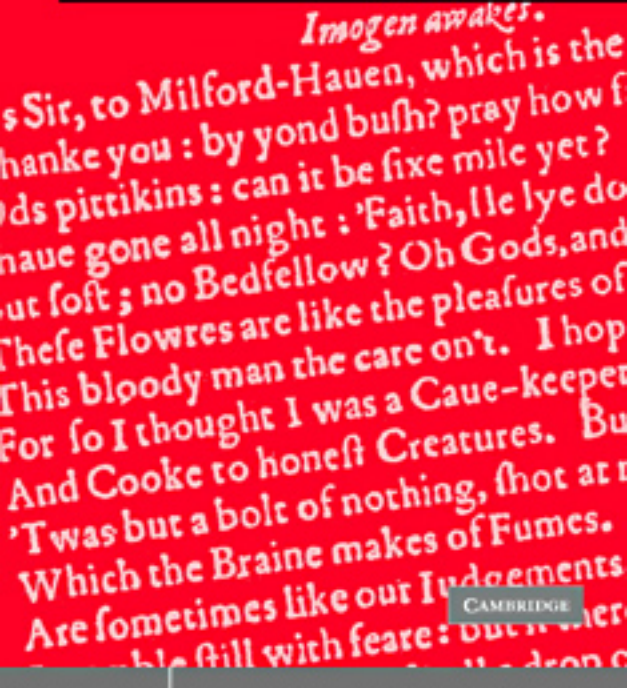
Russ McDonald

Shakespeare's Late Style



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SHAKESPEARE'S LATE STYLE

When Shakespeare gave up tragedy around 1607 and turned to the new form we call romance or tragicomedy, he created a distinctive poetic idiom that has often bewildered audiences and readers. The plays of this period – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and Shakespeare's contributions to the collaborative *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – exhibit a challenging verse style: verbally condensed, metrically and syntactically sophisticated, both conversational and highly wrought. In *Shakespeare's Late Style*, McDonald anatomizes the components of this late style, illustrating in a series of topically organized chapters the contribution of such features as ellipsis, syntax, grammatical suspension, and multiple forms of repetition. Resisting the sentimentality that frequently attends discussion of an artist's "late" period, *Shakespeare's Late Style* shows how the poetry of the last plays reveals their creator's ambivalent attitude toward art, language, men and women, the theatre, and his own professional career.

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There has been no subject less accurately investigated than that of English prosody. And however some may imagine it a trivial affair, and an enquiry about little things; there are others we trust to whom it will appear, that no grand and heroic achievement was ever performed by him that neglected little things.

Anonymous review (1784) of Edward Capell's *Notes and Various Readings, The English Review*, May 1784

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Introduction

"In all of Shakespeare's development," write C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, "there is no change in dramatic style so striking as that between the final tragedies and the late romances."[1] Barber and Wheeler use the term "dramatic style" loosely, referring chiefly to the theatrical sub-genre and the point of view that selects and informs it. But the sentence is true in a strict sense as well, when "style" is taken to mean syntax, meter, diction, repetition, figurative language, and other such verbal and poetic properties. Around 1607, Shakespeare was drawn to a new kind of story and, at the same time, gave his characters a new kind of poetry to speak. At the beginning of this phase, having completed *Macbeth* and begun and perhaps finished *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra* (or perhaps both), he contributed to the completion of *Pericles*, collaborating with George Wilkins or possibly finishing a play that Wilkins had begun; at the end of this phase, from about 1611 to 1613, he collaborated with John Fletcher on three plays, *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Cardenio*; between 1608 and 1611 he wrote three unaided plays, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Modern scholarship cannot decide what to call these seven plays, indeed can scarcely agree on what to call any one of them: comedy? romance? pastoral? tragicomedy? Whatever the designation, Shakespeare's shift from tragedy to the new form coincided with and is related – both as cause and effect – to his development of a poetic style like nothing he (or anybody else) had composed before: it is audacious, irregular, ostentatious, playful, and difficult. This book undertakes a detailed examination of that late style.

The plays of this period have resisted most critical efforts to account for their attraction and theatrical power. This is not merely the conventional claim of one who seeks to justify a critical project by decrying the

[1] C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 298.

inadequacy of previous efforts. From G. Wilson Knight in the 1930s to Philip Edwards in the 1950s to Howard Felperin in the 1970s, it was generally agreed that criticism had failed to take the measure of these extraordinary works, and even the abundant attention of the past quarter century has not altered that perception. Kiernan Ryan, summarizing twentieth-century scholarship in 1999, acknowledges the perceived inadequacy of most recent efforts. He also identifies a potentially helpful way of proceeding:

> It is to the deliberate detail of their language and form that we must look, if the last plays are to be released from both the retrospection of old and new historicism and the abstractions of the allegorists. For it is by dislocating the dramatic narrative and contorting conventional poetic discourse that Shakespearean romance articulates its alienation from its own age and its commerce with futurity. What makes these plays still strike us as enigmatic and elusive is neither their engrossment in recondite topical allusions nor their veiled subscription to the perennial mysteries of myth and religion. It is the fact that we have not yet mastered their formal grammar and poetic idiom, and so have not yet learned how to read them.[2]

None of the other major phases of Shakespeare's career nor any of the other dramatic kinds – comedy, history, tragedy – has seemed so needy.

