

Shakespeare's Imitators in the Eighteenth Century

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SHAKESPEARE'S IMITATORS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

THE imitation of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century is a subject that has been generally neglected by his critics and his bibliographers. Much has been written about the numerous adaptations of his plays by such men as Tate, Cibber, and Aaron Hill, but the actual attempts made in the eighteenth century to write in imitation of Shakespeare's style have provoked little comment from modern scholarship. Yet, quite apart from the parodies and travesties (which are not very numerous, and are almost always deplorably childish), professed attempts by eighteenth-century authors to write in the manner of Shakespeare—to write, that is to say, a play, and occasionally a poem, in a style which was unlike that of the eighteenth century, and which the writer hoped was Shakespearean—are sufficiently numerous to merit more attention than has hitherto been paid to them.

Shakespeare's influence on the language of such poets as Gray and Blair is well known. Gray, for instance, replying to a letter from his friend West about the fragment of *Agrippina*¹, reproaches himself for condescending to such phrases as 'silken son of dalliance' and 'wrinkled beldams,' which he attributes to his fondness for Shakespeare. Similarly he finds 'a tang of Shakespear' in the language of Mason's *Elfrida*²; and David Hume deplores the fact that his young kinsman, John Home, who had written a tragedy called *Agis*, had been corrupting his taste by imitating Shakespeare too much in his play³. But such imitation as may be found in Gray or Mason or Home is only occasional, and amounts to little more than a faint and cautious echoing of remembered phrases in a favourite author. There are, however, a number of sustained and professed imitations of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, in which the author owns that 'he had the mighty Bard in View'⁴ throughout; and however negligible these may be as literature or drama, and however wide of the mark as imitations of their author, they certainly throw a good deal of light on the eighteenth-century's attitude to Shakespeare.

It was an age, of course, in which literary imitation flourished—an infallible sign, perhaps, of the feeble and secondary nature of so much of

¹ *The Correspondence of Gray, Walpole, West and Ashton*, ed. Toynbee, II, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³ *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, ed. J. H. Burton, I, p. 392.

⁴ Prologue to Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1714).

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its inspiration, but also a proof of its interest in the older writers. To write 'in the manner of' Chaucer, or Spenser, or Milton was one of the main verse exercises of the period. Some of the imitators were serious enough in their intentions, others were merely looking for an excuse to write facetiously; some began seriously and ran into burlesque, others set out in a flippant spirit and turned serious as the author became more and more fascinated by his model. Imitations of Chaucer were popular because they gave the author an easy chance of writing ludicrously; Milton's style was a favourite one for mock heroics. Spenser certainly had a number of sincere admirers in the eighteenth century, but he, too, was frequently burlesqued. When, however, we come to examine the treatment of Shakespeare by his eighteenth-century imitators, we find two rather surprising things: the attempts to imitate him are comparatively few, and, secondly, there is little effort at parody and burlesque. There must be some explanation of those two facts.

In the first place, Shakespeare is not an easy writer to imitate seriously, nor even, unless the writer is very easily satisfied, to imitate comically. Imitating Spenser is a much simpler business; for there you have several factors to help you. Spenser wrote what was quite definitely a literary language; a great part of his peculiar charm comes from his use of quaint and archaic terms, and those can be reproduced or imitated. The characteristic drowsy rhythm of the Spenserian stanza is something that only Spenser himself could manage quite perfectly; but it is in the power of any reasonably competent metrist at least to suggest it. Something may be done, too, by way of odd spellings and an occasional word-coining to encourage a charitable reader to accept your imitation of Spenser as something which is at least recognisable. But the imitator of Shakespeare has almost none of those small aids to plausibility. Compared with Spenser, Shakespeare is a writer with almost no manner at all. When a line or passage is unmistakably Shakespearean, it is rather because no other known writer could possibly have written it than that it has some rhythm or mannerism that can be set down as characteristic. Every line of Shakespeare is thoroughly Shakespearean, but in a different way. The impression is not so much that Shakespeare is putting things in one characteristic manner as that the words themselves are striding along by the shortest possible way to the end in sight. With other writers, there appears to be a longer interval between the idea and its expression—if one may be permitted to separate the two for the purposes of this distinction. With Spenser one can almost speak of the expression being ready for the idea before it arrives, and then, when it does arrive, pro-

