Antedating Shakespeare's Poems and Plays

Antedating Shakespeare's Poems and Plays

By

Penny McCarthy

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Antedating Shakespeare's Poems and Plays

By Penny McCarthy

This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-1003-2
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-1004-9

For Callum, Tom, Chris and Melissa

“So finally flyeth this our new Poete, as a bird”
E. K. in *The Shepheardes Calender*, Edmund Spenser

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

PREFACE

The academic community of Shakespeare scholars still tends to believe that the chronology of Shakespeare's plays and poems is more or less fixed. It will allow only a little tinkering with a few plays that may possibly be moved to slightly earlier dates. The studies by James Shapiro of plays supposedly written in 1599 and in 1606 enjoy huge success. Theatre programmes invariably give the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 as the context for *Macbeth*, and William Strachey's account of the New World, particularly the part involving the wreck of the *Sea Venture* in 1609, as the trigger for *The Tempest*. Edited texts follow suit, describing Shakespeare as a late starter who served an apprenticeship collaborating on plays he later revised and claimed as his. He supposedly wrote three plays a year from the mid-1590s, some problem plays around the turn of the century, then his greatest tragedies, and some "romances" late in his career.

But Brian Cummings has stated that this settled consensus is sitting on a pile of dynamite. He hints at the works of Thomas Nashe, whose mischievous allusions seem to point at the existence of plays of Shakespeare's at far earlier dates than the consensus assigns for them. Arthur Marotti has emphasized the continuing prevalence of manuscript and oral transmission even in an "age of print", opening the way for speculating on long pre-publication lives for the works. Margreta de Grazia and Tiffany Stern have recently clarified how closely the consensus remains dependent on Edmond Malone's original chronology for the plays, proposed in 1788, and then on Edward Dowden's of 1874; and how we should be thinking more of extended dates of "writing", a term that should include all alterations and revisions, authorial and by others. This signals a sea change: the time is ripe for rethinking the whole subject.

This study builds on these latter insights to argue for far earlier dates of "being-in-the-world" of six of Shakespeare's plays and most of his poems. It spells out the precariousness of the status quo, and presents evidence that should upset it. This is done chiefly through searching out oblique allusion to Shakespeare's words in contemporary literary works–especially those of Nashe, but also of Ben Jonson and many others. The notion of "Shakespeare's spongy mind", as an absorber of the words of others, is refuted, and the direction of influence reversed. These others are parodying, imitating, "cashing in on" him, not *vice versa*.

This overturning of the consensus is essential for a number of reasons. The accepted chronology is demonstrably flawed. Its abandonment will affect deeply held scholarly beliefs that have permeated the whole culture. And the evidence presented here has implications for other assumptions commonly made about Shakespeare's practice, biography and affiliations. Chief among the new conclusions are his close adherence to the Sidney/Dudley/Pembroke patronage circle; a period under Lord Burghley's patronage and later adherence to Elizabeth Carey's circle; his knowledge of French and Italian literature; and his comparative distance from the world of dramatic collaboration for the city theatres.

I am grateful to Taylor & Francis for permission to use material from my Ashgate imprint *Pseudonymous Shakespeare: Rioting Language in the Sidney* Circle (2006); to Mellen editions for permission to use my essay "Some *quises* and *quems*: Shakespeare's true debt to Nashe" in the *Shakespeare Yearbook* 14, edited by Douglas A. Brooks (2004); to Graham Holderness, editor of *Critical Survey*, for permission to reuse my essay "*Cymbeline*: 'The first essay of a new Brytish Poet'?", 21.2 (2009); and to Robert Potts at the *Times Literary Supplement* for permission to reuse material from my essay on *The Tempest*, "Stuff as dreams are made on", of 21 July, 2023. I thank the Smithsonian Library for permission to reproduce images taken from the title page of John Gerard's *Herball* of 1597. Sydney Fitzgibbon, Library Technician of the Special Collections of the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives has been most helpful. I thank Taylor & Francis again, and Catherine Taylor in particular, for permission to reproduce a chart showing syllabic position in Shakespeare's *Lovers Complaint,* from Marina Tarlinskaja's *Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama, 1561-1642* (Ashgate, 2014).

I thank my family (as ever), especially those computer-literate ones who have lent their aid in preparing the typescript–Lawrence Eagar with his page-numbering, Isadora McCarthy with technical advice, and Eva Stenram with images. Brian Cummings, Penelope Corfield, Gerit Quealy and William Leahy have given welcome encouragement; and Matt Hutchison provided much-needed confidence-boosting at a critical moment. It was he who suggested Cambridge Scholars Publishing as a possible publisher, and to them also I am most grateful. Alison Duffy and Adam Rummens could not have been more attentive and reassuring.