One possible explanation for this perceived critical failure is that most commentators begin broadly, exploring indisputably central themes such as forgiveness and redemption or attempting to define and contextualize the plays' distinctive dramatic form. My study takes the opposite point of departure, beginning with microscopic units such as syllables and lines and moving outward. It is a response to Ryan's challenge that we take seriously the "formal grammar and poetic idiom" of these plays. But my aim is not merely to redress the neglect of the late style. The chapters that follow not only define its principal properties but also explore the relation of that style to the dramatic forms it was devised to serve. The remarkable stylistic and formal developments both signify and derive from Shakespeare's revised understanding of the world, his refreshed sense of the positive capacities of language, and his reconceived faith in the power of the theatre and the role of the artist. These affirmations seem not to be sustained wholeheartedly through the entire group of plays, however. Much attention has been paid to Shakespeare's last thoughts, chiefly by the allegory hunters of the nineteenth century and their twentieth-century descendants and detractors; considerable notice has been given to the

[2] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare: The Last Plays* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 18.

generic problems posed by the late plays; but relatively little has been written about the late verse. Ideas, genre, poetry – these three areas of critical thought have not been successfully triangulated. By beginning with particulars and furnishing a genuine poetics of the late works, I hope to offer a more specific and thus a more persuasive account of Shakespeare's final period.

This preliminary chapter moves eventually to a statement of purpose and method, but it opens by introducing certain critical problems that require elucidation before stylistic analysis can begin. First comes the question of textual authority, the status of the play-texts available to us. The fact of collaboration also demands a brief comment, especially as it affects stylistic analysis. Next is "lateness," an abiding and enormously influential notion in discussions of the plays from *Pericles* on. That problem leads conveniently to a brief critical history of the last plays in general, a survey glancing at some of the major approaches and important names. It is followed by a summary of the comparatively little work done on the late style, and then by a consideration of dramatic kind: what nomenclature best suits these works? Since one of my aims is to identify the points of correspondence between poetics and dramatic mode, this last critical question is uncommonly significant, more significant, in fact, than the answer. Finally, after referring to certain critical models I have found helpful, I set forth my argument in moderate detail. Given that the taxonomy I shall construct is (once again) literal, in these pages the phrase "the late style" means, for the most part, dramatic verse. The stylistic changes that become audible around 1607 are most easily discerned in the poetry, although many of the traits that make the verse challenging also complicate the prose, and some prose passages will be cited and discussed. In both its manifestations, prose and verse, Shakespeare's late style is difficult – difficult to listen to, difficult to read, difficult to understand, and difficult to talk about.

THE TOPIC OF TEXTS

Any treatment of stylistic particulars must acknowledge the distinctive textual circumstances of this group of plays. Each one considered here, unlike many of the earlier works, exists in only one version, all later texts deriving from the first printing. *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Henry VIII*, and *Cymbeline* were published initially in the 1623 Folio; *Pericles* appeared in 1609 in an unsatisfactory quarto, from which the five subsequent quartos were

reproduced; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, advertised as the work of Shakespeare and Fletcher, finally saw print in a quarto of 1634 and again in the second Beaumont and Fletcher Folio (1679); no text of *Cardenio* has survived. Scholarship has so far failed to learn why so few of the plays from the second half of Shakespeare's career found their way into print: between 1594 and 1600, thirteen of his plays were published, whereas between 1601 and 1616, only five appeared. This discrepancy suggests a changed attitude towards publication on the part of the author (or authors) or of the owners of those texts, the King's Men, and a number of explanations for this reduction have been proposed, from company prosperity (no need to sell) to a glutted market (too many books being sold) to a decline in Shakespeare's popularity.

