

ALEXANDER POPE: AN OXFORDIAN AT HEART?

Early Shakespeare Critics and the Authorship Question

Helen Heightsman Gordon, EdD _____ ©

Such were the tunes thy once-lov'd poet sung,
Till death untimely stopped his tuneful tongue.

Alexander Pope
Epistle to Robert, Earl of Oxford



AS the distinguished English poet Alexander Pope an unacknowledged Oxfordian? I first pondered this question when, searching the Internet for another famous quotation of Pope's, I read the couplet (above) in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. Knowing that Pope [1688-1744] had published a six-volume edition of Shakespeare's plays in 1725, I became curious. Did those quoted lines, I wondered, refer to Shakespeare as the once-loved poet? And was this Robert, Earl of Oxford, a descendent of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, believed by many to have been the author of the Shakespearean canon? The nineteenth Earl of Oxford was named Robert (de Vere). Was he a contemporary of Pope?

At first I was disappointed to learn that the quoted lines were addressed to Robert Harley, the first Earl of Oxford (of the second creation, in Queen Anne's reign). Harley was apparently unrelated to the de Vere family of the Elizabethan age. Pope's epistle to Harley was written in dedication of a book of poems by Thomas Parnell, published posthumously by Pope. So Pope was alluding to Parnell, not Shakespeare, as the "once-lov'd poet."

Although my question about Robert Harley had been answered "no," several new questions arose. Why has the distinguished English poet Alexander Pope been given such short shrift as a Shakespearean scholar and critic? Why, despite the fact that the world of letters has dubbed the first half of the Eighteenth Century "The Age of Pope,"¹ are his critical insights into Shakespeare's work dismissed as no more than a misguided lament that Shakespeare wrote primarily for the stage? And why is he so much more famous for *The Dunciad*--a retaliation against those who criticized his edition of Shakespeare's works--than for his significant insights into Shakespeare's genius? Did he leave subtle clues in his analysis that indicate an uneasiness about the authorship--doubts, perhaps--that could not be openly expressed for valid reasons?

Pope's fame rested upon poetry, not drama. What then had induced him to produce an edition of Shakespeare's plays? Did he have access to the folios and quartos? What criteria did he use in determining which plays were authentic or spurious? And why did his critics denounce him with such acerbity? I have not found all the answers, but I have concluded that Pope had enough doubts about the Stratfordian mythology to be included in the list of dissidents whose misgivings have led us to Edward de Vere. I am also convinced that, if Pope had known about de Vere, he would have placed himself in the Oxfordian camp.

We of the present century, awash in critical studies and theories about Shakespeare, enjoy ready access to the plays in readable form. We have libraries, reference works, and web sites to inform us and a more or less settled consensus upon the words he used. In order to appreciate Pope's pioneering work, we must picture a milieu in which literary criticism was in its infancy, no English dictionary existed to assist an editor in comprehending archaic words, and the only complete edition of the plays, the First Folio, was in a chaotic state, rife with errors and omissions. Alexander Pope (and his contemporary, Lewis Theobald), deserve credit for establishing many important "firsts" in the field of Shakespeare criticism:

☉ Pope was the first to identify as spurious seven plays purporting to be the work of Shakespeare that had been inserted in the Third Folio (1663).

☉ By comparing the apocryphal plays to the works more assuredly authored by Shakespeare in terms of style, language, characterization, imagination, and depth of thought, Pope declared emphatically that they could not have been written by the same author. Thus he established the concept of *textual criticism*, which has since become a major tool of literary analysis.

☉ Pope's "Preface to Shakespeare's Works" sets forth the daunting task facing an editor who deeply admires his subject's artistry yet finds the available sources in such sloppy condition as to do the author grave injustice. Pope believed that if Shakespeare had edited his own work, the folios would have reflected more accurately Shakespeare's true poetic genius and dramatic skill.

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☉ The complaint in Pope's preface that Shakespeare wrote for the stage has been misunderstood, in my opinion. Pope's objections resemble those of Hamlet, criticizing the actors' tendency to enlarge upon their roles, "strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage." The bawdiness that was anathema to eighteenth century sensibilities he presumed to have been inserted by actors to please vulgar crowds and tavern-goers. Today we are far more willing to accept an intentionally bawdy Shakespeare, but Pope is not the only scholar to suggest that actors, producers, and composers have taken other liberties with the scripts.

