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Counting Wilkins Out

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Who wrote *Pericles* I-II? To this pseudo-question Dr M.W.A. Smith has now devoted ten years and as many essays¹⁻¹⁰ containing hundreds of calculations about the words used in a score of plays by a dozen dramatists, presented in 50 tables and 25 diagrams. All this was always a waste of talent, time and effort; and it has devalued and distorted Shakespeare. The latest claims of proof¹⁰ that I-II were written by 'Wilkins', as 'stylometry reveals' are so irresponsible as to justify outspoken protest.

Why is the authorship of I-II a pseudo-question? Because it begins by begging itself out of existence. Dr. Smith assumes that all the documentary evidence¹¹ for (1) Shakespeare's authorship, and (2) an early date eliminating Wilkins (born c.1576), may safely be ignored. He further assumes, and asserts, (3) that his methods can distinguish differences of style, which (4) entail a difference of authorship, as if (5) Shakespeare had only one style, which (6) Dr. Smith can infallibly identify. He also claims (7, 8) that his assumptions (1) and (2) are supported by a literary consensus, which is assumed (9) to be infallible.

But these are the conclusions that are supposed to have been proved. On inspection, they merely prove to have been supposed. Although baseless, they were built in to the premises, which have accordingly collapsed. Even one such assumption is self-destructive. Nine together are self-annihilating.

Besides, most of them are obviously wrong. Thus (4), (5) and (6) are as absurd as they are arrogant. Yet Dr. Smith has spent ten years falsely claiming that two styles must mean two authors. He also inadvertently denies his own denial of (1), by conceding that I-II may after all be by the young Shakespeare. This also completely contradicts all the other eight claims and assumptions.

So this concession on (1) is crucial. To admit Shakespeare, at any age, is to expel 'Wilkins' from the authorship of I-II. So what investigations of the young Shakespeare's style has Dr. Smith actually made and published, in the last ten years? None. Yet he has openly delegated this essential task to other statisticians, i.e. anyone but Dr. Smith, who for the last decade has been too busy investigating anyone but the young Shakespeare.

Now take (2). What investigations has Dr. Smith made into the date of I-II? Again, none. For all such vital data he relies solely on (7), (8) and (9), for which no evidence has ever existed and which are in any event obviously irrelevant to objective investigation.

That leaves (3), as the sole source of a five-year 'Wilkins' Niagara which has publicly aimed and claimed to wash Shakespeare away. Dr. Smith might have spent five minutes reflecting on those Baconians who also claim to disprove Shakespeare, by a system of ciphering. Is there no simple factual unitary explanation for any 'stylometric' (that is, statistical) affinity between I-II and Wilkins? Was he, for example, a Shakespeare plagiarist? The answer is that exactly this well-attested fact is his sole claim to fame. He set his name to a prose version of *Pericles*¹² which he lyingly called an 'infant of my brain'. It nowhere mentions Shakespeare, whose ideas and language it shamelessly steals. Yet Dr. Smith never once, in ten years, so much as hints at this obvious explanation of all his results. What is complacently called 'stylometric deduction' relies on a silent subtraction of documentary facts and a loud and prolonged multiplication of literary assumptions. There is no shadow of a case for the ghost writer Wilkins.

NOTES

- 1 M. Smith, 'The Authorship of *Pericles*: an initial investigation', *The Bard*, iii (1982), 143-76.
- 2 *ibid.*, 'The Authorship of *Pericles*: collocations investigated again', *The Bard*, iv (1983), 15-21.
- 3 *ibid.*, 'An Initial Investigation of the Authorship of *Pericles*', *Shakespeare Newsletter* xxiii, 3 (Fall, 1983), 32.
- 4 *ibid.*, 'Critical Reflections on the Determination of Authorship by Statistics', *Shakespeare Newsletter*, xxiv, 4 (Spring, 1984), 4-5, 28, 33, 47.
- 5 *ibid.*, 'The Authorship of *Pericles*: New Evidence for Wilkins', *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, ii, 4 (1987), 221-30.
- 6 *ibid.*, 'The Authorship of Acts I-II of *Pericles*: A New Approach using First Words of Speeches', *Computers and the Humanities*, xxii (1988), 23-41.
- 7 *ibid.*, 'A Procedure to Determine Authorship using Pairs of Consecutive Words: More Evidence for Wilkins's Participation in *Pericles*', *Computers and the Humanities*, xxiii (1989), 113-129.
- 8 *ibid.*, 'Function Words and the Authorship of *Pericles*', *N&Q* ccxxxiv (1989), 333-6.
- 9 *ibid.*, 'A Note on the Authorship of *Pericles*', *Computers and the Humanities*, xxiv (1990), 295-300.
- 10 *ibid.*, 'Counting Wilkins In: Stylometry Reveals Who Wrote Acts I and II of *Pericles*', *Shakespeare Newsletter*, xl, 4 (Winter, 1990), 60.
- 11 E. Sams, 'The Painful Misadventures of *Pericles* Acts I-II', *N&Q*, ccxxxvi (March, 1991), 67-70.
- 12 G. Wilkins, *The Painful Adventures of Pericles, Prince of Tyre/ Being/ The true History of the play of Pericles, as it was/ lately presented by the worthy and an-/cient Poet John Gower* (London 1608).