Recently two additional possibilities have been advanced: first, that the company's involvement with the aristocracy, especially the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, "might have prompted Shakespeare and his fellows to change their publication strategy from print for a relatively wide readership to manuscript presentation copies for a small group of influential patrons"; and second, that Shakespeare and his fellows withheld the playbooks because even at this early date they had begun to entertain the possibility of a collected edition of his plays.[3] After publication of the second quarto of *Hamlet* in 1604, perhaps a defensive response to the faulty Q1 of 1603, none of Shakespeare's plays appeared in quarto for the first time except *King Lear* and *Pericles*, the latter in the unsatisfactory version of 1609. Thorpe's quarto version of the Sonnets also appeared in 1609, of course, but its origins, especially whether it was published with the poet's permission, are debatable. Whatever the cause or causes, the texts of many of the plays we rank among Shakespeare's greatest achievements were not available to the reading public until after his death.

This dearth of textual choices limits the close reader, of course – "limits," but does not disable. The increased complexity of the style, particularly the syntax, as Chapters 3 and 4 will demonstrate, yields a relatively high quotient of confusing sentences or phrases, but editors lack an alternative text that might help them clarify or emend a difficult or manifestly corrupt passage. Naturally such textual instability affects the work of the stylistic critic, whose conclusions about minute poetic or

[3] The quotation is from Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 112. Erne considers both these possibilities in some detail (pp. 108–14) and makes a persuasive, if not a knockdown, argument.

syntactic effects might seem dubious or unreliable. While it would of course be desirable to have better texts, versions reflecting greater fidelity to the words that Shakespeare wrote or that the King's Men performed – especially in the case of *Pericles* – the existing copies nevertheless offer thousands of comprehensible and more or less authoritative lines and sentences, plenty of territory for noticing poetic choices and linguistic properties. As Coburn Freer remarks about the problem of textual instability, "if such objections vitiate the study of the poetry in Renaissance drama, they also invalidate every other kind of criticism, except the study of the text and the facts connected with its generation and transmission."[4]

An irreducible fact about the poetry treated in this book is its status as dramatic verse. Much will be made of Shakespeare's metrical disposition, his increasingly elliptical approach to expression, the tangled structure of much of the poetic syntax, the insistent repetitions audible in the verse, and other such formal features. These technical properties combine to produce poetry initially delivered from the stage, and this theatrical origin has shaped, and thus needs to be borne in mind throughout, the ensuing analysis. How audience members perceive the distinctive verse of the late plays determines how they respond to the dramatic narrative, how they react intellectually and emotionally, how they comprehend the meaning of the story enacted before them. In other words, what they hear is as important as what they see, and in fact what they hear to some extent determines what they see. Recognizing the theatrical status of the medium is one of the ways in which the analysis performed in this book differs from what some detractors of poetics deride as "New Criticism." The kind of poetic analysis conducted fifty years ago would not normally have insisted on the relevance of the dramatic context, would have been more likely to address the play as poem and contented itself with certain favored critical topics, notably metaphor, tension, paradox, and irony. As we have learned, a just appraisal of almost any aspect of Shakespeare's style must include an awareness of its theatrical provenance.[5]

[4] Coburn Freer, *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 11.

[5] The patriarch of this insistence on the theatrical was J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); more recent exponents of performance criticism include James L. Bulman, *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1996), Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), and William B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

To acknowledge that origin is not, however, to insist that it constitutes the only legitimate context: Lukas Erne has argued convincingly that "Shakespeare did not only expect that at some point in the future people would 'read – and reread' his plays. He could not help knowing that his plays were being read and reread, printed and reprinted, excerpted and anthologized as he was writing more plays."[6] Moreover, although Erne himself eschews detailed analysis of verbal properties, he acknowledges that his argument "does go some way toward justifying such an approach, suggesting that a close, 'readerly,' attention to the play's text is not a modern aberration."[7] Much of the analysis undertaken herein depends upon the leisure needed to reflect on the verse, to read and re-read, to notice its patterns and other effects. And yet we must remain conscious that these verbal configurations are acting upon the ear of the audience and affecting their perception of the semantic content of the poetry, even though the operation of those effects may be extremely subtle or even subliminal. Hence, the discussion that follows is not predicated exclusively on one or the other conception of textual ontology.

COLLABORATION

The problems of what was written are complicated by some uncertainty about who wrote what. According to MacDonald Jackson, with reference to *Pericles*, "The very gateway to the final period of Shakespeare's playwrighting career is . . . obstructed by thorny problems of text and authorship."[8] So, it might be added, is the exit ramp. Even if we tidy up the end of the career, placing *Pericles* after *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* and thus treating the plays from *Pericles* through *Cardenio* as a discrete group, we cannot avoid the inconvenient fact that four of the seven were written by Shakespeare and somebody else. As will become clear in the next section, nineteenth-century suspicions about the presence of another hand in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII* helped to

[6] *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, p. 25. Erne has thoroughly documented what a number of scholars have been arguing for some time. Even before the Styan-led revolution of performance criticism in the 1970s, Sigurd Burckhardt insisted that "to be understood [Shakespeare] must be *read* – with attention to sometimes minute detail. There is an odd superstition abroad that nothing can be part of Shakespeare's intention that cannot be communicated directly across the footlights." *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. vii. See also Harry Berger, *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[7] Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, p. 22.

