

‘Dissociation of Sensibility’ and the Amnesia for the Shakespeare Authorship Question

Historical Textual Inferences

Given a minimum of textual significance, and reasonable assumptions about semantic parallels, historical inferences may be, soundly and virtually beyond dispute, made from texts. The bulk of Oxfordian advances have been of this character, though sometimes we have over-egged the pudding. But, for instance, in Alexander Waugh’s delightfully playful and brilliant new book, *Shakespeare in Court*, he calls attention to no less than *nine* writers who, mostly at the turn of the 16th Century or later, identified ‘Avon’ as historically referring to Hampton Court Palace. Therefore, taken in conjunction with Ben Jonson’s reference to the ‘flights upon the banks of Thames, Which so did take Eliza and our James’, with the assumption that neither monarch ever attended a public theatre, and that Hampton Court was the most used Palace theatre, this, appropriately put into the mouth of Sir George Greenwood, puts paid to the notion that ‘sweet Swan of Avon’ does refer (though with Jonson’s characteristic ambiguous feint of another possible meaning) to Stratford Upon Avon. and so gives us the historic conclusion that ‘sweet Swan of Avon’, in Ben Jonson’s great poem, therefore refers to Hampton Court.

Their Hypnotic Hold on us as Paradigms

So compelling are such pieces of historic textual data and inference that it is hard to step back and grasp any different order of historically compelling insight. So much is this so that Peter Dickson, in *Bardgate*, a very important work, dismisses literary and textual evidence in favour of historical evidence altogether, even though he himself uses texts, in the sense just identified, as historic data.

Aesthetic Critical Criteria and the Relation to History

This kind of enquiry is indeed necessary, perhaps the main necessity. Yet it is not the only one; the major lack, in Oxfordian studies so far, is the lack of an Oxfordian literary criticism. Nor does this mean a lack of the historical dimension. *Indeed, there is a whole dimension of historical understanding which is best identified by aesthetic critical criteria.* This is my theme today. But this dimension, which is phenomenological, is at the other end of the spectrum from such predominantly factual enquiries and inferences as we have just considered.

How do we measure or identify movements of historical consciousness, which are only in an indirect way causal, which are, rather, *manifestations* of historical change?

Five Dates

I begin, then, with Five Dates. I am working backwards.

1920/1921

Looney and Eliot's 'Dissociation of Sensibility'

I have run these two together. In 1920 Looney issued *Shakespeare Identified*, with its epoch making first making explicit, and unifying interpretation, of the way Edward de Vere throughgoingly 'fits' the character of the author we are dealing with (though there are very clear hints in *Billy Budd* and *The Confidence Man* and elsewhere, that Melville may have figured it out, as Stritmatter, Anderson, Stone, Berney, Marcus, and others have been, and are, exploring). In 1921 TS Eliot published *The Metaphysical Poets*, in the form of a review of Grierson's anthology of that name, also an epoch-making revaluation, of Donne, Marvell, and other metaphysicals, for whom Johnson's valuation in *The Life of Cowley* had mainly held sway for 140 years, but whose standing was revolutionised by this review, and then consolidated and systematised in FR Leavis's *Revaluation* of 1936.

<http://www.usask.ca/english/prufrock/meta.htm>

In this review Eliot formulated the concept of the 'dissociation of sensibility':

'The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, *the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth*, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the "Country Churchyard" (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the "Coy Mistress." The second effect of the influence of Milton and Dryden followed from the first, and was therefore slow in manifestation. The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected. In one or two passages of Shelley's "Triumph of Life," in the second "Hyperion" there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated.'

What does he mean? I give two examples:
Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dost thou thus
Through windowes and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantique wretch, go chide
Late schooleboys, and soure prentices
Go tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride
Call country ants to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no seasons knowes nor clyme
Nor houres, days, moneths, which are the rags of time.

This is conversational poetry, the poetry of speech, pure enactment, not to be heard again till some moments in Pope, in Byron, and then in early Eliot in the 20th Century. It is poetry of 'the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth' century, it is successor of such as this:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. - Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens and the crow
Makes wing to th' rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
Thou marvell'st at my words; but hold thee still.
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
So prithe go with me.

Thus too, the ominous beginning of the *Hamlet* we have, where the malign intensity of the world of the play is immediately conveyed and signified in the few words of the process of the exchange of the watch, is not to be matched again for 200 years, in its conveying of the implicit enacted in the process, until we reach the opening sentence of Jane Austen's *Emma*, with its ominous message so blithely and in such throw away fashion conveyed
Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

So, why do these two revelations or revaluations, coincide? What can we say about the movement of what Eliot calls ‘the mind of England’, or elsewhere ‘the mind of Europe’ that these two, undoings of a great amnesia, appear virtually simultaneously?