ABBREVIATIONS

CS	*Critical Survey*
EIC	*Essays in Criticism*
ELR	*English Literary Renaissance*
ES	*English Studies*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JEMS	*Journal of Early Modern Studies*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MP	*Modern Philology*
N&Q	*Notes and Queries*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SCJ	*Sixteenth Century Journal*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*
Sh. Q.	*Shakespeare Quarterly*
Sh. S.	*Shakespeare Survey*
SLI	*Studies in the Literary Imagination*
Sp. St.	*Spenser Studies*
TLS	*Times Literary Supplement*
TSLL	*Texas Studies in Literature and Language*

INTRODUCTION

TREBLE-DATED

"He began early"
John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*

"He began early to make essayes at Dramatique Poetry", wrote the antiquarian John Aubrey in his *Brief Lives* sketch of William Shakespeare.[1] Did he really? Or was he, as most Shakespeareans believe, a late starter, far too immature to be a writer at an age when Marlowe, his exact contemporary, was fully fledged? This study puts forward evidence for seeing Shakespeare as "treble-dated": a very early starter, a recaster, a reviser.

The phrase "treble-dated crow" is taken from his strange poem "Phoenix and the Turtle", and adverts to the belief that crows lived three times as long as other birds. The way I mean to apply the conceit–not as concerned with longevity, but with stages of writing and rewriting–becomes clear in Chapter 1. (The poem itself is analysed in Chapter 7.) In this introductory chapter, I outline the negative and the positive approaches I shall be taking: scepticism about the methods and conclusions of consensus scholarly dating of the composition of Shakespeare's works, on the one hand; and faith in other methods that favour ascription of earlier dates to the works under consideration, on the other.

Aubrey was writing in the last decades of the seventeenth century (his manuscript *Brief Lives* spans many years), far removed from many of the lives he describes, and therefore his testimony should be treated with caution. But on what grounds, exactly, should this remark about Shakespeare be rejected, as it normally is? Shakespeareans will answer something like this: "Though it is hard to date Shakespeare's works precisely, a broad consensus about the span of possible dates for each

[1] *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 275-76.

work has been reached by the academic community, and might as well be accepted until evidence to the contrary turns up. The consensus is against an Early Start."

The answer is not satisfactory in itself. If the consensus really is provisional, it should be constantly testing its own deductions–and if that means "to destruction", then so be it. Evidence to the contrary (of varying degrees of strength) *has* turned up, and has been ignored or rejected. There is, besides, much unnoticed evidence to the same effect.

By "the consensus" on chronology (to treat it as uniform when plainly it is not) I mean the mainstream general agreement with the research findings of Edmond Malone, the first to attempt a chronology of the plays, in 1788.[2] It is that Shakespeare started writing his poems and plays probably not much before 1590–and some would say 1593/4;[3] that he wrote about two or three plays a year steadily through the later 1590s (which I consider so unlikely as not to need rebuttal); and that a considerable number were written in the first twelve or so years of the seventeenth century, in particular, a group dubbed "Romances". None of the dates assigned to his poems are much questioned, the most usual assumption being that they were composed only shortly before they appeared in print.

Until very recently, few questioned the broad consensus, which is clearly expressed by MacDonald P. Jackson, for example, in his essay in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*: "The approximate order in which Shakespeare's plays were written and their dates of first performance (spanning the period 1590-1614) have now been securely established . . . A skeleton chronology can be provided by such matters as entry of plays in the Stationers' Register and/or their appearance in print; the date when known sources became available . . ." (Jackson is probably thinking of availability in English, the assumption being that Shakespeare could not have relied on texts in another language). He continues with ". . . records

[2] Edmond Malone, "An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written", in *The Plays of William Shakespeare in Ten Volumes*, eds. Samuel Johnson and George Steevens (1778), 2nd edn., I.269–346.

[3] Bart van Es may be taken as representative of the contemporary mainstream as regards the plays' chronology. He lists only four plays as pre-1592: the forerunners of *Henry VI*, Parts 2 and 3, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. See Bart van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 312-14.

of performance or other references to particular plays; and allusions within plays to identifiable historical events and circumstances".[4]

Individual scholars have, it is true, antedated the composition of individual works, but not by a great deal, except where they are *parti pris*, wishing to ascribe Shakespeare's works to another (usually to Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford), and succumbing to the temptation to rely too much on possible topical allusion to the circumstances and events of their preferred candidate's life. The complexity of the range of dates given, and the reasons for them, makes it unhelpful (I believe) to detail them in the course of this study. But anyone consulting Kevin Gilvary's *Dating Shakespeare's Plays* will find that the information in the summaries at the end of the treatment of each play, the "Works cited" sections and the charts in the Appendix, is comprehensive and useful.[5] It also anticipates the shift taking place in more recent editions of the collected works (see below) by giving a date range, from the earliest possible to the latest possible date, rather than a fixed single date of composition.