[8] MacDonald Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare: 'Pericles' as Test Case* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 11.

stimulate interest in the last plays as a group. Those early concerns, although based on a non-systematic impressionism, have been validated by stylometric and other kinds of tests developed by twentieth-century scholarship, especially the meticulous labors of Cyrus Hoy in the 1950s.[9] Recent scholarship has returned attention to the practice of collaboration. Brian Vickers's *Shakespeare, Co-Author*, focusing on the investigations of such scholars as Jonathan Hope, David Lake, and MacDonald Jackson, offers an exhaustive account of the current state of attribution studies.[10]

Scholars agree on the following general conclusions: that Shakespeare both began and ended his career writing with other people, and probably did so in the middle of it as well; that *Pericles* was a collaborative effort with George Wilkins, even though we can't be sure by whom the product was conceived or how the partnership functioned; and that *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Cardenio* were all joint productions with John Fletcher, although questions remain about the nature of this final collaborative relationship, such as who plotted the plays? Did the two authors work together or separately? Did Fletcher touch up certain scenes first written by Shakespeare? Might a third playwright have contributed? Other questions that used to receive attention, such as the nineteenth-century belief that Shakespeare couldn't have written the scene depicting the descent of Jupiter in Act 5 of *Cymbeline*, have mostly disappeared from the critical discourse. While specialists still quibble over certain scenes and decline to speculate on some small samples, such as prologues and epilogues, we can say that Shakespeare is probably responsible for the following sections of the collaborative plays. *Pericles*: Acts 3, 4, and 5, with Wilkins having written Acts 1 and 2 (although there may be some Shakespeare in the first two acts and some Wilkins in the last three); *Henry VIII*: 1.1, 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2.1–203, and 5.1; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: 1.1 through 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, and 5 (but not 5.1.1–33 or 5.2).[11]

[9] Hoy's conclusions appear in a series of articles entitled "The Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (I-VII)," published in *Studies in Bibliography* between 1956 and 1962. Some of his conclusions have been modified by later work, such as that of Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-Linguistic Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), although in general Hoy's attribution of scenes and passages in the Shakespeare–Fletcher collaborations has remained the starting point for most analysts. See also Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare*.

[10] Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Vickers's second chapter, "Identifying Co-Authors" (pp. 44–134), surveys the history of attribution studies by describing the various kinds of tests employed. Chapter 5 (pp. 291–332) considers the evidence for the joint authorship of *Pericles*, chapter 6 (pp. 333–432) for *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

[11] In addition to Vickers, who is interested in the methods of distinction, see *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, with John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's*

Accepting these conclusions about division of labor, I should acknowledge their significance for the present study. Although I sometimes write of one or another of these collaborative works as if it were entirely Shakespeare's, such reference is largely a critical convenience. The phrase "the style of *Henry VIII*," for example, denotes those scenes or parts of scenes that most scholars have assigned to Shakespeare. A similar assumption obtains when *Henry VIII* is referred to loosely as one of the "romances," although it should probably be called a history play. The reader should consider such phrases a kind of shorthand, with the assurance that all stylistic illustrations are taken from Shakespearean scenes. For purposes of clarity I have evaded other potential complications. Although Shakespeare is generally assigned the last three acts of *Pericles*, "it is nevertheless true," as Frank Kermode points out, "that the first scenes also occasionally have lines that sound like idiosyncratic Shakespeare," in support of which claim he cites the image of the "blind mole" and the "poor worm" (1.1.100–2).[12] While remaining aware that such possibly Shakespearean lines exist here and there, I have mostly resisted the diversion that entering into such controversies would entail.

That collaboration renders parts of certain plays unavailable for stylistic analysis may be taken less as a hindrance than as a benefit. Having the presence of another poetic hand – Fletcher's much more than Wilkins's, of course – is most instructive in the attempt to establish Shakespeare's stylistic profile after 1607–8. The audible differences between two distinct styles of verse initially set scholars to investigating the details of composition and led them eventually to establish the order of the canon. And the differences between Fletcher's and Shakespeare's verse are marked: respectively, smooth versus choppy, heavily versus subtly patterned, delicate versus rough. According to Charles Lamb, Fletcher "lays line upon line, making up one after the other; adding image to image so deliberately that we see where they join: Shakespeare mingles every thing, he runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors; before one idea has burst its shell another is hatched and

Plays, and Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare*, as well as the following editions: Suzanne Gossett, ed., *Pericles* (London: Thomson Learning, 2004); Gordon McMullan, ed., *Henry VIII, or All is True* (London: Thomas Nelson, 2000); Eugene Waith, ed., *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Lois Potter, ed., *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997). Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) is interested especially in the gender politics of collaboration and in the political history of modern attribution studies.

