

Eric Sams

## Essay on "Memorial Reconstruction"

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I implore all open-minded admirers of Shakespeare to help me rescue him from such experts as the Oxford editors Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, who accept the unknown poem "Shall I die?" yet reject some 20,000 world-famous lines as dubious or spurious. They claim for example that *1 Henry VI* was written by (I am quoting, not joking) "X", "Y", "Y?", "X? (or Y)", "Y? (or x)", "?" and "Thomas Nashe" which explains "the poverty of much of the writing".

Exactly this same approach, for much of this century, has attributed the 1608 so-called "Bad Quarto" of *King Lear* to the bad "memories" of "actors" in performances of the "1623 version". As any rational reader can see, this was always nonsense; and not just ordinary nonsense, either, but obvious and outrageous nonsense. This has now at last been officially admitted by the Oxford editors on their own behalf and that of their colleagues and predecessors. Our paid professionals have persistently confused a sublime art-work with a botched corruption, wrenched 1623 backwards to precede 1608, invented a play and its performance, dreamed up a whole company of amnesiac actors, libelled a reputable publisher, and suppressed an authentic masterpiece, solely to justify their own infallible feelings about style, which also stand exposed as self-deluding folly.

It follows that nothing they say should ever be taken on trust again. Thus the modern academic consensus collapses. Its favourite self-congratulatory phrase "editors agree" may as well connote error as truth. Yet it has now become the sole or main defence offered for the ludicrous theory of "memorial reconstruction by actors" (MRA for short). On what grounds could this have ever been planted in the first place, let alone choke the whole scholarly field of Shakespeare studies for sixty inglorious years?

All such disintegrations into "collaborators", "actors" and so forth are in every sense vain. They are essentially attempts to prove that plays which experts despise must be bogus. They begin with arbitrary assumptions about Shakespeare, to which I shall also give the generic term MRA; what plays he could or could not have written, what documents penned, what books studied, what opinions held. He is created in one's own image, and then worshipped. That is why the description of him as a butcher's boy is rejected throughout Academe, as a personal insult, while "schoolmaster in the country" is accepted as a personal compliment, although the two accounts come from exactly the same source and carry exactly the same weight.

Such irrational contradictions could never have occurred in any scientific discipline; yet they are the very stuff of all Shakespeare studies. Literature appeals to feelings; editors deal in detail. So there are no checks from history or logic, no correctives from general principles or common sense. Awkward facts and arguments are simply ignored. All this is aggravated by the strong sense of corporate unity ("editors agree"). When the historian A. L. Rowse says of the Shakespeare establishment that they have come to prefer nonsense to sense, would rather not be disturbed, and refuse to be told, he is speaking no less than the literal and well-attested truth. Decades of such subjective elitism has bequeathed us, for reasons to be given, not only the wrong texts and dates but also the wrong life and works; in short, the wrong Shakespeare. He has been metamorphosed into a distinguished professor of Renaissance literature instead of a local lad who made good. All the biographies, critiques and editions will have to be rethought and rewritten. A Niagara of non-stop nonsense will have to be not just dammed but reversed.

The Oxford editors have begun that revolutionary volte-face by confessing the *Lear* fiasco and explaining its cause as mental inertia. Among those who mistook *Lear* 1608 for MRA was Stanley Wells himself. He makes some amends by restoring it to the canon, as Shakespeare's own first version. Yet he and his colleagues on the Oxford and all other editions calmly continue to explain all the other "Bad Quartos" as MRA, on the ground that "editors agree"; and these plays stay suppressed. But MRA is a false doctrine, as I and others have now unanswerably shown. So these wrongful convictions too must now be quashed, with due apologies to Shakespeare and his public. *King Lear* 1608 will then be joined by eight other released prisoners, blinking in unaccustomed daylight: *The First Part of the Contention* 1594, *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York* 1595, *Romeo and Juliet* 1597, *Richard III* 1597, *Henry V* 1600, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 1602, *Hamlet* 1603 and *Pericles* 1609.