The research of E. A. J. Honigmann is in quite another category from that of the *parti pris* investigators.[6] He starts with a challenge to those who accept the consensus to state why–in the absence of evidence–they plump for later dates; and he does not, as they do, make *a priori* assumptions. He adduces literary and documentary evidence for his shifting of Shakespeare's acts of composition backward in time. He is the lodestar of Early Dating scholarship, while its most vociferous exponent is Eric Sams.[7]

Honigmann gives Shakespeare a start date of 1586 with "Phoenix and the Turtle", and assigns ten of his plays (plus a doubtful proto-*Hamlet*) to dates preceding 1592.[8] But he leaves the two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, in 1592/3 and 1593/4; and his concern is simply to antedate the earlier plays, thus dragging the whole corpus a stage

---

[4] MacDonald P. Jackson, "Authorship and the evidence of stylometrics", in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy,* eds. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 103-104.

[5] Kevin Gilvary, ed., *Dating Shakespeare's Plays: A Critical Review of the Evidence* (Tunbridge Wells: Parapress, 2011).

[6] See E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare's Impact on his Contemporaries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 54-69.

[7] Eric Sams, *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564-1594* (London: Yale University Press, 1995).

[8] E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The Lost Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985, rprt. 2013), 128.

back. He does not engage in drastic redating of the "later" plays. Sams deals with the years up to 1594, claiming many of the apocryphal plays and doubtful "Source plays" (see below) for Shakespeare. He is more of a presiding spirit for this study than an avatar: I do not subscribe to his view on Shakespeare as an apprentice collaborator in the theatre of the late 1580s.

Recently, more welcome cracks have started to appear in the consensus. Brian Cummings verbally expressed his scepticism about the accepted chronology in 2009 at a symposium at the Globe Theatre: "There is a chronological time-bomb under Shakespeare", he said, pointing to Thomas Nashe's mischievous apparent references to phrases in Shakespeare's plays long before they were supposed to have been extant. Margreta de Grazia has undermined the whole notion of a sure chronology of Shakespeare's works, given our developing understanding of possible dramatic collaboration, and of revision by the author, theatre company, printers and editors.[9] She logs newer editions of the plays that eschew chronological ordering, but points out that some, notably Norton and Oxford, continue to cling to it (pages 102-104). And very recently, Tiffany Stern has signalled that a sea-change in attitudes may be underway by highlighting the faulty criteria according to which we have been trying to fix composition dates and the sequence of the plays.[10] She questions, as did de Grazia, the notion of a single date when a play was written, a line of argument anticipated by James Marino (discussed in Chapter 1 below) and practised by Gilvary.[11]

Though these shifts are welcome in that they loosen the rigidity of past determinations as to dates of composition, they concomitantly run the danger of making chronology seem pointless. I argue, to the contrary, that there is a great deal of positive evidence for earlier dates. The poems, where collaboration is not in question, have been particularly neglected in this respect. And it is remarkable that despite their doubts about the usefulness or attainability of a correct chronology, the sceptics do not evince any qualms about leaving *Macbeth*'s composition in 1606, and accept without question the thesis of "late romances".

To the arguments of the newly sceptical, I mean to add positive evidence. I shall tackle only those works of Shakespeare's for which I can

---

[9] Margreta de Grazia, *Four Shakespearean Period Pieces* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).

[10] Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare, Malone and the Problems of Chronology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[11] James Marino, *Owning William Shakespeare: The King's Men and Their Intellectual Property* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

provide a modicum of evidence for antedating, or arguments that are at least as plausible as those now offered for the status quo. The works are: the two narrative poems; "Phoenix and the Turtle" and *A Lover's Complaint* (but not the *Sonnets*); the Henry IV plays; *The Tempest*; *Macbeth*; *Cymbeline* and *Pericles*. Some other plays come into the discussion at various points to reinforce the main branches of the argument: *The Comedy of Errors*, *King John*, *Loves Labours Lost*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing, The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Nights Dream*. To have tackled more than this in one study would have been impossible, and I merely hope that my suggestions will form a starting point, a re-launch, rather, for sceptical re-evaluation of the accepted chronology. I have some hope that it might, because the displacement of even one work can have a disruptive effect on others supposedly in its temporal vicinity.

It must be emphasized that while the project is of course concerned with the composition dates of the works in question, the focus is chiefly on that state of solid being-in-public that precedes being "extant", as the title page of the "Diverse Poeticall Essaies" appended to the 1601 compendium *Loves Martyr* puts it. The claim there is that the poems included, with Shakespeare's "Phoenix and the Turtle" among them, were "never before extant". My claim is that this means they were in circulation, but not in print.

So in the case of the works studied below, the aim is to establish that they were *known to others* in their complete form, well enough known to be obliquely cited or parodied or imitated, long before their appearance in printed versions. In the case of the plays, that means either staged or circulated, most probably in manuscript. In the case of the poems, it implies manuscript circulation, or perhaps a reading among friends.