[12] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 255–56.

clamorous for disclosure."[13] This is one of the most insightful stylistic analyses ever written, and without pausing now to illustrate its accuracy, I will have occasion throughout the book to refer to Lamb's distinctions as a way of sharpening the definition of Shakespeare's particular style.

LATENESS

Shakespeare's style, like everything connected with the last plays, is inevitably associated with the idea of "lateness," Shakespeare's "last" productions, his "final period," even his "swan song." An implausibly large number of critics find themselves unable to write about the last phase of Shakespeare's career without invoking the late years of Ibsen, Michelangelo or, invariably, Beethoven. The composer represents "an ideal example of the final achievement of a great artist, when he seems to acquire a new profundity, a new understanding, in making a last attempt to solve the enigma of life" – Kenneth Muir's sentence is typical of this critical position.[14] A variation on the theme is found in Adorno's interpretive reversal of the terms, so that "the antiharmonistic postures of Michelangelo, of the mature Rembrandt and Beethoven are all attributable to the inner development of the concept of harmony and in the last analysis to its insufficiency."[15] Such rhetoric is difficult to escape, based as it is on perception of a distinctive voice in a recognizable phase of an artist's career. Still, throughout this book the phrase "Shakespeare's late style" is meant to function chiefly as a chronological pointer: a term designating the dramatic verse Shakespeare composed between 1607 and 1613, a sign divested, insofar as possible, of emotional or teleological connotations. Logically, of course, the use of the adjective "late" implies a way of thinking about the style, acknowledges a category separating it from the expressive forms discernible in earlier plays, but such groupings need not be sentimentalized, nor must the style be considered necessarily superior, the plays regarded as wiser.[16]

[13] *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (London: 1904), IV, 341–42. Lamb also remarks of Fletcher's style that "its motion is circular, not progressive. Each line revolves on itself in a sort of separate orbit. They do not join into one another like a running hand" (p. 329).

[14] Kenneth Muir, *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), p. 3.

[15] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 161.

[16] Another figure whose late work is sometimes compared to that of Shakespeare is Henry James. This comparison can be more fruitful than some of the others, based as it is on the specific resemblances between two styles of writing (albeit that one is verse, the other prose). See John Porter Houston, *Shakespearean Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 200–5.

Owing to the overexposure of such comparisons with other major artists, "lateness" is an idea that has recently come under attack, and it is worth scrutinizing the critical history of this concept and noting some of its ramifications for the study of style.[17] The santification of the late plays, and indeed our capacity for talking about "late plays" at all, is a function, interestingly enough, of very close reading. In the nineteenth century such scholars as William Spalding, the German G. G. Gervinus, and above all F. J. Furnivall, the prodigiously energetic editor and founder of the New Shakespeare Society – these scholars and others, mostly working independently of one another, set out to determine which parts of certain disputed texts were written by William Shakespeare.[18] This goal required that they establish Shakespeare's poetic identity, a task they undertook by means of detailed prosodic investigations. Thus they were able to determine that, broadly speaking, Shakespeare liberalized his blank verse as he matured, writing a progressively less regular line as he moved from histories and comedies to the tragedies and beyond: such relaxation of the line, they discovered, entailed the poet's admission of multiple forms of variation, particularly enjambment and light endings, along with an increasing tolerance for lineal disruption. Knowledge of this progression then allowed scholars to determine with considerable certainty the order in which the plays were composed.[19]

"Of these tests," A. C. Bradley concluded, "that of rhyme and that of feminine endings, discreetly employed, are of use in broadly distinguishing Shakespeare's plays into two groups, earlier and later, and also in marking out the very latest dramas."[20] Bradley is cautious, as well he

[17] Suzanne Gossett, in her Introduction to the Arden3 edition of *Pericles*, enumerates the obstacles to considering it a "late" play: "the 'lateness' paradigm is inadequate to describe a play which is not entirely by Shakespeare; on which Shakespeare worked when he was not yet forty-four years old; which reworks a plot that had already served as a frame for one of his earliest comedies; and which he may have been writing simultaneously with or shortly before *Coriolanus*, a play with ties to an entirely different section of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*" (p. 54). The most thorough treatment of this topic promises to be Gordon McMullan's *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship, Biography, Reception* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[18] See William Spalding, *A Letter on Shakespere's Authorship of "The Two Noble Kinsmen,"* ed. J. H. Burton (London: New Shakespeare Society, 1876). For a detailed survey of some of these tests and their results, see Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author*, especially pp. 44–134, and *passim*.

