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The Tragical History of Shakespeare Scholarship since 1928

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In modern Shakespeare studies, a consensus can often be defined as what happens when a caucus swallows a lot of nonsense, such as the 'memorial reconstruction' delusions that have been solemnly hailed as gospel for most of this century. They are all utterly implausible, unevidenced and unverifiable; they are regularly refuted by professional scholars, especially in America. Yet the ruling British establishment remains silent and unmoved; so these fantasies are still taught and learned as facts in schools and universities world-wide, and retailed as truth in standard editions such as Arden, New Cambridge, New Penguin, Oxford and Signet. As a result, early Shakespeare plays are derided and rejected as 'Bad Quartos', and attributed to anyone but Shakespeare, while their Folio counterparts are habitually misdated, by decades.

I know from long experience that reasoning is powerless against such occult creeds. But I also know that their converts cannot have studied the original sacred writings with any real attention; otherwise the mumbo-jumbo would be just as obvious and odious to them as it is to me. So it may prove salutary to set out as an example, for all to see, what John Smart and his disciple Peter Alexander actually say about those crucial test-cases the *Henry VI* plays, in their respective *Shakespeare: Truth and Tradition* (Oxford 1928) and *Shakespeare's Henry VI and Richard III* (Cambridge 1929).

Without the protective prestige of University Presses, these theories would hardly have lasted five minutes, let alone seventy years. They started with Smart's attempts (op. cit. pp. 169-172) to analyse the relationship between the 2000-line *True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York*, published in 1595, and its 3000-line counterpart *3 Henry VI*, unknown until 1623. Smart notes that everyone had always sensibly supposed the former to be the earlier play and the latter its later revision. He proceeds to reverse that rational judgement, thus: '*3 Henry VI* is the original and genuine work' and *True Tragedy* its corrupt abridgement, 'only that and nothing more'.

This was the starting-pistol that despatched academic Shakespeare studies on their present marathon fool's errand, whence they will return slowly and reluctantly if at all. But ordinary readers can soon spot how badly Smart has misfired. His very first sentence assumes his own answer, far in advance of any attempt at argument, thus: 'An incorrect and defective edition of *3 Henry VI* was published in 1595, under the title *The True Tragedy*.'. So here is the Smart-Alexander method nakedly self-exposed; conclusions first, justifications afterwards. Smart's main 'proof' follows precisely this same principle. He contrasts the *3 Henry VI* reading 'more inexorable...than tigers of Hyrcania' with the corresponding *True Tragedy* passage, which has 'tigers of Arcadia'. Now, Smart knew for a fact that Arcadia was tolerably tiger-free. 'Any poet must have known', he serenely asserts, 'that Arcadia did not owe its celebrity to the fierceness of its tigers, but to its pastoral peace and felicity'. So, he claims, that place-name must be a reporter's mishearing of 'Hyrcania'; and 'from a comparison of these passages alone we should be justified in concluding' that *2-3 Henry VI* 1623 are the originals and the 1594-5 Quartos are the corruptions.

Not bad for just one word, which transports two five-act histories bodily backwards in time for 30 years; assigns their previously unknown dates of composition to the early 1590s; rejects the 1619 title-page attribution of the two Quartos to William Shakespeare, Gent.; abolishes their original anonymous author; condemns them as crass corruptions; identifies the corrupting process and agent; and remorselessly exposes, as either knaves or fools, the rascally publishers who attributed them to Shakespeare, the unprincipled pirates who printed and sold them, the artless audiences that applauded them, the simple souls who bought copies of them, the blinkered revisers who amended them, the slack administrators who assigned and

transferred rights in them, the gullible scholars and editors who thought them good enough for Greene, Kyd, Marlowe or Shakespeare, and the countless thousands of uninstructed critics, commentators and ordinary readers who for the past 300 years, all over the world, had treated them as Shakespeare's plays or sources. A word of power indeed; but its sole fuel is Smart's own egotistically infallible feeling about what it must mean. *Et in Arcadia ego*.

In reality, such inferences would have been utterly fantastic even if based on fact. But Smart's notion of Arcadia is just a modern stereotype, which begs the primary question - why should the author of *True Tragedy* associate tigers with Arcadia? Well, that country positively bristled with the lairs of wild beasts, which included at least one wolf (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I 216, 236). So when the classical world is flooded only a few lines later, and the wolf is swept away together with the lions and the tigers (I 300), any reader could infer that all these fierce fauna were indigenously Arcadian. And which Tudor playwright, above all others, was the devoted but unscholarly student of Ovid, especially the *Metamorphoses*? Shakespeare not only names that work but also quotes the original Latin of that same passage, 'terras Astraea reliquit' (I. 150), in his contemporary play *Titus Andronicus* c. 1590 (IV.i.42, IV.iii.4).