The evidence for wide-spread circulation of this sort is strong. Edmund Spenser's publisher William Ponsonby tells the "Gentle reader" that he has tried to get into his hands such poems of his author as "were disperst abroad in sundrie hands", in order to publish them together as "Complaints" in 1591.[12] Lodowick Bryskett reveals the potentialities of semi-public oral transmission in the opening pages of his *Discourse of Civill Life*.[13] He portrays his acquaintances in Ireland assembling for three evenings in a row to hear him give a trial reading of his English translation of the *Tre dialoghi della vita civile* of Giambattista Giraldi (Cinthio). The

[12] *Edmund Spenser, Poetical Works*, eds. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912, rprt. 1989), 270. Subsequently "*Spenser: Works*".
[13] Lodowick Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civill Life* (London: Edward Blount, 1606).

historical verisimilitude of Bryskett's introductory matter is generally accepted.

Arthur Marotti has made a study of the phenomenon of manuscript and oral transmission in the period, showing how prevalent it was.[14] Similarly, a study by Henry Woudhuysen, primarily concerned with Philip Sidney's work, proves that manuscript circulation continued to be widely used even in the "age of print".[15] Though we rarely find such manuscripts, their once-wide circulation is assured by the authors' complaints in print about misuse of manuscript copies; or by their friends' fretting about imminent unauthorized publication, as in the case of Philip Sidney's posthumously published *Arcadia*.[16] Examples of complaints from more lowly authors are those of Abraham Fraunce in 1587, concerning his *Lamentations of Amyntas*,[17] and of Thomas Nashe in the dedication of *The Terrors of the Night* (1594):[18]

> The urgent importunitie of a kinde frend . . . wrested a Coppie from mee. That Coppie progressed from one scrivener to another, & at length grew so common, that it was readie to be hung out for one of their signes, like a paire of indentures. Where upon I thought it as good for mee, to reape the frute of my owne labours.
>
> A2$^{r\text{-}v}$

Shakespeare's participation in this pre-print universe is less well attested, except in the case of his sonnets, which we know from Francis Meres were being distributed before 1598 "among his private friends &c.".[19] The existence of two different early versions of *Lucrece* demands a similar conclusion (so I argue, contra Colin Burrow).[20] But it is likely that his other "polite" works had a similar pre-print existence: there is no reason why he should not have shared the practices of his coevals.

"Pre-print" should perhaps read "before the first surviving printed version", since it is possible that there are lost printed editions about which

---

[14] Arthur Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), esp. 2, 11.
[15] Henry Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts, 1558-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
[16] See William Ringler, ed., *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 530.
[17] Woudhuysen, *Circulation*, 89.
[18] Thomas Nashe, *The Terrors of the Night* (London: J. Danter, 1594), A2.
[19] Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (London: P. Short for C. Burbie, 1598), 281^{v}.
[20] Colin Burrow, ed., *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, rprt. 2008), 44. See Chapter 2, below.

we can know little or nothing. Occasionally a page or so of a quarto preceding a quarto hitherto labelled as Q1 turns up–as in the case of *Henry IV, Part 1*–and has to be labelled Q0. Given the erratic implementation of the stationers' rules for entering and registering works for print, presence in the Stationers' Register cannot be relied on as a sure criterion for postulating the date of the "making public" and even the first printing of any work.[21] For entry in the Register can postdate by many years a first appearance as a printed text, as is clear from the case of *Romeo and Juliet's* first registration, ten years after the publication of its first quarto.

Putting print aside and considering only performance, the evidence of Philip Henslowe's theatre diary looks promising, but is hard to assess.[22] Henslowe is logging the amount of money taken at each performance on a particular date. But as de Grazia points out, his records refer to the Admiral's company, not to the Chamberlain's or the King's, to which Shakespeare is known to have belonged.[23] Titles similar to those of Shakespeare's works crop up in Henslowe's theatre log; but the question of whether they are the same plays as the later printed canonical equivalents is moot.[24]

Luckily, there is another fruitful source of indicators for the earlier existence of many of Shakespeare's works. Contemporary literary evidence is key to this study, often in the form of covert allusions so oblique that they are hard to recognize, but once spotted, like puns or the answers to a crossword, hard to reject. Even where the parallelism is obvious, criteria are still sorely needed for determining precedence as between Shakespeare's play and its postulated avatar. The following examples will serve to demonstrate the generalized lack of method in previous criticism for settling priority in obvious cases of parallelism.

Notoriously in the case of *Hamlet*, some awkward early allusions to the title itself by Thomas Nashe in Greene's *Menaphon* of 1589 and Thomas Lodge in his *Wit's Miserie* of 1596 has propelled critics into the evasive manoeuvre of the "Ur-play". It is proposed that an early, now lost, and certainly non-Shakespearean Ur-*Hamlet* did once exist, and Shakespeare later drew on it, probably when composing his play just before the turn of

---

[21] See Peter Blayney, "The publication of playbooks", in *A New History of Early English Drama*, eds. John Cox and David Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 383-422.

[22] *Henslowe's Diary*, eds. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

[23] De Grazia, *Four Shakespearean Period Pieces*, 65.