ceeding to take charge of it, and polish it, until it shines with the same equal light as everything else in the stanza and the canto. This, of course, is to state the distinction too absolutely; yet no one, perhaps, will dispute that many writers do develop a manner far more definite and consistent than Shakespeare's. 'It has not wit enough to keep it sweet,' Dr Johnson once remarked of *The Rehearsal*; and then, recollecting himself, 'It has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction.' A writer of this sort is easily imitated, because, in a sense, he is always imitating himself. But one of the most remarkable features of Shakespeare's style is just the way in which every idea seems to strike out its own individual path to its proper expression. It is true, of course, that Shakespeare's style varies largely from play to play, and that the reader of average sensitiveness can feel that *Twelfth Night* has a manner of its own very different from that of *The Tempest*; but that hardly makes matters easier for the imitator of Shakespeare, it only complicates his difficulties. It is not, perhaps, very hard to produce a tolerable imitation of the early Shakespeare, and more particularly of his comic dialogue, where his style was still marked by a number of mannerisms; but to imitate successfully the Shakespeare of *Lear* or *Hamlet* one would require an almost equal power and hurry of thought, and a corresponding gift of expression—in which case one might be better employed than in mere imitation. Shakespeare, then, was protected from the imitators by the fact that there was almost nothing external—no tricks of style, no set manner, no favourite words, no fixed rhythm—that they could lay their hands upon. If they were to follow him successfully, they would have to think and feel as he did, and with the same intensity; and that was asking too much of an imitator.

A further consideration that must have hindered eighteenth-century dramatists was the fact that their plays, even when they were imitations of Shakespeare, had to take their chance before the general, and, in the main, ignorant public. This public must be borne in mind, too, when one is judging of the success or failure of eighteenth-century imitations. The dramatist who went too far with his imitation would never see his play acted. By 1700 Shakespeare's language was already beginning to look uncouth; sometimes, indeed, it was quite unintelligible. It might be very well to imitate him in a poem; for your poem would be read by a moderately intelligent and cultured public, who could at least understand, even if they did not particularly appreciate, your attempt to reproduce the language and idiom of the older writer. But a play had to take its chance before a very mixed audience—including the footmen in the upper gallery—and there was no sense in obscuring the meaning by using words

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which would not be generally understood. Writing in 1718, Gildon has to record that 'the inimitable Shakespear' is being 'rejected by some Modern Collectors for his Obsolete Language¹.' In 1742 West discusses with Gray the use of archaic terms in poetry. He is prepared to admit them occasionally: they are useful—surely a significant reason—for comic effects. 'But now comes my opinion that they ought to be used in Tragedy more sparingly, than in most kinds of poetry. Tragedy is designed for public representation, and what is designed for that should certainly be most intelligible. I believe half the audience that come to Shakespear's plays do not understand the half of what they hear².' When it is remembered that they generally heard their Shakespeare in eighteenth-century versions that were partially modernised, the significance of West's warning becomes even more obvious. There is a story about the actor Quin, who had been playing for many years what he believed to be Shakespeare. He was listening one day to Garrick acting *Macbeth* in its original, and not its eighteenth-century, form; and after the performance was over he asked Garrick where he got such strange and out-of-the-way expressions as

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon,
Where got'st thou that goose look?

This was apparently the first that Quin had heard of the cream-faced loon³. There was, therefore, the real danger of imitating Shakespeare so successfully that you rendered your play unintelligible to many of the audience. If you were to risk imitating him at all, you would do so carefully; you would write what was still essentially an eighteenth-century play, though you might give it an archaic appearance by keeping Shakespeare at the back of your mind.

This, however, obviously leaves much still to be explained: there were few imitations of Shakespeare by the poets, let alone the dramatists. And here one must take into account another fact: the eighteenth century genuinely admired Shakespeare, but it was rarely on account of his language. They admired his character drawing, his treatment of the passions, his rough majestic force, but rarely his language. Gray certainly did; but in this, as in some other things, he was an exception. The general opinion was that Shakespeare had the misfortune to live in a semi-barbarous age before the language had been sufficiently refined. He was a rude old artist, blundering occasionally into grand thoughts, but never to be trusted, and frequently, in his irregularities and wild expressions,

¹ *The Complete Art of Poetry*, 1718. *The Advertisement*.

² *The Correspondence of Gray, Walpole, West and Ashton*, II, p. 32.

³ T. Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, I, pp. 123-4.

to be deplored. It was a kindness to save him from himself; the Tates, the Cibbers, the Aaron Hills who produced adaptations of his plays usually did so from the best of motives. Shakespeare was his own worst enemy; he had to be polished and put in order if he was to appeal to a politer age¹. The idea of imitating his language—one of his most serious defects—was to many critics quite absurd. A writer of 1714, discussing Rowe's *Jane Shore*, did not mince matters. 'I think it so far from a Recommendation, that it is written in the Stile of *Shakespeare*, that it ought to damn it; *Ennius* and *Lucretius* were very much admir'd by the *Romans*, but it never came into the Head of *Virgil*, *Horace*, *Ovid*, *Tibullus*, or the rest, to write in imitation of the Stile of either of these Poets; the best Stile is that which arrives to the Perfection of the Language then in Being, such as is that of *Cato*, which is the best Standard of Dramatic Diction which we have in our Tongue².' West also believed that the style of *Cato* was the best for a modern tragedy; and he further told Gray if Shakespeare himself were writing to-day he would write in a different style from what he did³. What this might have meant to West and his contemporaries we may guess from some verses of William Hamilton of Bangour, who undertook to polish the rough ore of a passage in *King Lear*. Lear is addressing Edgar: 'Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume....' This becomes in Hamilton:

