

## 1 Introduction

The order in which Shakespeare wrote his plays – which work he wrote first, which last and how his technical and imaginative skills developed over time – has long been a subject of intense interest. But few clues survive as to what that sequence was. Only in the eighteenth century, over 150 years after Shakespeare had died, did Edmond Malone (1741–1812) come up with a way of collecting and combining external and internal information about the plays to create a date order (or ‘chronology’) for Shakespeare’s texts. We have been using Malone’s chronological methodology, and often his results, ever since.

This Element tells two interconnected stories. One is about Malone’s brilliant creation of a Shakespeare chronology, and his three attempts – published in 1778, 1790 and 1821 – to settle the order of Shakespeare’s plays. The other is about chronology now, as reflected in single volumes and complete works, and how it descends, methodologically, from Malone. In revealing how current Shakespeare editions still adopt and adapt Malone’s impressive, fallible choices, it suggests that Malone’s problems, irrespective of the analytical tools used or order proposed, remain ours: we are asking a question that does not admit of a single answer – when was a play *written*? – and often placing in one sequence plays dated by very different kinds of evidence, external and internal, though the surviving texts may have other date ranges entirely.

This Element is for anyone wondering when plays were written (and what that question means); anyone interested in the extraordinary story that brought Shakespeare’s chronology into being; and anyone who finds liberating the notion of chronological instability.

It was in 1776 that Edmond Malone, an Irish lawyer keen to become a literary scholar, went to visit the famous Shakespeare editor George Steevens. Malone had produced notes and a brief biography for the forthcoming *Poems and Plays* of Oliver Goldsmith (published in 1777); he hoped to be asked to do something similar for the Shakespeare edition that Steevens was preparing. Steevens did indeed invite Malone to help him, presumably expecting a contribution of the ‘Goldsmith’ variety: a handful of useful scholarly notes, together with a ‘safe’ and earnest biography.

But though Malone was to provide copious notes to be added into the Johnson–Steevens Shakespeare (so-called as Steevens’ edition was an update of Samuel Johnson’s), he was unable to find enough new material to make up a Shakespeare biography, noting that ‘very few particulars have been recovered, respecting [Shakespeare’s] private life, or literary history’.<sup>1</sup> Hungry for a research project that would make a genuine editorial contribution, Malone realised that there was evidence yet to be gathered and catalogued about the performance and publication of Shakespeare’s plays. Collecting and analysing such information would enable him to establish a Shakespeare chronology which would show when and how Shakespeare’s ‘genius’ (a very eighteenth-century concept) emerged and flourished. The result would be a biography, but of Shakespeare’s mind, rather than his life. This would have the advantage, too, of answering the question that had haunted so many editors – how did Shakespeare turn into *Shakespeare*: ‘what was the first Essay of a Fancy like *Shakespear*’s?’ asked Nicholas Rowe in 1709; ‘when [was] every piece . . . composed, and [was it] writ for the Town or the Court’, wondered Alexander Pope in 1725; by what ‘gradations of improvement’, enquired Samuel Johnson in 1765, did Shakespeare proceed?<sup>2</sup> So closely linked was *An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written* to biography itself that when Malone’s executor, James Boswell the Younger, published the final, posthumous, version of the chronology in 1821, he made it section XV of Malone’s lifelong and never-to-be finished research project, his *Life of Shakespeare*.

Malone did not cease his work on the chronology after he published *An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written* (in volume one of the Johnson–Steevens ten-volume *Plays of William Shakespeare* of 1778). Concerned above all with accuracy, and refreshingly ready to confront the notion that his own conclusions might

<sup>1</sup> Edmond Malone, *An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written* in William Shakespeare, *The Plays*, ed. Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, 10 vols (1778), 1: 270. [Hereafter *Attempt* (1778)].

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Works*, ed. Nicholas Rowe, 6 vols (1709), 1: vi; William Shakespeare, *The Works*, ed. Alexander Pope, 6 vols (1725), 1: vii; William Shakespeare, *The Plays*, ed. Samuel Johnson, 8 vols (1765), 1: xxxix.

be wrong, Malone reworked his *Attempt* to reflect his new thoughts and later discoveries; he was partway through the third version of it when he died. The three versions of 1778, 1790 and (posthumously) 1821 indicate that establishing a Shakespeare chronology ultimately bracketed and defined everything else that Malone achieved in Shakespeare scholarship.