But Alexander, instead of checking the facts, took Smart at his one word; and then typically added a whole new unsupported fiction shelf. His imagination too was irrationally triggered by tigers. By 1592, as the literary world well knows, Robert Greene had parodied the line 'O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide' and thus identified Shakespeare as the author of the play in which it occurs. As both Smart and Alexander well knew, this line appears in *True Tragedy* 1595 as well as that play's much longer and better counterpart *3 Henry VI* 1623. Therefore, they automatically but absurdly assume, Greene must have meant the latter. If he meant the former, their theory must be wrong. But they conceal the other side of the coin, which they have deftly flipped to conform with their own prior call. For this purpose, two heads are indeed better than one. Smart offers his blatant bias as a famous fact, four times in four pages; the line Greene cites is 'taken from *3 Henry VI*' and so on. Alexander, not to be outdone, announces the same nonsensical notion a dozen times: 'Greene's quotation from *3 Henry VI*.', 'the line from *3 Henry VI*' and so forth, over and over again. Why were these irresponsible fabrications ever preferred to the obvious inference that Greene c.1592 had seen the actual extant play published as *True Tragedy* in 1595, and duly identified it for posterity as Shakespeare's own early work? Because both Smart and Alexander knew for certain, on the irresistible strength of their own surmises, that *True Tragedy* 1595 could not possibly be a Shakespeare play; for example, it puts tigers in Arcadia. That leaves *3 Henry VI*, which must therefore have existed by 1592, though unrecorded until 1623, because that too is what the self-validating theory requires.

Alexander's own subsequent solo handling of what he culpably miscalled 'textual evidence' follows the same erratic flight-path into the empyrean. The Duke of York's descent from King Edward the Third, correct in the 1623 Folio text of *2 Henry VI*, is garbled in its shorter and inferior Quarto version published as *The First Part of the Contention* in 1594. Rationally, that change was the result of revision. But Alexander silently feigns that the 1623 text had already been written and performed by the early 1590s. This ruse remains unnoticed by his many academic admirers. But he must at least seek to explain how, on his theory, Shakespeare's allegedly extant and performed text of *2 Henry VI* came to be so crassly corrupted, into an argument from genealogy which 'has no point whatever'. According to Alexander, this curious outcome cannot conceivably be blamed on any such common causes of corruption as the carelessness or confusion of any playwright, or prompter, or copyist, or compositor, or editor, or any possible process involving misreading, or mishearing, or misunderstanding, or any permutation of any such agencies. No, no; the only imaginable explanation of the wrong genealogy, depend upon it, is that one of Shakespeare's actors had misremembered Shakespeare's words.

Every ordinary reader will see that this is not even an argument, let alone the 'proof' acclaimed by academics for most of this century. It is merely a conditioned reflex, like Smart's recoil from tigers. It demands dozens of further unevicenced assumptions; not only the pre-existence and performance of *3 Henry VI*, but a forgetful and stupid actor, and his imaginary reasons for trying to reconstruct a 3000-line play, and his supposed success in doing so, and his further good fortune in persuading others to perform, print and publish the resulting corruption, while the genuine text was helpfully mislaid or withheld for thirty years.

Among the many perplexing aspects of this only possible explanation is its total incompatibility with Smart's only possible explanation, namely mishearing by a reporter. Otherwise Alexander's voice and verdict alike evoke eerie echoes of his mentor's infallible ex

cathedra pronouncements from Arcadia, alias Academia. Smart silenced common sense with a word; Alexander needed only a look. 'A glance at the Folio makes it clear'; this is his typical tone and attitude. Similarly 'one has only to compare the two versions' of the *Contention* pedigree 'to see how limpingly the Quarto halts after Shakespeare'. But, in every sense, it does not follow. As Alexander naively blurts out ('the Folio'..'after Shakespeare'), this too is just his own *a priori* assumption, dressed up as an argument. In the same vein he declares that *True Tragedy*, like *Contention*, 'mangles history and has no point of its own'. As before, their supposed 'corrupt condition' cannot be attributed to 'a compositor, or transcriber, or abridger, or to their combined efforts; to account for it we require to postulate a factor not found in the normal method of transmission' (op. cit. 64-5). This factor that Alexander says we require to postulate, or in plain English the tale he needs to make up, is memorial piracy by needy, dishonest and forgetful actors conspiring with shady publishers to defraud the paying public and demean Shakespeare. It is indeed abnormal. Not only is it not found in the normal method of Tudor textual transmission; not one single component of it has ever been found anywhere at all except in a private fantasy-world of the 1920s, where the wicked pirates were perhaps subconsciously influenced by childhood memories of Barrie's *Peter Pan*. And it was allegedly Shakespeare's own actors, of all people, who not only forgot their great colleague's lines but mangled them into unrecognisable drivel.