For thee, the skilful worm, of specious hue,
No shining threads of ductile radiance drew;
For thee no sun the rip'ning gem refin'd;
No bleating innocence the fleece resign'd:
The hand of luxury ne'er taught to pour
O'er thy faint limbs, the oil's refreshing show'r...⁴.

Similarly, James Beattie undertook to polish up 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind' into

Blow, blow, thou vernal gale!
Thy balm will not avail
To ease my aching breast...⁵.

The fact is that Shakespeare succeeded in pleasing the eighteenth century *in spite of* his language, and therefore we need not be surprised to find his imitators not attempting very earnestly to reproduce his peculiar mode of expression. When they did, they were as often as not

¹ Cf. the prologue to Aaron Hill's *King Henry V*:
From Wit's old Ruins, shadow'd o'er with Bays,
We draw some rich remains of Shakespear's praise.
² *A New Rehearsal, Or Bays the Younger*, 1714, p. 77.
³ *The Correspondence of Gray, Walpole, West and Ashton*, II, p. 23.
⁴ *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1760 (Edinburgh), p. 210.
⁵ James Beattie, *Original Poems and Translations*, 1760, p. 74.

condemned for it. The anonymous critic of 1714 was not alone in condemning Rowe's attempt to imitate Shakespeare's style in his *Jane Shore*. Pope, who was a friend of Rowe's, and who was speaking without the least malice, stated years afterwards what he thought of the attempt: 'It was mighty simple in Rowe, to write a play now, professedly in Shakespeare's style, that is, professedly in the style of a bad age¹.'

'In the style of a bad age': the words are suggestive of the attitude of the Augustans to the age of Shakespeare. Pope, in fact, refers to it as we might refer to Victorian furniture or architecture—'in the style of a bad age.' To us Shakespeare is an Elizabethan, a dramatist no less than three hundred years away; to Pope and his contemporaries he must have appeared something of a Victorian. It is true that the linguistic changes between 1600 and 1700 were more considerable than those from 1800 to the present day; but that perhaps only intensified the feeling at the beginning of the eighteenth century that Shakespeare was definitely old-fashioned. The frequency of allusion in prologue and epilogue to 'old Shakespear' will indicate the half-affectionate, half-condescending attitude which the thoroughly up-to-date dramatist of 1700 would assume towards this rather antiquated writer. Perhaps no generation has ever been more consciously modern than that which opened the eighteenth century. Time and again one can see how intensely up-to-date it felt itself to be, and, of course, was. The fact that so many people still find the Victorian age rather unpleasant to contemplate should warn us against too hasty a judgment of the Queen Anne wits when they show a certain impatience with our immortal Shakespeare. In 1700 his immortality was still young; he was no more, in fact, than 'old Shakespear,' and there were people still walking the streets who had been born before he died. In 1700, if you were looking for someone quaint to imitate or parody, you would much more naturally turn to Chaucer, or, if he was too hard for you, then to Spenser.

There is one final reason why Shakespeare was so little imitated in the eighteenth century; it should be remembered that the contemporaries of Addison and of Johnson had very definite ideas as to what a play should be. Even if the matter of language be left out of account, there were other features of Shakespeare's plays—the disregard of the unities, the lack of love scenes in most of the tragedies, the mixture of comedy with tragedy, and so on—which offended the eighteenth-century purist. Shakespeare himself might be forgiven, but a modern writer need not think to ride off on the plea that what Shakespeare had done must

¹ *Spence's Anecdotes*, ed. Singer, 1820, p. 174.

necessarily be permissible for others. The prologue to Jephson's *Law of Lombardy* (1779), itself a play with some traces of the older drama¹, puts the matter quite firmly:

Nor let presumptuous poets fondly claim
From rules exemption, by great Shakespeare's name;
Though comets move with wild excentric force,
Yet humbler planets keep their stated course.

When Colley Cibber rewrote *King John* for his own generation, he saw nothing presumptuous in explaining in his dedication, 'I have endeavour'd to make it more like a play than what I found it in Shakespeare.' To the eighteenth century he had certainly succeeded in doing so.