☉ In the eighteenth-century debate over Shakespeare's learning, Pope was among the first to assert that only a learned man could have incorporated so much knowledge into the plays, an opinion he states so convincingly in his "Preface to Shakespeare" that the argument should have been laid to rest right there.

☉ Pope seems to have had reservations from the outset about the Stratford claimant. In his Preface, after praising Shakespeare's originality and penetrating insights, he drops a seed of doubt: "This is perfectly amazing from a man of no education or experience in those great and publick scenes of life which are usually the subject of his thoughts." Although he does not directly dispute the Stratfordian position, he clearly recognizes the disjunction between the sophistication of the plays and the background of the alleged author.

☉ Since Pope had access through friends to the early quartos, he was able to refute the oft-quoted statement by the First Folio editors that "Shakespeare never blotted a line." He demonstrated this by comparing earlier versions of Shakespeare's plays with later, much improved versions. As a creative writer himself, a poet who had to rely on his pen for self-support, Pope knew as well as anyone that a great poet requires both natural ability and conscious craftsmanship.

☉ Pope was the first to call attention to many of Shakespeare's most memorable passages. Only about half of the passages he singled out had been noted by others before him (Mack 420). This contribution is easily overlooked because these passages now enjoy that sense of the obvious which fame and familiarity have bestowed upon them.

☉ Pope's Preface to *Shakespeare's Works* acknowledges the guesswork in assigning chronology to the plays, but rather than seeking topical references, relying upon questionable printing dates, or forcing the chronology to fit within Shakespeare's life span, Pope used his critical acumen to chronicle the plays according to the level of maturity he perceived in them.

© Pope was the primary organizer of the committee that arranged for and financed the beautiful marble statue placed in Westminster Abbey in 1740, acknowledging Shakespeare's preeminence in English letters and his rightful place of honor in Poet's Corner.

© Finally, one negative influence must also be attributed to Pope, one that tended not only to discredit the work of his rival Lewis Theobald, but also to diminish the reputation of the entire literary critical establishment of the eighteenth century. Theobald had brought out a competing (and much better) edition of Shakespeare's plays in 1726.² Whether out of genuine frustration at the faults he perceived in Pope's 1725 edition or a desire to capitalize on Pope's fame, Theobald challenged Pope directly with his title: *Shakespeare Restored: or, a Specimen of the Many Errors, as well committed, as unamended, by Mr. Pope in his late Edition of this Poet, Designed not only to correct the said Edition, but to restore the True Reading of Shakespeare in all the Editions ever yet publish'd.* Thus began the long, destructive feud between Shakespeare's first editors that has continued to resonate until our own day.

Theobald's rebuke stung Pope's pride because it was true. Pope had underestimated the editing task and had not fulfilled it as well as he might. Pope's furious retaliation in his satire "The Dunciad" not only trivialized Theobald as a dunce, but vented accumulated rage against his other critics as well. Though Pope's wit made his satirical denunciations entertaining, his influence unfairly tarnished reputations and detracted from other pursuits which might have had more enduring value.

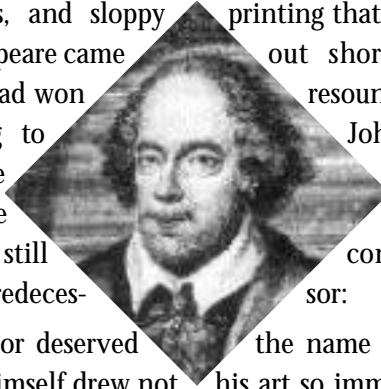
Pope's background

As a Catholic, Pope had endured persecution and discrimination all his life. Stunted in physique by childhood illness, he compensated by developing his brilliant mind, spending much time alone, and never seeking to marry. Probably the unrelenting doses of unfair criticism made him sensitive to any and all criticism, however justified. Envy also played a part in the personal attacks. As his genius became recognized and his popular success brought financial rewards, he acquired enemies who attempted to advance their own stature in the world of letters by assailing his reputation. His biographer Samuel Johnson reported that one rival, Joseph Addison, ended his friendship with Pope when "one could no longer bear an equal, nor the other a superior" ("Life of Pope"). Johnson also tells of one tight-fisted acquaintance who, rather than admit he was too strapped financially to subscribe to the *Iliad*, "conceals his avarice by his malice" ("Life"). The assault upon Pope from Theobald's pen may have been the last straw, provoking an explosion of pent-up fury that has left Theobald permanently branded as a nit-picking drudge and Pope as cantankerous and temperamental.