All these, like *Lear* 1608, represent Shakespeare's own first versions. That follows by simple disjunction from the refutation of MRA; the alternatives are exclusive because only one version can be written first. Never mind the contemptuous rejection of such texts by experts who cannot tell *King Lear* from "actors" and their "memories"; how much less can editors discriminate among apprentice works? Now we have nine new plays, which add thousands of lines to the canon, at a time when our academics

are seeking to subtract not only "Bad Quarto" but good Folio texts. This is already a salutary sign of progress in the opposite direction, back to the documentary facts of Tudor and Stuart times.

Now we realise why so many title-pages and witnesses tell us, in terms, that Shakespeare was a reviser. He alone is associated with variant versions because pay he alone was a radical reviser. "Bad Quartos" bear his name because he wrote them, as common sense and the refutation of MRA also confirm. His Folio plays bear his name because he wrote them, as repeated and explicit testimony, as well as common sense, further confirms. The textual differences are due to revision. "Bad Quartos" began in the 1590s and stopped after 1609 because that was Shakespeare's period as a published playwright. Thereafter he prepared final versions for a collected edition. At last, all the dates fit in simple linear sequence.

His publishers, printers and actors were not knaves; his editors, readers and spectators were not fools. Of course his contemporary could identify and interpret his early styles and intentions far better than any modern scholar.

So could he. His *Henry V* (Epilogue, 9-14) advertises his own plays about Henry the Sixth "which oft our state hath shown". Only MRA, which is wrong, requires this 1599 allusion to mean the 1623 Folio plays. Common sense identifies the 1594-5 versions, which were attributed in their third edition (1619 or earlier) to William Shakespeare, Gent. Robert Greene, who was also well placed to know, had already said the same by parodying the phrase "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide" and thus identifying an early Shakespeare style and play. That line occurs in both the Quarto and the Folio version. The publication dates tell all rational readers that Greene (1592) was ascribing *True Tragedy* (1595), not *3 Henry VI* (1623) to Shakespeare. Yet all our accredited authorities assert the opposite, with one voice, which is merely MRA ventriloquising through its many mouthpieces. Of course only the 1000 shared lines, not the 1623 version's entire 3000, can sensibly be dated c.1590; similarly with the 500 and 3000 respectively of *Contention* and *2 Henry VI*.

But that wrong date of c.1590 for the 1623 versions is the foundation-stone of all modern chronology, which accordingly collapses. Without MRA, there is no longer even a wrong reason for backdating 1623 by up to thirty years. In the real world, writings left unpublished until seven years after their author's death at fifty-six are far more likely to have been completed late than early, and hence more sensibly dated late than early, whenever they were started. No wonder Shakespeare's will, in 1616, inserted a special bequest to his colleagues and later editors Heminges and Condell to buy memorial rings. "Farewell, farewell; remember me". Thus the 1623 plays are not solely theatrical but also (and perhaps primarily) literary; so yet another long-cherished MRA-based assumption is unfounded.

The manuscripts would often be fluent fair copy. That explains what his editors meant by their famous commendation "we have scarce received from him a blot (i.e. a correction) in his papers". They could of course see that new texts had been written, and others recomposed, *currente calamo*. They might well however be unfamiliar with the first versions of 30 years earlier. Thus the 1619 issue of *Contention* and *True Tragedy* would indeed have seemed "maimed and deformed" in comparison with the far longer *Henry VI* versions already in the Folio editors' possession. The universal notion that this phrase referred to all the "Bad Quartos" of the 1590s is just another baseless MRA invention. Of course the Folio was not telling its readers what had happened before many of them were born.

But the emperor's clothes have never lacked tailors or retailers; and the fashion has spread. Under the same malign MRA influence, even such unique and sophisticated works as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 1623 have been absurdly classified among the very earliest canonical plays, for example by Stanley Wells, solely because of his feelings about its failings. Similarly only MRA demands an early date for such radical rewritings as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *King John*, both 1623.