The first, and in some ways the most notable, of Shakespeare's eighteenth-century imitators was Nicholas Rowe. In 1712 the facetious William King had published *The Tragi-Comedy of Joan of Hedington. In Imitation of Shakespear*²; but this play was pure burlesque, and may, indeed, have been written with the purpose of ridiculing Rowe's *Jane Shore*, which the Town was probably by this time expecting. From the first Rowe had shown an interest in the earlier drama; he had, for instance, found the plot for his third play in Massinger's *Fatal Dowry*, and had actually projected an edition of that dramatist³. Not only that, but he upset the critics by introducing archaic words and odd, old-fashioned expressions into his own plays. 'My Soul is come within the ken of Heav'n,' he had written in *Tamerlane*. 'Ken,' he was told by one of his critics, 'is too *Scottish* and familiar for Tragedy⁴.' He was censured, too, for his irregularity and his disregard of dramatic rules. Rowe, in fact, had turned back to the Elizabethans, consciously or unconsciously, for much of his inspiration. It was not, however, until *The Tragedy of Jane Shore. Written in Imitation of Shakespear's Style* (1714) that he openly claimed to be imitating Shakespeare. It was perhaps the prestige that his edition of 1709 had given him that emboldened Rowe to try his startling experiment on the Town; for it was undoubtedly a daring thing to do in that age of correctness. *Jane Shore* ran for fifteen nights, however, between February 2 and 25—a run which was very nearly a record for the theatre of Queen Anne—and it became one of the stock tragedies of the eighteenth century. Of all the imitations of Shakespeare it is certainly the best piece of drama. But had it any merit as an imitation? Not to the critics. Pope, for instance, could see no resemblance. 'I have seen a play professedly

¹ The prologue describes the author as coming 'warm from Shakespeare's school.'

² Published in *Useful Miscellanies*, 1712.

³ *The Bondman*, 1719. *The Bookseller to the Reader*.

⁴ *A Comparison between the Two Stages*, 1702, pp. 187-8.

writ in the style of Shakespear; wherein the resemblance lay in one single line,

And so good morrow t'ye, good master Lieutenant¹.

The critic is being a little unjust here, and in consequence he has managed to make two slips: he has misquoted the line, and it is not from *Jane Shore* at all, but from Rowe's last play, *Lady Jane Gray*.

But Rowe's claim to be imitating Shakespeare is not quite so absurd as Pope makes out. Here and there, for example, there are such obvious echoes as

And the long Train of Frailties Flesh is Heir to,

and there is one whole scene, where Gloster gives orders for the death of Hastings, which keeps very close to Shakespeare. As might be expected, he relies too much for his Elizabethan atmosphere upon tags like 'Beshrew my heart!' and 'Soft ye, now,' and upon obsolete words like 'resty' and 'hilding.' Once or twice he descends so low as 'Avaunt, base groom!' But Rowe had undoubtedly learnt something from his editing—Shakespeare's profusion of metaphor, his habit of cumulative description, his fondness for coining words. 'Thus to coy it!' is the exclamation of Hastings when Jane repulses his advances. Sometimes, too, he catches a rhythm that might have been Shakespeare's:

These trickling Drops chase one another still,
As if the posting Messengers of Grief
Could overtake the Hours fled far away,
And make old Time come back.

The tears are Rowe's, the manner is more like Shakespeare's. Nor is it merely in the language that Shakespeare's influence may be found. *Jane Shore* was something that the neo-classical critics generally deplored in the drama: it was almost a historical play. True, his immediate model for this type of drama was not Shakespeare, but that despised dramatist, John Banks, an author of the previous generation as unlucky with his plays as Rowe was fortunate. But though the influence of Banks is obvious, it is Shakespeare who must be given the credit, and some of the blame, for *Jane Shore*.

It was possibly the appearance of Rowe's play that encouraged Theobald to write his poem in imitation of Shakespeare, which was published in the same year as *Jane Shore*—1714. *The Cave of Poverty, A Poem*.

¹ *Works*, ed. Elwin and Courthope, x, p. 372. Cf. Johnson (*Lives of the Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, II, p. 69): 'The numbers, the diction, the sentiments, and the conduct, every thing in which imitation can consist, are remote in the utmost degree from the manner of Shakespeare. . . .' And cf. also *An Examen Of The New Comedy, Call'd The Suspicious Husband* . . . , 1747, p. 45.

Written in Imitation of Shakespeare, a longish exercise in the *Venus and Adonis* stanza, was dedicated to the Earl of Halifax. 'I know,' wrote Theobald, 'Your Lordship's Discernment will easily perceive, that my Imitation is very Superficial; extending only to the borrowing of some of his Words, without being able to follow him in the Position of them, his Style, or his Elegance.' This is on the whole true; but unfortunately Theobald seems frequently to be borrowing his words from Spenser rather than from Shakespeare, e.g.,

Mean while around the Walls fresh Murmurs creep
Like Notes of soft-ton'd Flutes on silver *Thames*:
Like *Philomel* that sings the Night asleep,
Or purling Sounds of gentle-gliding Streams.