[24] Henslowe, *Diary*, 21-22, fol. 9. Entries for 5, 9, 11 and 12 of June 1594 list 'andronicous', 'hamlet', 'the tamynge of A shrowe' and 'andronicous' again.

the century. Emma Smith and James Marino have argued forcefully against this manoeuvre, showing how the "Ur-play" is most likely simply the projection of a wish not to associate Shakespeare with an earlier Hamlet play.[25]

A different manoeuvre is to claim a "striking anticipation" of Shakespeare by another writer, critics betraying their bemusement that someone should have seemingly echoed Shakespeare before he could have written the line or scene in question.[26] Marino writes wittily about ploys of this kind: "if the principle that an allusion might precede the text, and that the literary work might be a poetic response to the allusion itself, were to be widely adopted, it would swiftly become impossible to use allusions for dating literary works".[27]

Yet the assumption of Shakespeare's lateness is often allowed to trump other considerations. Ian Donaldson finds anticipations of *The Tempest* and *Othello* in *Every Man In His Humour* (see my *Henry IV* chapter), without raising the possibility that Jonson is parodying or alluding to Shakespeare, or offering criteria for deciding whether this is the case.[28] Instead, he flatly states that Shakespeare borrowed the name "Prospero" from Jonson, and drew on the character of the "obsessively jealous merchant" Thorello to create his own character Othello.

What tends to get suppressed in such determinations of precedence are other possible explanations, and, worse, other more plausible explanations. Parody of, allusion to, homage to, "cashing in on" Shakespeare are *a priori* at least as likely explanations as the dubious notion of Shakespeare's (pointless) imitation of another.

I suggest three criteria for settling priority between Shakespeare and another writer in cases where one appears to be echoing the other. One is appropriateness of vocabulary. The original writer's vocabulary will seem motivated and fitting, while the writer with lexical choices that appear unmotivated, zany, and comically inappropriate must be the imitator. The second is an apparent clumsiness or opacity in a text, which yields its signification only when it is recognized as concealed allusion to a passage

---

[25] Emma Smith, "Ghost Writing: *Hamlet* and the *Ur-Hamlet*", in *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality*, ed. Andrew Murphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 177-90. Marino, *Owning*, 75-79.

[26] Suzanne Gossett claims that George Wilkins's *Law Tricks* contains a scene that "strikingly anticipates" a late scene in *Pericles*. Suzanne Gossett, ed., *Pericles* (London: Arden, 2004), introduction, 162-63.

[27] Marino, *Owning Shakespeare*, 56.

[28] Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 131-32.

in the text of the other. (This is the crossword-solving phenomenon mentioned above.) Thomas Nashe supplies examples of both kinds. His "omnipotent breeches" is comically inappropriate, relating to the saner "omnipotent villain" Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1*; his "good being the character of bad" is bafflingly opaque, but rephrased, reveals itself as a line in *Macbeth*. (See the relevant chapters below for references and explanations.) The third depends on attentiveness to the wider context: the contested passage will fit the whole work better in the original writer than in the imitator, where it will seem dragged in.

Nashe could indeed be a prime resource for dating many of Shakespeare's plays and poems. But Nashe criticism exemplifies the prejudice mentioned above: it simply assumes Nashe's precedence over Shakespeare, offering no criteria for settling the matter.[29] I have put forward these claims in an article and in my monograph *Pseudonymous Shakespeare*, but they have been neither rebutted with good argument, nor accepted–the worst of all worlds.[30]

Underpinning my argumentation from literary allusions is the philosophical principle of falsifiability as stated by Karl Popper, though it is more of a "plausibility principle" here. However many confirming instances of a theory one finds, they will be nullified by a single negative instance. ("All swans are white" nullified by the sighting of a single black swan.) So too, however attractive a topical relevance fit, a stylistic fit (which may include an apparent match with the style of a different author) or a shared "meme" (see below) may seem in dating a play or poem to a particular date, a single strong allusion from an earlier date will act as a black swan, and justify shifting the play by Shakespeare backward in time. Nashe's work contains many of these black swans.

My argument sometimes requires *ruling out* a text as a source for Shakespeare. The outstanding example is William Strachey's account of the Bermuda voyages in 1609/10, with the wreck of the *Sea Venture*. It is the received wisdom that Shakespeare took much of his material for *The Tempest* from Strachey; though the mainstream scholar Arthur Kinney has expressed strong doubts on this score.[31] Roger Stritmatter and Lynne

[29] I shall highlight the criticism of John Tobin and Andrew Hadfield in the course of the book. But the stance is universal.

[30] Penny McCarthy, "Some *quises* and *quems:* Shakespeare's true debt to Nashe", *New Studies in the Shakespearean Heroine* (Shakespeare Yearbook 14), ed. Douglas A. Brooks (Lampeter: Mellen Press, 2004*),* 175-92; *Pseudonymous Shakespeare: Rioting Language in the Sidney Circle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 145-51.

[31] Arthur Kinney, "Revisiting 'The Tempest'", *MP* 93 (1995): 161-77.

Kositsky have done forensic historical work on the timing of the arrival of Strachey's account in England, and the likely reliance of Shakespeare on far earlier travellers' accounts of the New World.[32] In the light of their findings the received view does not look at all like "wisdom", but more like special pleading.

