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Edward III, Edmund Ironside and the Editorial Establishment

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A revolution in Shakespeare studies is taking place off stage. The first shots were fired in these pages (*LRB* 6 February and 6 March 1986). John Kerrigan announced that *Edward III* is clearly Shakespearean. But Stanley Wells scoffed at "so touching an affection" for this "anonymously published play", and promised to justify its exclusion by "thought processes to be revealed" in the forthcoming Oxford *Compite* (sic) *Works*, which had been in preparation since 1978.

All that came forth was this (1986, xxi): "*Edward III*...was published in 1596. It was first ascribed to Shakespeare in 1656. Certainly it displays links with some of his writings, but authorship problems are particularly acute during that part of his career when the play seems to have been written, and we cannot feel confident of the attribution".

But times and feeling changed. In this *Textual Companion* (1987, 78) the Oxford co-editor Gary Taylor explained that image-clusters and other verbal idiosyncrasies serve to confirm (sic) *Edward III* as Shakespearean. We now learn (*Shakespeare Newsletter*, Summer 1990, 28) that both editors regret "their decision not to print the text of *Edward III* as part of the canon".

In other words they have deprived the public of a Shakespeare play, which is likely to stay lost for another generation at least. Something must be amiss with modern methodology if our leading Shakespeare experts confessedly fail to identify his work. After seven years, they still could not tell the canon from Anon. So the same may certainly apply to the early quartos they reject as "memorial reconstructions", the famous plays and passages they reject as "doubtful" or "collaborative", and the other candidates they reject as "non-Shakespearean".

Further, all their earlier reasons for rejecting *Edward III* must now fatally backfire. Their first reason (*Works*, loc. cit.) was that it might be collaborative, for all they knew. But Taylor soon knew better (*Companion*, 136). So all the other Oxford theories of "collaboration", however often feigned to be facts, may also be silently abandoned.

One such theory supplied a second wrong reason for rejection. The closest canonical kin to *Edward III*, by a rare-word test of which Taylor approves, is *1 Henry VI*, of which he does not approve. Indeed, he informs us as a fact that "Shakespeare only wrote about 20%" of it; the rest is freely distributed among "Thomas Nashe", "X" and "Y". But on Taylor's own showing all this must now be seen as sheer moonshine. The obvious reason why a Shakespearean *Edward III* should share so much of his very rarest vocabulary with *1 Henry VI* is that he wrote them both, at about the same time. This manifest inference will help to correct the confused Oxford chronology, with which *Edward III* fails to conform.

That was a third wrong reason for rejecting the play. But now the play becomes a reason for rejecting the Oxford chronology, and hence the mistaken theories of "memorial reconstruction" from which those wrong dates are avowedly derived. Similarly with the fourth wrong reason, namely *Edward III*'s "ambiguous" result of "deviance" from the supposed Shakespearean norm as measured by Taylor's own "function-word test" (*Companion* 88, 137). What this result now shows is that the test is worse than useless. So, therefore, are all its many corollaries about authorship as set out through nine pages and seven statistical tables (*ibid.*, 80-9). These defects are also inadvertently admitted in other contexts. Thus the same Taylor test infallibly proved that Shakespeare could not conceivably have written *The Taming of A Shrew*, except that, according to both Taylor and Wells, he could perfectly well have done exactly that (*ibid.*, 5, 171).

This same wrong test also ruled out *Edmund Ironside*, which *Edward III* now rules in again. The criteria of verbal idiosyncrasies, including image-clusters, as defined and accepted by Taylor for *Edward III* (*ibid.*, 78) also validate *Ironside* as set out in my editions (1985, 1986, 249-50, 346-56).

Academic prejudice against the apocrypha has previously proved so strong that all such rational criteria have themselves been rejected *a priori* for giving the "wrong" result. For example *Edward III* contains, as Kenneth Muir pointed thirty years ago, a Shakespearean image-cluster in which the key-word *blot* is accompanied by *heaven*, *night*, *moon*, *constancy*, *sovereign*, *winter* and *sun*. So, as MacDonald Jackson announced in 1963 (*Notes and Queries*, x, 329-31), does *Ironside*, together with other characteristically Shakespearean *blot* associations such as *star*, *torch*, *misty vapours*, *midday*, *twenty thousand* and *Ethiopian*. From these facts, Jackson perversely inferred that there must be something wrong with the whole concept of image-clusters, on the unspoken assumption that *Ironside* is not by Shakespeare.

Alternatively there was something wrong with Jackson's logic. He is now an Oxford editor. But he too his making some belated amends. He has long agreed that *Edward III* is a Shakespeare play; and he has recently conceded (*Shakespeare Survey* 40, 1988, 226) that *Ironsides* may well be another. So the study of image-clusters may now resume; and perhaps self-evident inferences will at last be permitted, in this new revolutionary era.

What people now need is an edition of *Edward III* as an addition to the canon. [Its close kinship with *Ironsides* will be apparent to all who read both.] We await the adoption of Oxford's orphan. Will no one show it the touching affection it demands and deserves? That would be a suitable celebration of its 1996 quatercentenary.