Theobald was still a young man; he would have done better than this a few years later. He has imitated Shakespeare, however, in his compound adjectives—'the Dew-bedabled Lev'ret,' 'Hell-pleasing Pray'rs,' 'the tender-hefted Swain,' 'the hot and fiery-pointed Sun.' But besides these and other quite recognisable attempts to imitate Shakespeare, there are more general traces of his influence on young Theobald's imagination, an influence which is not the less general because it may sometimes be referred to particular passages in his master, e.g.,

Thro' Thee, the Sea-boy climbs the giddy Mast,
And hears the furious Winds around him roar;
Beholds the whiten'd Surge; nor stands aghast,
Whilst curling Billows lash the sounding Shore.

Theobald was no Chatterton born out of his proper century; but it is at least significant that he never wrote so well as when he was attempting to reproduce the style and idiom of an earlier day. His work in the normal eighteenth-century manner is undistinguished, and, indeed, undistinguishable.

The question as to whether Theobald wrote *The Double Falsehood*, or whether, as he himself asserted, he made only some corrections in the manuscript, is hardly relevant here; for this tragedy, whether genuine or spurious, bears more resemblance to the work of one of Shakespeare's lesser contemporaries than of Shakespeare himself. There is, however, one other play of Theobald's which deserves a passing note. This is *Orestes, A Dramatic Opera* (1731). Theobald admitted to Warburton that in this play (which is much nearer a tragedy than an opera) he had imitated Shakespeare, particularly *Macbeth* and *Lear*¹. Actually, however, the most interesting signs of Shakespearean influence are to be found in the two comic scenes of the shipwrecked sailors. Those two scenes necessitated

¹ R. F. Jones, *Lewis Theobald*, p. 151.

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prose; and the Grecian crew provided that almost forgotten touch of comic relief which the tragic drama of Theobald's own day absolutely forbade.

In 1725 a young Scottish poet wrote one of the most remarkable imitations of Shakespeare that the eighteenth century produced. A descriptive poem on Winter, it was the work of John Armstrong, afterwards celebrated as the author of *The Art of Preserving Health*. According to Armstrong, his imitation had just been completed when James Thomson's poem on the same subject appeared; but it is hard to believe that Armstrong was not unconsciously imitating his fellow-countryman as well as Shakespeare. Such a passage as this:

The shivering clown digs his obstructed way
Thro' the snow-barricadoed cottage door;
And muffled in his home-spun plaid encounters
With livid cheeks and rheum-distilling nose
The morning's sharp and scourging breath¹.

has more in common with the poet of the *Seasons* than with Shakespeare; but the extract is hardly fair to Armstrong, who can do much better than that. Besides the poem on Winter, Armstrong left two other imitations of Shakespeare, apparently written about the same time; these are fragments of a tragedy, attempted, as he tells us, 'at an age much too early for such achievements.' They are wild and bombastic in their utterance, and yet the imagination of a poet peeps, like the morn in one of his fragments, 'through the blotted thick-brow'd east.'

The airy citadel,
Perch'd like an eagle on a high-brow'd rock,
Shook the salt water from its stubborn sides
With eager quaking; the Cyclades appear'd
Like ducking Cormorants—Such a mutiny
Out-clamour'd all tradition...².

This is not quite Shakespeare, but neither is it Armstrong. Those early exercises of the young and untutored poet are perhaps the best examples we have of Shakespeare inspiring an enthusiastic imitator to write better than he knew. Armstrong, however, gave way to his century, and steered his course towards safer shores. *The Art of Preserving Health* contains many mature and delightful passages, but there is nothing in it of that reckless and promising failure which he had shown while he was still under the spell of Shakespeare.

A much more pedestrian imitation of Shakespeare appeared in 1737—William Havard's *King Charles the First, An Historical Tragedy. Written*

¹ First printed in *Miscellanies; By John Armstrong, M.D.*, 1770, I, p. 150.