That there are three different versions of *Attempt* also reveals the careful way Malone approached and reapproached his subject: he never thought his work complete and did not view any of his chronologies as fixed. Indeed, in all three of his editions, he is careful to point out that his conclusions are contingent, dependent on the facts he has to hand, and that he is ready to ‘transfer . . . credit’ if a scholar with a ‘superior degree of antiquarian sagacity’ is able to update and improve his work.<sup>3</sup> And he was true to his word: he accepted one of Edward Capell’s ideas – that ‘the sweat’ in *Measure for Measure* might refer to the 1603 outbreak of plague – though he added that ‘it is the only [observation . . .] which in the smallest degree could throw any light on the present inquiry into the date of our author’s plays’.<sup>4</sup> Here, as he grudgingly takes on a Capell notion, he shows how his ultimate priority is to let what he sees as ‘evidence’ triumph.

As well as gathering and ordering material for Shakespeare’s chronology, Malone also invented a way of writing about it. Shakespeare scholarship was, at the time, fractious, ardent, opinionated and often mischievous. For instance, the editor with whom Malone was so impatient to work, George Steevens, had attributed all explanatory notes about Shakespeare’s bawdy to a couple of vicars who annoyed him: his Hampstead neighbour, the Reverend Richard Amner, and a divine with whom he had had a quarrel, the Reverend John Collins.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Malone had no impish side: he introduced into Shakespeare scholarship his rigorous and lawyerly

<sup>3</sup> *Attempt* (1778), 346.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Capell, ‘The Plays’ Order and Date’ in *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare*, 3 vols (1779–80), 2: 34; *Attempt*, in William Shakespeare, *The Plays and Poems*, ed. Edmond Malone, 10 vols (1790), 1: 346. [Hereafter *Attempt* (1790)].

<sup>5</sup> See Marcus Walsh, ‘George Steevens and the 1778 Variorum: a Hermeneutics and a Social Economy of Annotation’, in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Sabor and Paul Yachnin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 71–83.

pedantry. That is obvious even in his book's awkward and overlong title, *An Attempt to Ascertain . . . 'Attempt'* ('for so he has modestly styled it', notes a reviewer in 1783) frankly acknowledges that the work to come is less than a 'discovery' or a 'proof'; it is a first (and second, and third) try at categorising a topic 'on which conviction cannot at this day be obtained'.<sup>6</sup>

At around the same time that Malone was diligently gathering and organising facts for his chronology, English Romanticism was staking impassioned claims for Shakespeare's boundless imagination. Malone's thorough, detailed and documentary-rich analyses infuriated poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose diary mockingly dubs him 'the Genitive Plural of a Greek Adjective'. ('Malon' means 'more'; the genitive plural never changes: Malone's copious work was unchangingly tedious.) 'Malone', continued Coleridge, was

that eternal Bricker-up of Shakspeare — Registers, Memorandum Books, and Bill, Jack, and Harry, Tom, Walter, & Gregory, Charles, Dick, and Jim &c &c lived at that time, but that nothing more is known of them — but of the importance when half a dozen Players' Wills can be made to stretch thro' half a hundred or more of pages — tho' not one word in them that by any force can be made to illustrate either the times or life or writings of Shakspeare, or indeed of any time.<sup>7</sup>

What is interesting, though, is that Coleridge was not against the idea of a Shakespeare chronology. On the contrary, he wanted an order for Shakespeare's plays for the same reason that Malone did: he yearned for insights into his hero's literary development. He did, however, have his own ideas about how that development might be traced. Coleridge's rival

<sup>6</sup> Anon, 'Capell's Notes and Various Readings of Shakespeare', *The Critical Review*, 56 ed. Tobias Smollett (1783), 401–9 (405); *Attempt* (1778), 346; repeated in 1790 and 1821.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols in 10 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 3: 3277.

chronology – he was ultimately to come up with four of them – witheringly rejected Malone’s ‘data’ in favour of what he called ‘internal evidence’, but which was in fact his opinion.<sup>8</sup> Dividing Shakespeare’s work into five ‘aeras’ (eras), he explained how the first, and earliest, contained Shakespeare’s experiments with different forms of drama, and consisted of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Pericles*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>9</sup> For him, then, it was Shakespeare’s imagined experiments with dramatic form that was the bedrock for the writing to follow. The Malone–Coleridge division between fact and imagination typified, and helped secure, the rift between scholarly Shakespearean documentation and passionate interpretation that has continued to this day. But it is notable that Coleridge, as much as Malone, needed a chronology to shape his Shakespeare thoughts, and intriguing that he constructed his very different sequence from what he also understood to be internal evidence. The extent to which discovering and analysing internal evidence can be an act of interpretation is an issue that this Element will explore in some detail.