[19] See Barbara A. Mowat, "'What's In A Name?': Tragicomedy, Romance, or Late Comedy?" in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Jean Howard and Richard Dutton, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), IV, 129–53. For an overview of the changes in verse style through the course of the career, see Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 5.

[20] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear" and "Macbeth," With a New Introduction by John Russell Brown* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 405–6.

might have been. In evaluating the conclusions derived from prosodic comparisons, we need to keep in mind the sometimes slippery nature of the evidence: as Lois Potter has reminded us, "nineteenth-century attempts to compare the frequency with which dramatists used feminine endings and run-on lines were often vitiated by their use of texts in which editors had already tampered with the metre."[21] The "discreet" use of these quasi-scientific studies had an immense impact on scholarship because it helped to foster a relatively firm and persuasive chronology of composition. In the seventeenth century, for example, Dryden and his contemporaries believed that *Pericles*, on the basis of its (intentional) naive effects and (unintentional) textual corruption, must have been a very early play, one that perhaps Shakespeare the apprentice had been given to salvage.[22] Such error was dispelled by nineteenth-century metrical scholars, who were able not only to calculate approximately when *Pericles* was written but also to ascertain that only part of it was Shakespeare's. Finally, knowing that *Pericles* was composed late allowed literary critics to discern its affinities with those other plays that seem to have been composed near the end of the career.

Enter Edward Dowden, poet and Professor of English Literature in Trinity College, Dublin. Alert to the scholarly advances of his recent predecessors and colleagues, the poet and critic set forth for the Victorian reader the ramifications of the newly established phases of Shakespeare's career.[23] The subtitle of Dowden's most important book, published in 1875, is telling: *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*.[24] There he famously introduced, or at least articulated most eloquently, the theory that the tones of Shakespeare's plays correspond directly to the states of Shakespeare's mind. According to this correspondence of mood and mode, the dramatic–poetic metamorphosis that manifestly occurs in the late work bespeaks a spiritual passage from despair to serenity, an artist no longer "in the depths," but "on the heights." Here is the relevant passage from the version published two years later, in which the argument is distilled:

[21] Introduction to Lois Potter's Arden edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, p. 20.

[22] See Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 291–92.

[23] "Reader" is the appropriate noun: although many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics did remember the theatrical origins of the texts, Dowden very clearly thought of the plays chiefly as dramatic poems, as works to be read.

[24] (London, 1875).

The impression left upon the reader by Shakspere's last plays is that, whatever his trials and sorrows and errors may have been, he had come forth from them wise, large-hearted, calm-souled. He seems to have learned the secret of life, and while taking his share in it, to be yet disengaged from it; he looks down upon life, its joys, its griefs, its errors, with a grave tenderness, which is almost pity. The 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 . . . And it will be felt that the name which I have given to this last period – Shakspere having ascended out of the turmoil and trouble of action, out of the darkness and tragic mystery, the places haunted by terror and crime, and by love contending with these, to a pure and serene elevation – it will be felt that the name, on the heights, is neither inappropriate nor fanciful.[25]

Overheated though the rhetoric may be, Dowden's romantic, idealized narrative has had a potent, lasting influence on twentieth- and even twenty-first century criticism.

Our story continues with the intervention of Lytton Strachey, who at the beginning of the twentieth century belittled Dowden's romantic account of Shakespeare's spiritual progress. Recasting Dowden's "serenity" as disengagement and boredom, Strachey famously denigrated the late work on the grounds of artistic ennui:

It is hard to resist the conclusion that he was getting bored himself. Bored with people, bored with real life, bored with drama, bored, in fact, with anything except poetical dreams. He is no longer interested, one often feels, in what happens, or who says what, so long as he can find place for a faultless lyric, or a new, unimagined rhythmical effect, or a grand and mystic speech. In this mood he must have written his share in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, leaving the plot and characters to Fletcher to deal with as he pleased, and reserving to himself only the opportunities for pompous verse. In this mood he must have broken off half-way through the tedious history of *Henry VIII*; and in this mood he must have completed, with all the resources of his rhetoric, the miserable archaic fragment of *Pericles*.[26]

This is the notorious passage, usually cited so that the critic can ridicule and dismiss it.[27] But it is worth considering the possibility that, up to a point and in a way he did not intend, Strachey may be right. If we overlook momentarily the cause he superciliously proposes – "boredom" – we may

[25] Edward Dowden, *Shakspere* (London: Macmillan, 1877), p. 60.
[26] Lytton Strachey, "Shakespeare's Final Period," *Independent Review*, 3 (August, 1904), 414–15.
[27] An exception to the automatic dismissal of Strachey's argument is James Sutherland, who softens the rhetoric slightly to speak of Shakespeare's artistic "fatigue." See "The Language of the Last Plays," in *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London: Longmans, 1959), pp. 144–58.