² *Miscellanies*, p. 163.

in *Imitation of Shakespear*. With it we may link William Shirley's *Edward the Black Prince; Or, The Battle of Poitiers, An Historical Tragedy. Attempted after the Manner of Shakespear* (1750). They may be taken together because, unless one were told, one would hardly guess that they were imitations of Shakespeare at all. Even to the eighteenth-century reader the imitation was not apparent. 'It is very lucky,' one critic wrote in 1751, 'for that Gentleman who has enrich'd the World with the *Black-Prince*, that he thought of telling his Readers in his Title-Page that he aim'd at the manner of *Shakespear*, since without that Help, it would have been impossible for the most discerning Critic to discover the Similitude¹.' Apart from an occasional flash in this play, e.g.,

... the winds
That hang the curling billows in the clouds—

there is little in the language that has the least trace of Shakespeare. What, then, did Havard and Shirley think that they were doing? Both plays take their themes from English history, and to that extent provoke comparison with Shakespeare; and though neither is exactly a chronicle play both of them disregard the unities. There can be no doubt that many eighteenth-century dramatists chafed under the restrictions which the neo-classical idea of tragedy imposed upon them. The tone of regretful acquiescence is well seen in the prologue written by George Colman for Francklin's *Earl of Warwick* (1766):

In Shakespear's days, when his advent'rous muse,
A muse of fire! durst each bold license use,
Her noble ardour met no critic's phlegm,
To check wild fancy, or her flights condemn:
Ariels and Calibans unblam'd she drew,
Or goblins, ghosts, and witches, brought to view.
If to historic truth she shap'd her verse,
A nation's annals freely she'd rehearse;
Bring Rome's or England's story on the stage,
And run, in three short hours, thro' half an age.
Our bard, all terror-struck, and fill'd with dread,
In Shakespear's awful footsteps dares not tread...
Slowly and cautiously his way he makes,
And fears to fall at ev'ry step he takes.

It would appear, therefore, that when an eighteenth-century dramatist professed to imitate Shakespeare he was sometimes only sheltering from the storm of hostile criticism which any departure from the recognised rules would bring upon his head. Shirley, however, was taken to task by

¹ *An Essay on the New Species of Writing Founded by Mr. Fielding*, 1751 (Bodleian: Godw. Pamph. 1859), pp. 36-7.

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an anonymous Gentleman of the Inner Temple who wrote a short criticism of his play:

It is very certain that *Shakespeare* never observed any Rule, but that essential one of *Character*, and it is as certain perhaps that *Shakespeare* was the best Dramatick Writer the World ever produced; from hence it has been urged, that Rules are not at all necessary, since we are not offended at the Breach of them in *Shakespeare*. To which I answer, that every Man of true Judgment is offended at it, though we suffer or excuse his Faults, on account of his amazing Excellencies. And it is absurd to suppose, that if he had followed the Critical Rules (which are only Observations on Nature) and wrote with the same Spirit, that it would not have given to his Works a great Addition both of Fame and Excellence¹.

Shirley further annoyed this critic by introducing a ghost, and by the battle on the stage with which the play closes. Those two plays of Havard and of Shirley, then, are examples of imitation in which the imitator tries hardly at all to copy the language, but rather the general form of a Shakespearean play; and this may explain how difficult it sometimes is to recognise any likeness at all in those professed imitations of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century.

There is perhaps another reason: the imitator was often unwilling to repeat what he considered to be the faults of Shakespeare. This difficulty was noticed by the critic of 1751 quoted above. 'I don't think an Imitator is tied down to so strict an Adherence to his Original, as to transcribe his Defects as well as his Beauties: For a good Painter will soften an ugly Feature in a Portrait. . . .²' On the other hand, William Kenrick, in the preface to *Falstaff's Wedding* (1766), admitted that it had been necessary in some places to copy the blemishes of his author. It is unlikely that either Havard or Shirley would have agreed with him on this point. Shirley, indeed, seems to have aimed in his imitation at getting the best out of both types of drama, the Elizabethan and the neo-classical. In this, perhaps, he was only following up a trail that Aaron Hill had blazed rather uncertainly in 1716. In his dedication to *The Fatal Vision: Or, The Fall of Siam*, Hill had stated: 'I have endeavoured to observe the rules, with all the necessary strictness. And yet, at the same time, indulge the common taste, for *fullness of design*; and *business*, as our players call it. This *new* essay to reconcile the *ancient*, and the *modern* plans of Tragedy (the first endeavour of the kind) may possibly deserve improvement, from some future imitator.' Hill's statement is an interesting indication of how the average playgoer continued to appreciate 'fullness

¹ *An Examen of the Historical Play of Edward the Black Prince. By a Gentleman of the Inner Temple*, 1750, pp. 6-7.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-9. Pope laughs at those imitators whose imitation consists in 'copying the imperfections or blemishes of celebrated authors' (*The Art of Sinking in Poetry; Works*, ed. Elwin and Courthope, x, p. 372).

of design and business,' though the critics had managed to intimidate the playwrights into the construction of monotonously 'correct' and uneventful tragedies.