Recent theorizing on intertextuality complicates the whole notion of imitation. Theatrical "memes" are postulated, belonging to no one author but available for dramatists (and by extension writers in other genres) to absorb as if by osmosis, and to recycle.[33] A lack of criteria for detecting parodic intention diminishes the usefulness of the notion; and Hugh Richmond's work on Italian "verismo", whereby a dramatist deliberately adapts a scene or action to their own vernacular, place and times, is a useful corrective to over-ambitious application of meme theory.[34] Verismo has nothing to do with osmosis: it entails that the later writer is a conscious adaptor of a prior work.

A point that should not need airing, but does, is the relevance of any critic's position on other matters, particularly on the authorship question, to their position on the dating of Shakespeare's works. Stritmatter and Kositsky believe Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, wrote Shakespeare's works–necessarily earlier than consensus dating would allow. (Oxford died in 1604.) This has no bearing on the value of their research about the dating of *The Tempest*. We do not reject the concept of DNA because of James Watson's views on intelligence; or indeed gravity because Newton was given to metaphysical musings. Similarly, Kevin Gilvary's useful reference book *Dating Shakespeare's Plays* is in no way compromised by his Oxfordian views.[35] They have prompted him and his collaborators to be alert to indications of earlier dates for Shakespeare's plays, but not to suppress or invent or warp items of their research.

---

[32] Roger A. Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky, *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's "The Tempest"* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013).

[33] Michele Marrapodi, "Shakespeare's Romantic Italy: Novelistic, Theatrical, and Cultural Transactions in the Comedies", in *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare & his Contemporaries*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), Introduction and essay, 1-12, 51-68.

[34] Hugh M. Richmond, "Shakespeare's *verismo* and the Italian popular tradition", in *Theatre of the English and Italian Renaissance*, eds. J. R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 179-203.

[35] See note 5, above.

The same goes for Katherine Chiljan's study of "too-early" reference to Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Suppressed*.[36] She is not a Stratfordian, so her work has been side-lined. But it has many useful insights into possible earlier dating for Shakespeare. As a great professor at Stanford, Jim March, used to say to his graduate classes, "Truth has no motivational subscript".

I place little reliance on topical fit, a stand-by argument for much past criticism (though its grip is weakening). It is insidiously tempting, but precarious. The truth is that almost any set of historical circumstances within perhaps a three-decade period can be mapped onto almost any play or poem, once one is convinced that it belongs at a particular juncture. Martin Butler is rare in questioning such fixed assumptions. He remarks how for all its supposed topical matches with King James and his family, *Cymbeline* seems to cleave to "the old Elizabethan rhetoric of English separateness" rather than to James's peaceable politics.[37] Daniel Amneus detaches *Macbeth* from the Gunpowder Plot.[38] I accept this, and also propose an early historical back-drop for *Pericles*, namely the late 1570s. This last case of drastic antedating has implications, it turns out, for the interpretation of the anonymous early play *The Troublesome Reign of King John,* and for canonical *King John*, *Loves Labours Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *1Henry VI*.

I also mostly eschew statistical stylistic analysis, either to settle authorship or to order Shakespeare's works chronologically. I follow Joseph Rudman in believing the expertise is not well enough developed to be reliable.[39] Anyone who has read Jonathan Bate's candid account of the swings in fortune of the theory of collaboration in *Titus Andronicus* will realize how precarious these attributions are.[40] But for my *Lovers Complaint* investigation and the *Pericles* chapter, I appeal to Marina Tarlinskaja, who studies syllabic stress in the iambic line rather than the "function words", juxtapositions of words, feminine endings and general

---

[36] Katherine Chiljan, *Shakespeare Suppressed: The Uncensored Truth about Shakespeare and his Works* (San Francisco: Faire Editions, 2011).
[37] Martin Butler, ed., *Cymbeline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Introduction, 42-43.
[38] Daniel Amneus, *The Mystery of Macbeth* (Alhambra, Cal.: Primrose Press, 1983), 41.
[39] Joseph Rudman, "Non-traditional authorship attribution studies of William Shakespeare's canon: some caveats", *JEMS* 5 (2016): 307-28.
[40] Jonathan Bate, ed., *Titus Andronicus* (Arden, 3rd edition, 1995, rprt. 2019), Introduction, 123-46.

vocabulary studied by others.[41] Her findings may indicate an early date of composition for both these works.

The notion of Shakespeare as a reviser is now so well accepted that I do not spend time insisting on it; but clearly it aids the hypothesis of the Early Start. E. A. J. Honigmann, Grace Ioppolo and Laurie Maguire are representative of different phases of pro-revision argumentation.[42] Lukas Erne's thesis of Shakespeare as literary dramatist, deeply concerned with the aesthetics of his poetry in the plays, has revision as a prerequisite, though he does not insist it is always authorial.[43] These scholars concentrate on the shift from Quarto versions of the plays to the Folio versions of 1623; but the question can be pushed further back (Sams, 1995, 136-62) to the shift from the early anonymous plays to the first quarto plays, taking seriously the possibility that the anonymous forerunners belong in Shakespeare's oeuvre.