notice that Strachey has perceptively identified some cardinal features of Shakespeare's late work: the comparative unimportance of character ("bored with people"), the fabulous plots and fairy-tale atmosphere ("bored with real life"), the episodic and putatively undramatic structure of romance ("bored with drama"), the relative lack of differentiation among speakers ("no longer interested . . . in . . . who says what"). Moreover, the claim that the aging Shakespeare was interested in nothing but poetical dreams reflects the high degree of fantasy in the late work – the magic of the masque in *The Tempest*, for instance, and the importance of the oneiric throughout. It also acknowledges that this dreaminess has made its way into the texture of the verse.

Publishing "Shakespeare's Final Period" in 1904 in *The Independent Review*, Strachey was writing as a self-fashioned modernist, a twentieth-century scientific critic obliged to expose and remedy the sentimental excesses of Victorian bardolatry.[28] He was also writing as a young man – he was twenty-four – impatient with the supposed spiritual wisdom of palsied eld. Although his iconoclasm did not succeed in dislodging the late plays from their exalted status, he won a convert or two: down through the twentieth-century, doubt was now and then expressed about the reverence with which the late phase of the career was regarded. Strachey's valuable contribution was to deplore the error of reading a career backwards: "For some reason or another, the end of a man's life seems naturally to afford the light by which the rest of it should be read; last thoughts do appear in some strange way to be really best and truest; and this is particularly the case when they fit in nicely with the rest of the story, and are, perhaps, just what one likes to think of oneself."[29] More recently, Gordon McMullan has complained about such retrospective reading of moments in an artistic career, showing that our knowledge of what came late in an artistic oeuvre, whether music or painting or drama, can shape – or, more to the point, distort – our understanding of how that work emerged.[30]

[28] There is confusion over the date of the essay, chiefly because the reprint in Strachey's *Books and Characters: French and English* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922) gives an erroneous date (1906) for the original publication. It first appeared in August of 1904.

[29] Strachey, "Shakespeare's Final Period," p. 415.

[30] See Gordon McMullan's forthcoming essay, "'The Technique of it is Mature': Inventing the Late Plays in Print and in Performance," in *From Stage to Print in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); and book, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*. We might, however, remember the words of T. S. Eliot on the career of James Joyce: "As with Shakespeare, his later work must be understood through the earlier, and the first through the last; it is the whole journey, not any one stage of it, that assures him his place among the great." Cited in Barber and Wheeler, *The Whole Journey*, p. vii.

The romantic schema and the reaction to it had an especially pernicious effect on the collaborative plays, *Pericles* to some extent, but most particularly *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Failing as they do, for different reasons, to conform to the transcendental paradigm laid out by Dowden, they were mostly ignored through the first half of the twentieth century. Occasionally, however, a censorious voice would sound, condescending to or even mocking the contribution of the aging Shakespeare. Witness Theodore Spencer's acerbic conclusions about *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: perhaps impishly, Spencer encourages the reader to "wonder whether his retirement was entirely voluntary . . . One can even imagine a deputation calling on Shakespeare – it is not an agreeable thought – to suggest that, all things considered, it would be wise to go home and write no more."[31] Spencer's critical objections are largely stylistic:

> The Fletcherian parts of the play are first-rate theater; their contrasts and conflicts make an immediate and successful impression. The Shakespearean parts, on the other hand, are static and, though with splendor, stiff. They are slow, dense, compared with Fletcher's easy liquescence. They have a deliberate yet vague grandeur, a remote and half-exhausted exaltation; they are expressed through a clotted rhetoric that is the poetry of an old man who has finished with action. Their style is the style of old age, and the imagery is an old man's imagery.[32]

Although the stylistic distinctions are unexceptionable, the conclusions about "old age" seem tendentious and exaggerated for effect. Fifty years after Spencer, Anthony Dawson revived his idea: "What is wrong with imagining Shakespeare's career trailing off, going from bad to worse, from *The Tempest* to *Cymbeline* and parts of *Henry VIII*, before being judiciously terminated by his worried partners in the King's Men, who perhaps asked young Fletcher to do what he could to make the old master's new texts acceptable to their increasingly perplexed audiences?"[33]

However courageous and amusing their polemics may be, Strachey, Spencer, and Dawson are mavericks. For the most part the late plays are admired, but admiration does not usually extend much beyond *The Tempest*. Even though we know that the collaborations belong in the picture, even though we recognize the extravagance of Dowden's rhetoric,