A half-hearted attempt at imitating Shakespeare was made by William Hawkins, who as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1751–6) lectured on Shakespeare and endeavoured to defend him from his eighteenth-century critics. *Henry and Rosamond. A Tragedy* (1749) is not so bad a play as a professor might be expected to write; but Hawkins could not persuade the managers to produce it—a fact which is noted with some bitterness in the preface. He did not claim in his title-page to be imitating Shakespeare, but when attacked by Goldsmith in the *Critical Review* (August, 1759) he admitted the charge¹, and only reproached himself for having imitated Shakespeare spasmodically, and not throughout. Hawkins was undoubtedly loitering rather nervously in Shakespeare's footsteps; but much of his imitation goes no further back for its original than Otway, or even Rowe.

Chalmers, in his life of Sir William Jones, states that he left behind him a tragedy which 'has been totally lost, except part of a preface, in which he professes to have taken Shakespeare for his model, not by adopting his sentiments or borrowing his expressions, but by aiming at his manner, and by striving to write as he supposes he would have written himself, if he had lived in the eighteenth century².' It is not easy to imagine what this play could have been like; it must certainly have adhered to the unities, and had probably a diction entirely acceptable to the eighteenth century. It must, in fact, have been another of those imitations with almost no superficial resemblance to the work of Shakespeare. Clearly, therefore, the imitation of an ancient author meant more than one thing to the eighteenth century. There was the attempt to write a poem or a play which might be mistaken for the work of the author imitated; there was the imitation of such a poet as Horace, which generally consisted in taking one of his odes and rewriting it with modern allusions or in aiming at the tone and general scope of his satires; and there was this ambitious endeavour to say for an ancient writer what he might be expected to say for himself if he revisited the modern world and became naturalised to it. The method of Sir William Jones here seems to have something in common with that which Oldisworth assures us was pursued by Edmund Smith. 'When he was upon a Subject, he would seriously consider what

¹ *A Review of the Works of the Rev. Mr. Hawkins. . . . By an Impartial Reader*, MDCCLX, p. 47. The 'impartial reader' is almost certainly Hawkins himself.

² *The Works of the English Poets*, 1810, xviii, p. 433.

34 *Shakespeare's Imitators in the Eighteenth Century*

Demosthenes, Homer, Virgil, or Horace, if alive, would say upon that Occasion . . .¹

In 1766 one of the most successful dramatic imitations of Shakespeare was published: *Falstaff's Wedding: A Comedy. Being A Sequel to the Second Part of the Play Of King Henry The Fourth. Written in Imitation of Shakespeare. By Mr. Kenrick*. The title-page is dated 1760, the preface 1766; but that is apparently to be explained by Kenrick's statement in the preface that the play had remained 'six years in the bookseller's warehouse after it was printed.' This delay was presumably due to the fact that Kenrick was hoping to have the play performed, and publication was held up in consequence. According to Kenrick, *Falstaff's Wedding* was a juvenile piece, 'written so long ago as the year 1751.' His friends had persuaded him to offer it to Garrick, who called it the only good imitation of Shakespeare he had ever met with, but failed to accept it. Garrick's explanation was that he could not venture 'to bring so many known characters of Shakespeare's upon the stage in a new performance,' but the excuses which a harassed manager makes for rejecting a play he does not want should not, perhaps, be examined too closely. Nevertheless the play was ultimately accepted, and performed at Drury Lane on April 12, 1766. 'As to its applause,' Kenrick writes, 'it was not indeed attended with that forced and melancholy clapping, which is mechanically clattered from the partial hands of a paper-raised audience; but, if an involuntary roar of laughter, from the beginning to the end of the play, be applause; this it certainly had².'

Kenrick began, of course, with certain definite advantages; he was simply taking over Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, and the rest from Shakespeare, and adding a few characters of his own creation. The same type of imitation was carried through more or less successfully by F. G. Waldron at the end of the century in *The Virgin Queen, A Drama in Five Acts; Attempted As A Sequel To Shakespeare's Tempest* (1797). Kenrick is more conscious than Shakespeare's early imitators of the changes in language and outlook, and is therefore better able to lay hold of the altered idiom and vocabulary. He is also imitating the comedy of Shakespeare; and that, as has been suggested, is easier to copy than the tragedy. The merit of his play, indeed, lies entirely in the Falstaff scenes; the part which deals (in blank verse) with the plot against the King and his romantic love

¹ *The Works of Mr. Edmund Smith . . . To which is prefix'd, A Character of Mr. Smith, by Mr. Oldisworth* (3rd edition, 1719, p. 10).

² The authority for this and the preceding statements about Kenrick's play will be found in *A Letter to David Garrick, Esq. From William Kenrick LL.D., 1772* (3rd edition the same year). The play was apparently taken off after a single performance.

affair fails, as usual, to catch more than a few distant echoes of Shakespeare's style. Kenrick's success is due to the fact that he does really know his Falstaff; he has got inside the fat knight's skin. The result is that *Falstaff's Wedding* frequently rings almost true, and is often genuinely amusing. *The Virgin Queen* is not quite so successful, partly because Caliban is less easy to imitate than Falstaff, and also because a considerable part of the play is serious and therefore shows up the imitator more unkindly. It is not, however, exactly a failure, except, perhaps, in the treatment of Ariel who continually sinks through Waldron's verse and becomes merely mortal.

