one another in several respects, different from the other plays in several respects’ (Adams, p. 3).

Certain issues arise, however, with the incorporation of *Pericles* into the late-play group, one of which is that the play spoils a possible material explanation for the change in style apparent in the late work. Critics, beginning to resist the dominance of Dowden’s purely (and fictionally) biographical reading of these plays, suggested that it is not so much a change of mood in the playwright that should be held responsible for the late-play caesura but the occupation by the King’s Men of a second playhouse, the Blackfriars, out of use for several years due to the objections of local residents but brought back into service in the second half of 1608 (with financing from a group of investors that included Shakespeare).¹⁴ This indoor theatre offered new possibilities for staging – including mechanisms in the roof for flying scenes (Ariel, say, in *The Tempest* or Jupiter descending on his eagle in *Cymbeline*) and the potential for lighting effects offered by an indoor playhouse illuminated not by daylight, as at the Globe, but with candles, and these factors, along with its smaller size and the different nature of the music required for such a space, perhaps account for the shift in tone. The problem created by the incorporation of *Pericles* into the late-play group, however, is that it cannot but pre-date the occupation of the Blackfriars by the company by at least several months and it thereby spoils the story of a clear-cut stop-and-begin-again for Shakespeare the playwright. Moreover, it introduces a further problem, because *Pericles* is a collaboration, a joint venture by Shakespeare and an obscure writer called George Wilkins, and so, critics sense, it can only be viewed partially or fragmentarily at best as late writing. After all, if the key definition of late work is that it is the product of an artist in old age, what can

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be done with work which is created by more than one artist, only one of whom is in the last phase of his life?

These awkwardnesses aside, critics could still argue that they had established a coherent group of four plays with a clear dynamic building up to the climax of the life's work in *The Tempest*. This is an argument still made in print: Nutt, for instance, baldly states that

[a] glance at any list of Shakespeare's plays covering the end of his theatrical career from 1589 to 1612 will show the four plays ... *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, huddled together at the end, perhaps with *Henry VIII* added on as the very last play. (Nutt, p. 1)

The problem with this is that, as the 'perhaps' grudgingly acknowledges, *The Tempest* is not the last play that Shakespeare wrote. There are no fewer than three plays – *Cardenio*, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – which unavoidably post-date *The Tempest* and which therefore need to be added in some way to the late-play grouping, which would begin to look like this:

Pericles, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, *Cardenio*,
Henry VIII, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

This extended list of course presents serious problems for the maintenance of the neatly delimited group with which we began, not least because, like *Pericles*, the additional plays are collaborative, not with the obscure Wilkins this time but with John Fletcher, newly famous at the time for his collaborations with Francis Beaumont – histrionic, almost operatic plays which toy wilfully with convention in order to establish a new English form of tragicomedy – and destined before long to inherit from Shakespeare the role of principal playwright for the King's Men. *Cardenio* we know of only because of mentions in the records and its possible partial survival in the form of *Double Falsehood*, a play claimed by its eighteenth-century 'reviser', Lewis Theobald, to be an adaptation of Shakespeare's original.¹⁵ But *Henry VIII* is present in the First Folio, the last in the group of plays depicting the lives of English kings, and although *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, like *Pericles*, does not feature in the Folio, there is a 1634 quarto of the play with a clear title-page ascription to Shakespeare and Fletcher.

Critics remain, as Suzanne Gossett points out, highly chary of these plays, since they spoil the serene-late-play story so very thoroughly – especially the *Kinsmen*, a dark, tense reworking of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* by way of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that, in any subjectivist reading (any reading, that is, which presumes that a given work of art reflects that artist's state of mind at the time of composition), offers us an ageing Shakespeare quite different from the image of the contented retiree amid the green fields of

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Stratford. Moreover, these plays form what appears, in effect, to be a further stylistic caesura, disrupting the clear division between the late work and what went before. For Russ McDonald, Shakespeare's style in these post-*Tempest* plays is still, like it is in the earlier 'late plays', 'elliptical, roundabout, crowded, and extravagant, but the sense of *possibility* no longer seems to obtain' (McDonald, p. 254). In other words, there is a noticeable further shift of tone after *The Tempest*, a move away from reconciliation to something distinctly bleaker, offering a group of 'late late' or (as Gossett calls them) 'last last' plays and thereby undermining the 'final' status of the group of three (or four) with which we began. Shakespeare 'seems', McDonald suggests, 'to be changing his mind again' (McDonald, p. 254). And in any case, of course, as with *Pericles*, more than one 'mind' is in play here: the plays' status as collaborations between Shakespeare and Fletcher again presents the problem of the co-written play which is late for one of its authors and early for the other.

And this is by no means all. The most current Shakespearean chronology in circulation at the time of writing is that to be found in the second edition of the Oxford *Complete Works*, published in 2005.¹⁶ It looks like this (I have included the editors' proposed dates):

All's Well That Ends Well (1606–7), *Pericles* (1607–8), *Coriolanus* (1608),
The Winter's Tale (1609–10), *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1610),
Cymbeline (1610–11), *The Tempest* (1610–11), *(Cardenio)* (1612–13),
Henry VIII (All Is True) (1613), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613)

The editors move *All's Well That Ends Well*, traditionally lumped a little earlier with the other inappropriately named 'problem plays', *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, into close and generically telling proximity to *Pericles* (with this simple, if undefended, chronological change, the romance elements in the *All's Well* plot take on entirely new significance), suggesting an easing-into the late-play genre, not the abrupt caesura of critical tradition ('Suddenly in 1608 there was a change,' announced Kenneth Muir, but it doesn't seem to be true).¹⁷ The Oxford editors had, in fact, already, in their first edition, made the quietly bold move of reversing the order of *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, thereby in part undermining the 'experimental' thesis which finds a convenient 'natural' order for the four 'romances'; and they had also already disrupted the late-play sequence by locating two tragedies – *Coriolanus*, a play in which it is effectively impossible to find traces of romance, and folio *King Lear* – both firmly inside the chronological bounds of the last work. We have come a long way, in other words, from Said's group of three clear-cut, singly-authored, generically distinct, serene late romances. Genre becomes a far less obvious way than it at first seemed to differentiate