It was, however, Malone’s *Attempt* that was to set the standard for scholarly chronology. Reviewers of the period recognised the impressive and field-defining nature of Malone’s research, while also hinting at its tedious quality. So *The Monthly Review* paid homage to Malone’s ‘elaborate enquiry’, while *The Critical Review* found ‘This “Attempt” . . . extremely dry, and full of black-letter erudition’.<sup>10</sup> James Boswell the Younger, who spent years completing the twenty-one-volume posthumous *Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* for Malone, extolled his predecessor’s ‘accurate knowledge’, ‘unwearied research’ and ‘inflexible adherence to truth’,

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespeare Criticism: Marginalia, Lectures, and other Notes from Coleridge’s Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1930), 1: 209.

<sup>9</sup> Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, 2: 213.

<sup>10</sup> Anon, ‘The Plays of William Shakspeare’, *Monthly Review*, 62 (1780), 12–26 (19); Anon, ‘The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare’, *The Critical Review* 3 ed. Tobias Smollett (1791), 361–9 (364).

while acknowledging that the scholar did not have ‘the pointed vivacity of Mr Steevens’s manner’, and could come across as ‘too minute and circumstantial in collateral details’.<sup>11</sup> Malone cultivated ‘the figure of the magisterial historian in possession of superior knowledge’, observes Richard W. Schoch; it was, and indeed is, the very dullness of Malone’s writing, the heftiness of its factual load, that has often made his work and methods seem unimpeachable.<sup>12</sup> Malone’s authoritative way of writing became the way in which chronology and theatre history (two fields he effectively invented) were written: even now, the ‘factual’ bits of early modern scholarship still sometimes adopt the superior, hectoring tone of a leading barrister that descends from Malone.

Given that Malone created the scholarly subfield of Shakespeare’s chronology, found the documents for it, invented the way in which they are discussed and codified a method for ordering plays that we still broadly use, it is hardly surprising that current chronologies follow, roughly, his sequence. Yet *Attempt* is often unfairly represented in modern scholarship. Malone’s least-grounded surmises and most surprising play dates, generally taken from the first version of *Attempt*, are sometimes supplied as though they represent his only thoughts on the subject: few who write about Malone’s *Attempt* acknowledge how carefully he reworked it throughout his life, how impressively ready he was to publish retractions of his earlier opinions and how bound we still are to his conclusions.

The dates that Malone came up with for his first, second and third *Attempt* are shown in Table 1 so that his surprising and less surprising decisions, as well as his changes of mind, can be seen. The table is shown against the most recent complete works to have come out, the revised Bate and Rasmussen *RSC Shakespeare* (2022) – so that the three *Attempts* can be compared to an example of recent if unsystematic current thinking (important chronologies by Wiggins with Richardson, and Taylor and

<sup>11</sup> James Boswell, *A Biographical Memoir of the Late Edmond Malone, Esq* (London: Nichols, Son, and Bentley, 1813), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Richard W. Schoch, ‘Edmond Malone and the Search for Theatrical Intelligence’, in *Writing the History of the British Stage, 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 290.

Table 1 Malone’s dates per *Attempt*; *RSC Complete Works* dates

| Play                             | Malone 1 1778 | Malone 2 1790 | Malone 3 1821 | RSC  |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------|
| <i>Shrew</i>                     | 1606          | 1594          | 1596          | 1589 |
| <i>2 Henry VI</i> (contention)   | 1592*         | 1591*         | 1591*         | 1592 |
| <i>3 Henry VI</i> (true tragedy) | 1592*         | 1591*         | 1591*         | 1592 |
| <i>Two Gentlemen</i>             | 1593          | 1595          | 1591*         | 1592 |
| <i>Titus</i>                     | 1589*         |               |               | 1592 |
| <i>1 Henry VI</i>                | 1591*         | 1589          | 1589          | 1592 |
| <i>Richard III</i>               | 1597          | 1597          | 1593*         | 1592 |
| <i>Errors</i>                    | 1596          | 1593*         | 1592*         | 1592 |
| <i>LLL</i>                       | 1591          | 1594*         | 1594*         | 1592 |
| <i>Dream</i>                     | 1595*         | 1592          | 1594*         | 1592 |
| <i>Romeo</i>                     | 1595*         | 1595*         | 1596*         | 1592 |
| <i>Richard II</i>                | 1597*         | 1597*         | 1593*         | 1592 |
| <i>John</i>                      | 1596*         | 1596*         | 1596*         | 1592 |