As soon as the MRA anchor is weighed and found wanting, the dates float free. Then *The Shrew's* allusion to a Fletcher play becomes a plain post-1600 pointer, not the "later interpolation" that MRA is forced to invent. The MRA theory of the *Shrew* plays, which I have also specifically disproved is every whit as self-refuting in its absurdity as the parallel theory of *Lear*; yet every modern edition solemnly relies upon it. Freed from such follies, *The Taming of A Shrew* 1594 and *The Troublesome Reign of King John* 1591 again become prime candidates for early Shakespearean authorship c.1590, as W.J. Courthope's six-volume pre-MRA textbook *A History of English Poetry* taught in repeated printings for twenty years, up to 1916. Even the Oxford editors now admit that the still unknown *A Shrew* may have been Shakespeare's first shot, while simultaneously asserting that their own untestable "tests" of style have proved the opposite. What is in fact proved is the worthlessness of such "tests", which consist of personal opinions programmed into almost equally powerful computers with the predictable results of MRA in, MRA out.

But all this is the merest tip of the massive iceberg on which all modern scholarship has foundered. All editions of counterpart plays are textually unsound, because their stemmata have been forced by MRA to grow backwards in time, base over apex. Similarly all the dates and databases on which the pseudo-science of "stylometry" has been so loftily and precariously built are also back to front and upside down. The imaginary collaborators such as the unknowns "X" and "Y" in *1 Henry VI* are also chords struck from the same MRA lyre. Thus the Ulster statistician M.W.A. Smith, starting from his absolute assurance that the first two acts of *Pericles* are no better than hackwriting, has been asserting for seven years that since Shakespeare cannot possibly have written thus, they are probably by "George Wilkins". Like editors,

statisticians disagree about everything except MRA, which is the source of all their errors and disagreements.

The acceptance of "Bad Quartos" as early Shakespeare will cut such confusion off at its root, and thus explain problems instead of creating them. Thus we can see how *Troublesome Reign* came to be published as Shakespeare's, without a hint of protest, during fully five years of his lifetime; and why its copyright provisions, like those of *A Shrew* also covered the utterly different Folio version. The same is true of other variants such as the *Merry Wives* texts, with the further clear inference that Shakespeare exercised rights in his own plays, and profited from their various rewritings. These would be undertaken for aesthetic reasons; but it would be sensible to wait until previous versions had run their course on the stage and in print. That idea could ease other dating problems. It also challenges other complacent MRA assumptions, for example that plays were owned by the company not the dramatist or that Shakespeare was unconcerned about publication. Here too the academic self-image has to be kept untarnished by anything so sordid as money or need or toil. Hence the contemptuous rejection of Shakespeare as butcher, hunter, ostler and lawyer, in defiance of all the evidence. As usual, the opposite stance is far more comfortably in accord with the facts. Shakespeare was an assiduous worker in life as well as art; hence his well-attested reputation as a Jack of all trades, not just writing and acting.

From his new plays we can follow his stage career more closely. Now we can see why *A Shrew* together with the early *Hamlet*, and *Titus Andronicus*, all c.1589, came to be acted by the Lord Chamberlain's company in June 1594. Without MRA, they are all early Shakespeare plays. There is no further need to pretend that the first title "really" meant *The Shrew* 1623, or that the second was "written by Kyd", or that the third is "dubious". Facing the facts compels the view that Shakespeare had already joined that company, in June 1594, as we know he had by the end of that year, and brought his plays and roles with him as their owner, author and actor. That in turn suggests why *A Shrew*, *Titus* and *True Tragedy* (and hence also *Contention*) had all been performed by the Earl of Pembroke's Men in the early 1590s; when that company went bankrupt in 1593, Shakespeare transferred to Chamberlain's.