There are other dramatists who wrote successful imitations of the earlier drama, e.g., Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) and James Tobin's *The Honey-Moon* and *The Curfew*¹, but who were not professedly imitating Shakespeare. Ireland's *Vortigern*, too, falls within the limits of the century; but it is scarcely a professed imitation either, and has been too fully discussed to require further treatment here. One hardly knows whether to commend the cleverness of the forger, or to marvel at the obtuseness of the public which he managed to delude. *Vortigern*, however, did produce a remarkable sequel, one of the few successful parodies of Shakespeare. This was Henry Dudley Bates's *Passages Selected by Distinguished Personages, On the Great Literary Trial of Vortigern and Rowena*, which appeared in five parts between 1795 and 1807. Misplaced ingenuity can rarely have gone further. The passages selected were not, of course, taken from *Vortigern* at all, but were the work of Dudley himself. Many of them are far nearer to Shakespeare than the best passages in Ireland's forgery, and if their author had avoided a tendency to exaggerate the antiquated spelling they would be even better than they are. The following is a good specimen of Dudley's skill:

I remember me a Prisonne-keeper's daughter at Aleppo, whom a haire-brained Counte did rescue from her iron bondage; and yet, forgetful of her own deliverance, she did afterwards employ her matron-houres in setting silken springes, to catch you littel boyes, as they do larkes on a furzeblowne common!

By this time the imitator of Shakespeare was writing for a far more critical audience than Nicholas Rowe had to satisfy in 1714; and the measure of difference may be seen by comparing the imitation of Rowe with those of Dudley, almost a hundred years later.

The growing sense of responsibility towards Shakespeare's text, which came with a more intimate knowledge of his works and his age, is further illustrated by the changing attitude of those who adapted his plays for

¹ Printed in 1805 and 1807, but written earlier. Tobin died in 1804.

the eighteenth-century stage. Men like Hill and Cibber had made little attempt to bring their additional scenes and interpolations into line with those parts of Shakespeare which they retained; but as the century wore on, conscientious efforts were made to ensure that the modern additions should not look out of place in the original play. William Hawkins, who endeavoured to make *Cymbeline* acceptable to his own generation (*Cymbeline. A Tragedy, Altered from Shakespeare. . . MDCCLIX.*), indicated in the preface how he had approached the task of modernising Shakespeare. 'I have thought it an honour to tread in his steps, and to imitate his Stile, with the humility and reverence of a *Son*. With this view, I have retained in *many* places the very language of the original author, and in *all* others endeavoured to supply it with a diction similar thereunto; so that, as an unknown friend of mine has observed, the present attempt is intirely *new*, whether it be considered as an *alteration from*, or an *imitation of Shakespeare*¹.' Similarly, the title-page of James Goodhall's *King Richard II. A Tragedy. Alter'd from Shakespear, And The Stile Imitated* (1772) shows the same anxiety to respect the age in which his author wrote. Goodhall, however, did not succeed in getting his play produced².

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the influence of Shakespeare on eighteenth-century drama was much more considerable than a survey of the professed imitations would indicate. A 'tang of Shakespeare' is to be found in many dramatists who do not claim to imitate him at all. The actual professed imitation of Shakespeare only shows more distinctly an influence that was at work in many unexpected places. That his imitators had so little success need hardly be wondered at; their task, as has been indicated, was beset with difficulties. 'I don't know,' writes the anonymous critic of 1751, 'whether their Task, if they arrive at any Perfection in it, is not more difficult than that of a good Translator. For they must write in the Manner of the copied Author, without taking his very Thoughts, and when they enter upon a Subject, must go on with it not as he has, but as he would have pursued it. It requires a great deal of Judgment, and a very intent Perusal of a Man's Works to fall exactly into a similar Method of Stile and Sentiment with him'³.

JAMES R. SUTHERLAND.

¹ Cf. also the Prologue:

Happy the varied phrase, if none shall call,
This imitation; that original.

² In addition to the titles given in the text, the following are also relevant: *A Fit of the Spleen. In Imitation of Shakespear*. By Dr. Ibbot (*A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, 1758, v, p. 202. Ibbot died in 1725); *Epilogue to Shakespear's first Part of King Henry IV. . . 1748; Spoken by Mr. J. Y. in the Character of Falstaff. . . (ibid., p. 281); A Letter To A Member of Parliament. . . To Which is annex'd. A Meditation On A Great Man, After the Manner of Sir John Falstaff. . . (Bodleian, 1730?)*.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-9.