This shameless nonsense is not my own ill-natured invention; it is what Alexander himself repeatedly assumes from nothing and asserts as fact. In his own stupefying words: 'All the hopeless confusion in the details of the pedigree, and the mechanical repetition of phrases found in the Folio, indicate that we have in the Quarto nothing more than someone's [i.e. a professional actor's] attempt to reconstruct from memory one of Shakespeare's scenes'. It sounds much more like an attempt to reconstruct one of Smart's theories. But Alexander also stays silent about that deep indebtedness, even while rattling the same brazen question-begging-bowl, which he aggressively thrusts out thrice in the same sentence: 'repetition...found in the Folio... one of Shakespeare's scenes'. All this, once again, flagrantly assumes what it purports to prove. Those who still calmly call it 'proof' thereby prove that their own grasp of history and logic is just as limp and lax now as Alexander's was in 1929.

His conquests need to be named and challenged. They have included such famous names as as E.K.Chambers, who was unquestioningly followed, in this mistaken respect as in others, by Samuel Schoenbaum. Nowadays, commentators such as Arthur Freeman, Michael Hattaway, Ernst Honigmann, Macdonald Jackson, William Montgomery, Norman Sanders, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells all accept Alexander's absurdities as rational arguments, despite their decisive refutation by Clayton Greer in 1933, Hardin Craig in 1961, the present writer from 1983 onwards, and Steven Urkowitz in 1988. This supine acquiescence has actually been advanced as a pro-Alexander argument; 'editors agree'. But Stanley Wells, the doyen of general editors, publicly concedes that he and his colleagues are likely to select, and may even try to influence, editors whom he believes to be in general sympathy with his views. In practice, only the believers in 'memorial reconstruction' can hope to be approved and employed by the ruling academic establishment; and the top of the ivory tower is closest to cloud-cuckoo-land.

Meanwhile the misdating and misattribution caused by the mistaken Smart-Alexander method continues unchecked, in every sense. But interested readers may wish to reexamine the reasons for which 'memorial reconstruction' was first invented. The theory was designed to identify the powerful cause that had produced, in so many early Quartos, such strikingly different versions of Shakespeare's Folio plays, and for so long a period (1594 to 1608); the cause, furthermore, in those same Quartos, in so many different ways, of such strikingly Shakespearean effects, despite an often unfamiliar and inferior style. The obvious answer, namely Shakespeare himself, has been blacked out by the dense Smart-Alexander smokescreen. That answer permits further equally clear inferences, as follows. The Quartos in question were written, acted and published in the usual way; their printed dates are *termini ad quem* for their composition. They look and sound like Shakespeare because he wrote them. The later plays were performed and printed later because they were written later, and they are longer and better because Shakespeare rewrote them with the intention of making them longer and better. As part of that process he corrected their historical and other errors, which is why York's descent from Edward the Third is clearer in the Folio than the Quarto version; Alexander's point is actually apter at annihilating than preserving his theory, which is self-refutingly overcomplicated by its constant need to invent imaginary causes for its imaginary effects, and then reverse their time-sequence. The reason why pairs of counterpart plays in different (often very different) forms are found only in a Shakespearean context, from

1594 to 1608, is because he alone among contemporary playwrights, radically rewrote his work, and those years were his heyday. The early versions differ from the Folio texts in a variety of ways because he was a varied and variable artist. Their style is often unfamiliar because he developed and refined it so radically. It remains unfamiliar because it has been wrongly rejected by the Smart-Alexander method, which is still accepted and acclaimed.

If this be method, yet there is madness in it; its long overdue removal will let in a flood of light. First and foremost, the play specifically identified as Shakespeare's by Greene in 1592 will be seen as *True Tragedy* 1595, not *3 Henry VI* 1623 as all modern authorities irrationally assert. Similarly, *True Tragedy* is not a 'memorial reconstruction' but an early Shakespeare play, and *3 Henry VI* is its later, perhaps much later, revision. The same applies to the relation between *Contention* and *2 Henry VI*, and in general to all the early counterpart versions now contemptuously dismissed as 'Bad Quartos', 'anonymous source-plays' and so forth. It is high time for the mistaken scholarly consensus to be rejected in its turn, after some seventy years of calamitous confusion. All the canon and all the dating will have to be radically rethought and revised; all the present authorities will have to be replaced or re-educated; and all the standard editions and complete works will have to be completely rewritten. And this will be the sole memorial of the 1928-9 Smart-Alexander constructions and their latter-day advocates.