These anonymous plays are the ones that foreshadow a number of Shakespeare's history plays, plus the comedy *The Taming of The Shrew*. *Henry IV, Parts 1* and *2*; *Richard III*; *King John*; *King Lear*; *Henry VI, Parts 2 and 3*; and *The Taming of The Shrew* all have affinities, sometimes extremely close, sometimes less so, with anonymous plays published mostly in the first half of the 1590s (though *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, while entered in the Stationers' Register to Adam Islip in 1594, was not printed until 1605). (See Table 1)

The exact relationship of each to its canonical twin is an enormously vexed question with a long history. It is relevant to my discussion of the Henry IV plays, and also impinges on *King John*, which comes into Chapters 6 and 8, on *Cymbeline* and *Pericles* respectively. I discuss the relationship of one proto-play, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, to parts of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, in Chapter 1. The point at issue is the timing of Shakespeare's start as a dramatist. If he was the author of these "proto-plays", then he was a much earlier starter than has been allowed.

---

[41] Marina Tarlinskaja, "Who did NOT write A Lover's Complaint?" in *Shakespeare and the Low Countries*, Shakespeare Yearbook 15 (Lampeter: Mellen, 2005), 343- 82; *Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama, 1561-1642* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

[42] E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 1965); Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Laurie Maguire, *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The "Bad" Quartos and Their Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[43] Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Linked plays

1Henry IV, 2Henry IV, Henry V	
The Famous Victories of Henry V	ent. 14 May, 1594
pub. 1598, Thomas Creede	to Thomas Creede
Richard III	
The True Tragedie of Richard III	ent. 19 June, 1594
pub. 1594, Thomas Creede	to Thomas Creede
for William Harley (and Peter Short?)	
King John	
The Troublesome Raigne of King John	Meres mentions
pub. 1591, Sampson Clarke	a "King John"
	in 1598
King Lear	
The True Chronicle History of King Leir	ent. 14 May, 1594
pub. 1605, Simon Stafford	to Adam Islip (erased)
for John White	ent. 8 May, 1605,
	to Edmund White
The Taming of The Shrew	
The Taming of A Shrew	ent. 2 May, 1594
pub. 1594, Peter Short,	to Peter Short
sold by Cuthbert Burbie	
2Henry VI	
The First Part of the Contention	ent. 12 March, 1594
pub. 1594, Thomas Creede	to Thomas Millington
for Thomas Millington	
3Henry VI	
The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke	No entry
pub. 1595, P[eter] S[hort] for Thomas Millington	

Table 1

If Shakespeare did write any of the proto-plays, the currently accepted database for assessing his style would be incomplete. Accepting that he was a consummate reviser of his Quarto plays would open the way to accepting a still earlier revisionary shift, from proto-play to Quarto (or Folio in the case of *King John* and *The Shrew*).

In the sphere of poems, R. M. Frye's establishment of the existence of an alternative Shakespearean version of *Lucrece* is good evidence for authorial revision.[44] Frye does not press its implications for earlier dating as I do. For advancing the dates of *Venus and Adonis* and *A Lovers Complaint*, I appeal to external literary reference, the constraints and alliances of patronage circles, including printers and booksellers, and (warily) stylistics. For antedating "Phoenix and the Turtle", the appeal is to both internal and external evidence.

The last plank of the scaffolding propping up the mainstream status quo is the invention of sub-categories for Shakespeare's plays such as "Romances" or "Problem Plays". The category of Shakespearean Romance was thought up by Edward Dowden in 1874.[45] It is relevant to my chapters on *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*, and I treat of it most fully in the *Pericles* chapter. Here it should simply be noted that there are no exclusive criteria for labelling a play a "Romance". Barbara Mowat lists the elements normally cited as essential and exclusive. They are: a strong element of "the wondrous" (which includes divine intervention), pastoral scenes, wandering, exiled or dissevered families, threatened chastity, restitution and reconciliation, with "being derived from Greek romances" often thrown in for good measure.[46] But many critics have noted the occurrence of one or another of these elements in a great number of Shakespeare's other plays.[47]

Even if the demarcation worked, there is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare did not intersperse the writing of romance among his histories, tragedies and comedies throughout his writing life. "Problem

---

[44] R. M. Frye, "Shakespeare's Composition of *Lucrece*: New Evidence", *Sh. Q.* 16.4 (Autumn 1965): 289-96.

[45] Dowden expounded his theory in lectures in 1874: "Saturday Lectures in connection with Alexandra College, Dublin", as he explains in his preface to the first edition of his *Shakspere: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (London: Henry S. King, 1875), vii.

[46] See Barbara Mowat, "'What's in a name?' Tragicomedy, romance, or late comedy", in *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, eds. Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (London: Routledge, 1992), 129-49.