Where had he been writing and acting before, and what of the other lost plays from the so-called "lost years" between 1582, when he attained the intellectual maturity of 18, and 1592, the date of his first named mention as a playwright? That gap has been created solely by the MRA prank of taking his apprentice work away from him and hiding it in academic studies. Restore his early life and works, and once again the new picture conforms with, instead of contradicting, the documented facts. Both John Aubrey and Nicholas Rowe assure us, after due enquiry in Stratford and London, that the disadvantaged countryman Shakespeare left home for London in his youth, and took up menial tasks, but soon began to write plays that proved popular. Why, even in the absence of such evidence, would anyone doubt it? What could be more likely, in a real world? Yet modern authorities such as S. Schoenbaum dismiss all such explicit, mutually independent and unanimous testimony as late and unreliable "mythos", although it is surely far preferable to the academic mythos of 400 years later and up to 4000 miles away.

Of course popular early plays would be profitable and therefore not only performed but published – anonymously at first, like the early canonical texts, according to the custom of the times. All Shakespeare-lovers and younger scholars will therefore wish to look again, without MRA blinkers, at the other so-called "source-plays" of the 1580s, such as *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. The old *Henry V* was attributed to Shakespeare in a 1961 book by the American scholar Seymour Pitcher; its curt dismissal as folio by S. Schoenbaum and other MRA merchants is mere prejudice. The old *Lear* was accepted as Shakespeare's, in pre-MRA times, by the Oxford English Dictionary. *Richard III* calls for "a horse! a horse! a fresh horse!" All three, as well as the old *King John*, i.e. *Troublesome Reign*, were performed by the Queen's Majesty's players, again with a manifest yet unexplored inference about Shakespeare's early stage career. Again, never mind the even more contemptuous rejection of these plays by experts who cannot tell *King Lear* from "actors"; how much less could they assess the style of the earliest plays? The current neo-Baconian fantasies about the highly-educated late developer who suddenly emerged as genius after ten "lost years" must at last be replaced by the documented facts of the self-taught early developer who made the most of his time and talents from the very first feasible moment. Just allow him to begin at the beginning, like everyone else, and suddenly it was Shakespeare, not Marlowe, who was the only true begetter of our dramatic renaissance, in the early 1580s.

As soon as we restore the revising young creative artist, with his many famous parallels (such as Schubert) and forget the unique freak performer with none at all, we must also look for other lost plays. Even at the later leisurely rate of two a year, there are many still missing. The Oxford editors agree with me that one such example must be *Edward III*, though they take no further discernible interest in that long-forgotten Shakespeare play. Its authorship has been further confirmed by the late Eliot Slater in a recent monograph, which also records that his rare-word methods also support the claims of *Edmund Ironside*. As soon as the MRA fog disperses, Shakespeare's early vocabulary will become objectively visible.

The machinery for its further investigation has already been sabotaged. The shameful facts are as follows. The distinguished Oxford English Dictionary editor C. T. Onions devoted much time and expertise to a search for Shakespeare's own special usages and coinages. The results were incorporated in *A Shakespeare Glossary* (Oxford, 1911). Its sources included "Bad Quartos", in accordance with the rational

approach of the pre-MRA era. After seventy years and nineteen printings, this horrendous heresy has now been noticed and severely punished by anonymous Oxford inquisitors. In their unshakable dogma, all such coinages must be counterfeit, forged by "actors" aid not minted by Shakespeare. Worse still, many of the words in question have seen in observed in apocryphal plays. Thus some thirty appear in *Edward III* and a different thirty in *Ironsides*. The rational inference is of course that these are early Shakespeare plays. But that would publicly invalidate the whole MRA hypothesis together with its "tests" of authorship. This time the evidence is not merely ignored, but destroyed. In a neo-Stalinist rewriting of the records, the 1986 edition of the Oxford *Shakespeare Glossary*, "enlarged and revised throughout", has *silently deleted every single one of the thousand words and expressions* once credited to Shakespeare by a leading lexicographer. Oxford no longer cares to know its Onions. But it still contrives to make one weep.