Table 1 (cont.)

| Play                  | Malone 1 1778 | Malone 2 1790 | Malone 3 1821 | RS  |
|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----|
| <i>Merchant</i>       | 1598*         | 1598*         | 1594*         | 159 |
| <i>1 Henry IV</i>     | 1597*         | 1597*         | 1597*         | 159 |
| <i>2 Henry IV</i>     | 1598*         | 1598*         | 1598*         | 159 |
| <i>Much Ado</i>       | 1600*         | 1600*         | 1600*         | 159 |
| <i>Henry V</i>        | 1599*         | 1599*         | 1599*         | 159 |
| <i>As You Like It</i> | 1600*         | 1600*         | 1599*         | 159 |
| <i>Caesar</i>         | 1607          | 1607          | 1607          | 159 |
| <i>Hamlet</i>         | 1596          | 1596          | 1600*         | 160 |
| <i>Merry Wives</i>    | 1601*         | 1601*         | 1601*         | 160 |
| <i>Twelfth Night</i>  | 1614          | 1614          | 1607          | 160 |
| <i>Troilus</i>        | 1602*         | 1602*         | 1602*         | 160 |
| <i>Othello</i>        | 1611          | 1611          | 1604*         | 160 |
| <i>Measure</i>        | 1603*         | 1603*         | 1603*         | 160 |
| <i>All's Well</i>     | 1598          | 1598          | 1606*         | 160 |
| <i>Timon</i>          | 1610          | 1609          | 1610          | 160 |
| <i>Lear</i>           | 1605*         | 1605*         | 1605*         | 160 |

|                      |       |       |                  |       |
|----------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|
| <i>Macbeth</i>       | 1606* | 1606* | 1606*            | 1606* |
| <i>Antony</i>        | 1608* | 1608* | 1608*            | 1608* |
| <i>Coriolanus</i>    | 1609* | 1609* | 1610*            | 1610* |
| <i>Pericles</i>      | 1592  |       |                  | 1609* |
| <i>Cymbeline</i>     | 1604  | 1605  | 1609*            | 1610* |
| <i>Winter's Tale</i> | 1594  | 1604  | 1611*            | 1611* |
| <i>Tempest</i>       | 1612* | 1612* | 1611*            | 1611* |
| <i>Henry VIII</i>    | 1601  | 1601  | 1603 (rev 1612*) | 1612* |

Loughnane, which supply date ranges rather than single dates, will be addressed later in this Element).<sup>13</sup> An asterisk demarcates a Malone date that is within two years of the RSC's; as shown, by the final *Attempt* that is thirty-one of thirty-six plays. (NB: As Malone believed that *Titus Andronicus* and *Pericles* were not fully Shakespearean, he left them out of his second and third versions of *Attempt*; *Two Noble Kinsmen* never featured on any of his lists.)

The sections that follow explore Malone's thoughts and rethoughts as he came up with his first *Attempt* for the Johnson–Steevens *Plays of William Shakspeare* (1778); his second, revised, *Attempt*, for the prolegomena to his own edition of the *Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare* (1790); and his third, semi-revised *Attempt* (he was hampered by failing eyesight and died before he completed his revision) for his posthumous edition of the *Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare*, completed by James Boswell the Younger (1821). Looking at the dilemmas Malone faced in marrying external and internal evidence, and in creating a single chronology from fusing the two, this study argues that to understand Malone's three versions of *Attempt* is to understand why and how he and, as a consequence, we have been asking an unanswerable question and drawing conflicting conclusions ever since.

Section 2 is on the way Malone sourced and catalogued information from publication and court records, often for the first time. It details how remarkable his gathering and pooling of material was, but reveals, too, the sometimes subjective way in which he analysed it. The section also touches on the fundamental problem with external evidence, namely, that it supplies a date by which a version of the work already exists, rather than what Malone wanted to know: when it was written.

Section 3 looks at what Malone did to date plays for which external information was not available: gather information from within texts, such as literary cross references, and potentially datable words, objects, people and events. Showing how Malone had to force, and sometimes invent, dates for lexical or historical habits, it calls attention to the assumptions that Malone made to shore up his 'discoveries', in particular, that Shakespeare's fictions

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (2nd ed., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 2456–60.