Pope's analysis of Shakespeare's work

In his "Preface to Shakespeare's Works," Pope reveals his deep admiration for Shakespeare and his desire to applaud the dramatist's "principal and characteristic Excellencies, for which . . . he is justly and universally elevated above all other Dramatic Writers." He admits that a preface is not the proper place to praise his subject but does so anyway because he "would not omit any occasion of doing it." His aim: "to give an account of the fate of [Shakespeare's] Works and the disadvantages under which they have been transmitted to us": i.e. the adulterations, errors, and sloppy printing that marred the quartos and folios.

Pope's edition of Shakespeare came out shortly after his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, for which he had won resounding critical acclaim and commercial success. (According to Johnson, he received £5,320 4s., plus £200 per volume from the bookseller Bernard Lintot.) Yet though he was, at the time, steeped in the language and style of Homer, Pope still considered Shakespeare more inventive than his Greek predecessor:



If ever any Author deserved the name of an Original, it was Shakespeare. Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of Nature: it proceeded thro' Egyptian strainers and channels, and came to him not without some tincture of the learning or some cast of the models of those before him.³ The Poetry of Shakespeare was Inspiration indeed. . . . His Characters are so much Nature herself that 'tis an injury to call them by so distant a name as Copies of her. ("Preface")

In an age that saw nature as the true source of the laws that govern humanity, Pope viewed Shakespeare's characters as derived directly from the source, not inventions based on stock characters from earlier dramatic traditions. He admired Shakespeare's power over our passions, a talent he seems to exercise without ever having to resort to artifice. Pope expressed astonishment that, although Shakespeare's power to evoke our tears "was never possess'd in a more eminent degree," the opposite emotions, "Laughter and Spleen, are no less at his command." Pope realized the depth of Shakespeare's judgment and the breadth of his wisdom, noting that Shakespeare's sentiments are "the most pertinent and judicious upon every subject" ("Preface"). When such appraisals were later echoed by Samuel Johnson and other editors of Shakespeare, the fact that Pope had said it first was lost in a miasma of general consensus. It was Alexander Pope who laid the foundation for later and deeper appreciation of Shakespeare (Lounsbury 117).

Pope's view of the Stratford biography

As one who was himself largely self-educated, his opportunities for formal study having been blocked by his illness and his community's prejudice against "Papists," Pope knew that education does not come effortlessly. He seems to have accepted the convention that Shakspere of Stratford authored the plays; no alternate theories had yet been advanced. Yet, with his own struggles in mind, surely he must have wondered how, after a day's work slaughtering calves and dressing venison, the butcher's son had found time to acquire the vast learning so evident in the plays. Whatever his private thoughts, Pope decidedly foreshadows the Baconians and J.T. Looney in pointing out the discrepancies between the content of the plays and the incongruous biography supplied by Nicholas Rowe (1709). He couches those doubts in terms of astonishment in his Preface:

This is perfectly amazing from a man of no education or experience in those great and publick scenes of life which are usually the subject of his thoughts. So that he seems to have known the world by Intuition, to have look'd thro' human nature at one glance and to be *the only Author that gives ground for a very new opinion, that the Philosopher and even the Man of the world may be Born, as well as the Poet.* (emphasis added)

Then why, if Pope had such doubts, didn't he investigate further into the life of his idol? Partly because he was simply too busy making his own living and also partly because it was his friend, the actor Thomas Betterton, whose pilgrimage to Stratford many years earlier had provided Rowe with much of the material for the first biography of Shakespeare (i.e. Shakspere). The material Betterton obtained from the locals was scanty, but he took it on good faith. Some of it, such as the tales passed along from William Davenant, the theater manager and son of a tavern-keeper who claimed to be Shakespeare's illegitimate son (Pillai 21), has been challenged by later scholars as unsubstantiated and unlikely. But Pope and Betterton, though they may have had their doubts, had little else to go on.