[31] Theodore Spencer, "*The Two Noble Kinsmen*," *Modern Philology*, 36 (1939), 257.
[32] *Ibid.*, 276.
[33] Anthony Dawson, "*Tempest* in a Teapot: Critics, Evaluation, Ideology," in *Bad Shakespeare: Revaluations of the Shakespeare Canon*, ed. Maurice Charney (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh-Dickinson University Press, 1988), pp. 62–63.

even though we have come to admit Shakespeare's close connection to Fletcher and the fashions of the London stage at the time, even though post-structuralism and its critical offshoots have amplified the anti-romantic strain – despite all these contra-indications, our view of the plays composed from about 1608 still owes much to Dowden and his conception of "late" serenity and transcendence. Consider the following sentence from Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2004): "the greatest of these late plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, both have a distinctly autumnal, retrospective tone. Shakespeare seems to be self-consciously reflecting upon what he has accomplished in his professional life and coming to terms with what it might mean to leave it behind."[34]

It is not inappropriate that knowledge of Shakespeare's earlier work should be allowed to inform efforts to understand the late, but we must be aware that to do so is often to subscribe implicitly to a myth of progress; and thus we must be careful not to allow such comparisons automatically to privilege the later plays as more accomplished, more sincere, or – the most common error – wiser than those that have come before. A defense against such sentimentality is Philip Edwards's directive that we ought to "wonder what criticism would have made of these plays, or any one of them, if all Shakespeare's other plays had been lost."[35]

CRITICAL HISTORY: PLAYS

The passage just cited prefaces Edwards's helpful synopsis of commentary on the late plays published in the first half of the twentieth century. In that survey Edwards identifies five principal approaches: (1) "The Poet Himself," the views of the allegorists and their critics; (2) "Conditioned Art," the practical studies of influence and stagecraft by A. H. Thorndike and G. E. Bentley; (3) "Myth, Symbol, Allegory," the theories of G. Wilson Knight, D. G. James, and Derek Traversi; (4) "The Pattern of Tragedy, and a Christian Interpretation," dominated by E. M. W. Tillyard and S. L. Bethell; and (5) "The Shape and Meaning of Romance," the investigations of the romance and pastoral traditions contributed by J. M. Nosworthy, J. F. Danby, and Frank Kermode. When Edwards, looking to the future, concludes that "criticism might for the moment

[34] Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 370.

[35] Philip Edwards, "Shakespeare's Romances: 1900–1957," *Shakespeare Survey 11* (1958), 2. A similar caution is developed by Anthony Dawson, "*Tempest* in a Teapot."

ignore the illumination and the universality in the last plays," he attests to the dominance of schools of criticism concerned largely with what he calls "symbolic patterns," "mankind's spiritual pilgrimage," and "man's apprehension of the mystery of salvation and immortality."[36] His survey was published in 1958, and the wide-angle approaches he describes were sustained over the next decade, encouraged partly by the critical sovereignty of Northrop Frye.

In 1972 Howard Felperin prefaced his *Shakespearean Romance* with the claim that "Many of the problems that have beset modern reinterpretation and revaluation of these plays remain to be solved."[37] Other critics agreed, and Felperin's book was part of an outpouring of critical work on the last phase, analysis representing the viewpoints identified by Edwards and more besides. Some of these books include *Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision* (1972), in which Joan Hartwig promotes "tragicomedy," not "romance," as the proper descriptive term; Barbara A. Mowat's *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances* (1976), an analysis of the self-conscious, metadramatic qualities of the texts; *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered* (1978), a collection of essays deriving from a symposium held at the University of Alabama in 1975; and Frances A. Yates's *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (1975), a learned topical interpretation with particular attention to Jacobean Protestantism.[38]

With the eventual exhaustion of myth criticism and the emergence of new methodologies, interest in reconciliation and "mankind's spiritual pilgrimage" came to be supplanted by a radical skepticism about the putative harmonies of the final period. Ruth Nevo's *Shakespeare's Other Language* (1987) and the concluding chapter of Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (1991) represent one version of this backlash, offering what might be called a "post-Freudian" approach. According to Alison Thorne, whose recent critical survey concentrates on psychoanalytic and feminist readings, these critics have "set about excavating the dark subtext that lurks within their versions of the Shakespearean family romance."[39]

[36] Edwards, "Shakespeare's Romances," p. 18.

[37] *Shakespearean Romance*, p. 4.

[38] Joan Hartwig, *Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972); Barbara A. Mowat, *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976); Henry Jacobs and Carol McGinnis Kay, eds., *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

[39] Introduction to *Shakespeare's Romances*, ed. Alison Thorne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 18. Ruth Nevo, *Shakespeare's Other Language* (London: Methuen, 1987); Janet Adelman,