Let us then go to our next date

1838

The Date of the First Clear Allusion to the Shakespeare Authorship Problem

This is in none other than John Payne Collier’s Introduction to Cowdell’s Traditional Anecdotes of Warwickshire of 1693.

<https://archive.org/stream/traditionaryane00dowdgoog#page/n14/mode/2up>

‘Perhaps it was in ridicule of his predecessors, that another gentleman, determined to outdo all that had gone before him, had the hardihood to question the poet’s identity; having laboured to prove he was one and the same person with Christopher Marlowe.’

1838 is also the year of John Stuart Mill’s *Bentham* to be followed by *Coleridge* in 1840, in which Mill clarifies for the English the concept of the great seminal minds of an age, embodying the polarities of the age in antagonistic fashion; it is the year before Newman’s *Tract 90*, which broke the Oxford or Tractarian Movement, and it is two years after the publication of the great pioneering work of scepticism about the New Testament, David Friedrich Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus*, to be translated into English by George Eliot in 1846. The Stockton to Darlington Railway opened to passengers in 1833. In other words the Shakespeare Authorship question becomes explicit in a general epoch of the examination of the bases of history, and during the accelerating rise of technological and scientific advance. And all this followed the transformation of English and European poetic by Romanticism in the wake of the impact of the French and American Revolutions, themselves products of the Enlightenment. This takes me to my next date.

1769

David Garrick’s Great Shakespeare Jubilee Festival

Apart from Samuel Johnson, most anybody who was anybody came. James Boswell, back from his Grand Tour during which he had visited Corsica, fighting for its independence from France, came dressed as a Corsican Chief. His account of his visit to Corsica and General Paoli had been published the previous year. Samuel Johnson’s Preface and Edition of Shakespeare came out in 1765. Rousseau had published *The Social Contract* in 1762, and Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Voltaire’s *Candide*, the two great countermoves of social pessimism in the face of Leibnizean optimism, both came out in 1759. So the high point, the apotheosis of ‘the great provincial made good’ mythos, the Stratford mythos, came at a time of both consolidation of the Enlightenment, and of its progressive undermining, but from the itself Enlightenment standpoint of Roman Scepticism. This takes us to our next date.

1660

End of Cromwell's Commonwealth, Restoration of Charles II, Foundation of Royal Society.

The epoch of the Vicar of Bray begins, with its windmill reversals and overturnings, epitomised by one great poet of declamation, John Dryden. The other great poet of declamation, John Milton, keeps his course, and publishes *Paradise Lost* in 1667. Neither poet has any longer the remotest understanding of the Shakespeare-Donne type of poetic. During the Commonwealth the theatres are closed, and Shakespeare goes underground, as noted by Alexander Waugh, again, in his new book. By the time of the Restoration, and the advent of the new bourgeoisie era, and the emerging Enlightenment, what Shakespeare was and signified, along with the poetic of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, is forgotten. That inveterate Enlightenment man, Samuel Pepys, dismisses *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Only Pope, partly transcending his age, keeps a creative back channel to the Metaphysicals and Shakespeare. I believe there are also hints that Pope knew that Shakespeare was not the Stratford man. Not until Coleridge and Keats is the beginnings of a recovery of the true genius of Shakespeare possible, coinciding with the rise of the novel, as already illustrated.

1622/23

Othello and The First Folio

Following publication of *Othello* in 1622 under the insignia of the Derbyite Eagle and Child by Walkley (see Dickson's *Bardgate* again), the Great Ruse of the *First Folio* follows, underwritten most probably by the Pembrokes, and engineered by the Great Ruse Master himself, Ben Jonson. Seventeen plays never previously registered. This kind of Ruse, illustrated in the monumental ambiguity of Jonson's great poem, also Shakespeare criticism of a calibre not met with again till Coleridge, goes with the great Renaissance epoch of creative ambiguity in general, lost really until the 20th Century and the beginnings of Post-Modernism in Joyce and Eliot - and, in another sense, Looney. William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which deals mainly in sixteenth and seventeenth century verse, comes out on the back of Eliot's work in 1930.

If I went back behind these dates, it would be to the shared impact of Belleforest, the French Perfect Historians of the late sixteenth century, and the study of Joan of Arc, on the Shakespeare Phenomenon, with which, as Richard Malim teaches us, they run parallel in time. George Huppert, the historian of the French Perfect Historians, recognises that there was a French 'dissociation of sensibility' to match the English one.

Of course, none of this is proof, and the phenomena are most elusive and arguable. But I do suggest that this way of thinking *makes intelligible* the amnesias and reawakenings, the shifts in historical consciousness, with which we are concerned. We must remember the implications of another of Eliot's greatest insights: '**Sensibility alters from generation to generation, in everybody, whether we will or no, but expression is only altered by a man of genius.**' Shakespeare was such a genius.

Unpacking the implication of that helps us understand how the Ruse was both possible and necessary.