[47] See Penny McCarthy, "*Cymbeline*: 'The first essay of a new Brytish Poet'?", *CS* 21.2 (2009): 42.

plays" likewise are only so labelled because *we* find their orientation puzzling. They need not be confined to a supposed anguished period of the poet's life.

Resistance to the specific arguments, considerations and indications above is, however, only one cause of the general reluctance to antedate Shakespeare's works. What probably plays a greater role is something more in the realm of logic. It is the refusal to face up to the implications of a *terminus ad quem*.

A "terminus ad quem" means what it says: a time *before which* (not *just before which*) a work must have been composed. Logically, the point at which the writing took place could have been a long time before its first mention or public appearance. There should be no so-called "common sense" assumption, let alone a concocted consensus, that it took only a few months or a year or two from its completion for any text to reach print.

Empirical evidence suggests that a long delay was in fact almost a norm. Though pamphlets such as Robert Greene's, Gabriel Harvey's and Thomas Nashe's might be hurried into print, in a flurry of topical polemic and because their authors lived with easy access to, and sometimes actually with, the printers, other kinds of work could, and so often did, take years to surface.

Examples are numerous. Spenser's *Astrophel*, an elegy for Philip Sidney, appeared with elegies by others nine years after Sidney's death. Thomas Moffett's *Lessus Lugubris*, another Sidney elegy, was not printed until 1940. Bryskett's *Discourse of Civill Life*, certainly a tract belonging to "polite letters", was completed by 1582, but not published until 1606. Fulke Greville's works are mostly posthumously printed. One can observe Spenser pondering the advisability of publishing his various pieces including *The Faerie Queene* decades before they do actually reach print.[48] And even in the case of pamphlets, speedy publication did not always occur: Nashe told his patron concerning his *Terrors of the Night*, "A long time since hath it line suppressed by mee".[49]

Particular caveats will I know be urged in the case of all the fore-mentioned authors. Greville was influenced by the example of Philip Sidney, who had not sought print in his lifetime.[50] Bryskett was . . . stuck in Ireland? And so on. But the point is that the phenomenon does not need to be explained away, because it was so common.

---

[48] Edmund Spenser, "First Commendable Letter", in *Spenser: Works*, 635.
[49] Nashe, *Terrors*, A2^{r}.
[50] Gavin Alexander, "Writing and the hermeneutics of posthumous publication", in *Fulke Greville and the Culture of the English Renaissance*, eds. Russ Leo, Katrin Röder and Freya Sierhuis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 279-93.

Its causes are various. State censorship or self-censorship may have intervened. We sometimes catch sight of books entered in the Stationers' Register but "stayed"; or held up by order of the Privy Council at the point of publication and carefully emended (the 1587 *Chronicles* of Holinshed); or called in after printing (the first edition of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*). The feelings of powerful patrons had to be considered: Spenser said he feared "cloying [the] noble eares" of "his excellent Lordship" by bringing out his *Faerie Queene* in public, but his concern may also have related to the content of his work.[51] Even the printers and booksellers often had to have regard to aristocratic patrons, and present themselves as the approved vehicle for making the works public.[52]

Shakespeare was part of this culture, as should become clearer in the course of this study. He was plainly not averse to publishing, since his narrative poems reached print quite early in his career, in 1593 and 1594; and half his plays were printed in quarto in his lifetime, as Lukas Erne has rightly insisted.[53] Yet half the plays remained *unpublished* until 1623, and some were entered a long while before publication (such as *Troilus and Cressida*, with a gap of six years), while others were entered (*As You Like It*) or mentioned (*King John,* mentioned by Francis Meres) but not printed before the First Folio.[54]

We can see how precarious is the notion of the rush to print when we consider Shakespeare's sonnets. These must have been written over a long span of time, and we know from Meres that before 1598 they were being privately distributed (see above, page 6). Yet it is not until the next year that a few appear in the compendium *The Passionate Pilgrime*, and not until 1609 that they reach print in their entirety. It will be objected that plays are different; that Shakespeare was a Company man writing plays to order for the London stage. I shall be claiming, to the contrary, that he

---

[51] Many critics, including Andrew Hadfield, Wayne Erickson, and Ty Buckman, have written on the subversive potential of *The Faerie Queene*. See Hadfield, "Was Spenser a Republican?" *English* 47 (1998): 169-82; Erickson, "Spenser's Letter to Ralegh and the Literary Politics of *The Faerie Queene*'s 1590 Publication", *Sp. St.* 10 (1992): 139-74; Buckman, "Forcing the Poet into Prose: 'Gealous Opinions and Misconstructions' and Spenser's Letter to Ralegh", *SLI* 38.2 (Fall 2005): 17-34.

[52] David M. Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570-1640* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), esp. 141-57. Sonia Massai, "Edward Blount, the Herberts, and the First Folio", in *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography*, ed. Marta Straznicky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 132-46.

[53] Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, 50, 78-114.

[54] Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 282^{r}.