Its depredations have been extended to its own great Dictionary. This offered its own method of testing for early Shakespeare, by means of dated illustrative quotations, devotedly collected by a team of specialists over many decades. This meticulous research avowedly affords evidence of "the age of the word generally" and also "its origin...or even, by negative evidence, its non-existence at the given date", and thus by direct inference its inventor. All these vital data too have been trashed and dumped. The main accepted authority on Tudor English is now Dr. Jürgen Schäfer, whose 1980 monograph *Documentation in the O.E.D.* has been instrumental in discrediting the evidential value of first citations, without the faintest factual justification.

The once fertile field of imagery studies, deep-delved by such pioneers as Charles Hobday, Caroline Spurgeon and E. A. Armstrong has also been blighted by MRA assumptions. Thus Kenneth Muir's important discovery of a demonstrably Shakespearean image-cluster in *Edward III* is rationally construed as evidence of authorship; but exactly the same image-cluster in *Ironsides* is irrationally held to justify the rejection of such evidence altogether. That ludicrously contorted position has been adopted even by the discoverer of the latter image-cluster, MacD. Jackson, as well as by S. Schoenbaum.

The plight of paleography is equally appalling. One might expect experts to be at least mildly interested in the thesis that the words "by me", which famously preface Shakespeare's will signature, 1616, might perhaps mean "in my own hand", in that instance as in so many others. Not a bit of it. The Bodleian and other authorities would far rather assume that "by me" means nothing in particular in that instance, even if no others. Mrs. Jane Cox, of the Public Record Office, has actually asserted that the will signatures in her custodial care are probably fakes, which suggests that Shakespeare could not even write his own name. Dr. I.A. Shapiro of the Shakespeare Institute knows that the signatures are authentic, which proves that Shakespeare could not have written his own will. Others, with no expertise at all, such as S. Wells and S. Schoenbaum, claim that the will was written by "Francis Collins" or his "clerk". There is not the faintest trace of evidence for any of these assertions. Typically, they are all incompatible yet ineradicable opinions.

They all rest on one single unspoken and irrational MRA assumption, namely that the will cannot possibly be in Shakespeare's own hand. So "Collins", or the "clerk", just like the "George Wilkins" and "actors" and all the rest, have been invented to prove that Shakespeare's pen could not possibly have been employed on tasks one thinks unworthy of him. In pre-MRA days, the great paleographer Maunde Thompson proposed and defined factual criteria for identifying Shakespeare's handwriting, for example in the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*. Nowadays, no one knows or cares whether he wrote it or not. The same applies to his orthography. So long as ingrained prejudice prevails, no progress is possible. Shakespeare scholarship is in every sense a thing of the past.

The removal of MRA will let in a burst of new light, in which every detail of this great topic is entitled to a new look. For example, Shakespeare becomes the author of all the versions of *Hamlet*. That play, according to Nashe in 1589, was written by a lawyer's clerk. So the legal text-book *Archaionomia* was not such "an odd choice" for Shakespeare's bookshelves as MRA makes S. Schoenbaum assume in the very act of agreeing that the Folger copy's signature "Wm Shakespeare" may well be both genuine and early.

That volume is annotated in a later hand. "Mr. Wm. Shaeespear lived at No.1 Little Crown St. Westminster NB near Dorset Steps, St. James's Park", i.e. near the present Downing Street. Westminster was then where the lawyers lived; a law suit to which Shakespeare was a party was heard there in the same allegedly "lost" year 1589. Nashe also tells us that the law-clerks Shakespeare and Kyd were close associates in translating Italian and reading French. This could explain much about Shakespeare's sources, for example how he was able to extract the details of *Hamlet* from Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, and why that play has so much in common with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Again, if Shakespeare once earned his living as a law-clerk, then *prima facie* the best-known will in the world is indeed in his own handwriting as "by me" so clearly states in its own lost language.

[The text ends with "Here a concluding sentence/paragraph"]