Pope's editing

The commonly accepted notion that Pope deplored Shakespeare's connections with the theater and wished the poet had confined his poetic dramas to the written page, is an oversimplification of Pope's position. In my opinion he was simply acknowledging what he saw as the constraints that necessity places upon a playwright's work. To be commercially successful, plays must please a diverse audience, not just people of high rank and privileged education. According to Mack, Pope himself was urged to write for the theater by his friend

Betterton, who had considerable connections with theaters, but Pope had declined, believing that playwriting was not his forte (93).

The child of a more decorous age, Pope did not value Shakespeare's ribald humor and buffoonery. He inferred that, by pandering to commoners, the dramatist sometimes sank to levels that were beneath his ability. Yet even in these lowlife scenes, he marvels at Shakespeare's resiliency and detects evidence of high birth and gentility:

our Author's Wit buoys up, and is borne above his subject. His genius in those low parts is like some Prince of a Romance in the disguise of a Shepherd or Peasant: a certain Greatness and Spirit now and then break out which manifest his higher extraction and qualities. ("Preface")

Here again, Pope seems to detect the personality of the author beneath the personae of his creations. He dismisses those who would demand conformity to the rigid and artificial constraints of the Aristotelian "unities." He also defends him against Puritanical objections to supernatural and bombastic passages which Pope considered theatrically effective: "It will be but fair to allow that most of our Author's faults are less to be ascribed to his wrong judgment as a Poet than to his right judgment as a Player" ("Preface").

Pope used his instincts as a poet to determine the order in which the plays were written, judging them by their varying levels of maturity. Pope's examples of Shakespeare's improvements are based on comparisons of these plays with those included in the canon, for instance: "*The History of Henry VI*, which was first published under the Title of *The Contention of York and Lancaster*; and that of *Henry V*, extremely improved; that of *Hamlet* enlarged to almost as much again as at first, and many others."⁴

Pope removed from his 1725 edition the seven plays of doubtful authenticity which had been added to the second issue of the Third Folio in 1663 and included in all subsequent editions until Pope's (Lounsbury 70). With the exception of *Pericles*, Pope's judgment in this matter has been accepted as standard. The other six plays have been omitted from all subsequent editions of Shakespeare's works.⁵

Pope's observations of faults in the plays

Always regretting that it was not the playwright himself, but two actors who had edited the First Folio, Pope attributed many of the flaws in the plays to the actor-editors, Heminge and Condell. They not only added ribald passages, Pope complained, but revealed their ignorance of French (e.g. "Marcellus" for "Marseilles"), Latin (faulty stage directions), and even English history. Pope was certain from his reading of Shakespeare that the poet himself would never have made such mistakes: "Nay the constant blunders in proper names of persons and

places are such as must have proceeded from a man who had not so much as read any history in any language: so could not be Shakespeare's." He feared that such blunders might be wrongly laid at the feet of the playwright: "For whatever had been added since those Quartos by the actors, or had stolen from their mouths into the written parts, were from thence conveyed into the printed text and all stand charged upon the Author."

Pope had access to most of the early quarto editions, generally considering them superior to the versions printed in the First Folio. Assuming that the folios had been tampered with by actors, he restored a number of scenes from the quartos, including some especially fine ones from *Romeo and Juliet*. Unfortunately, he also took it upon himself to purge passages that he believed, judging by their style and manner, could not have come from Shakespeare's hand, arbitrary deletions that have been questioned by later scholars.

In his sharpest condemnation of the actors-turned-editors, Pope chided them for the notion that a genius does not need to make revisions. These men thought to praise Shakespeare, Pope sighs, by saying he never changed a line. He refutes this "groundless report," by comparing passages in the quartos and the First Folio to prove that Shakespeare meticulously revised his own work.

Equally groundless, Pope says, is the common opinion that Shakespeare lacked learning:

Whatever object of nature or branch of science he either speaks of or describes, it is always with competent if not extensive knowledge. His descriptions are still exact; all his metaphors appropriated [sic], and remarkably drawn from the true nature and inherent qualities of each subject. When he treats of Ethic or Politic we may constantly observe a wonderful justness of distinction as well as extent of comprehension. ("Preface")

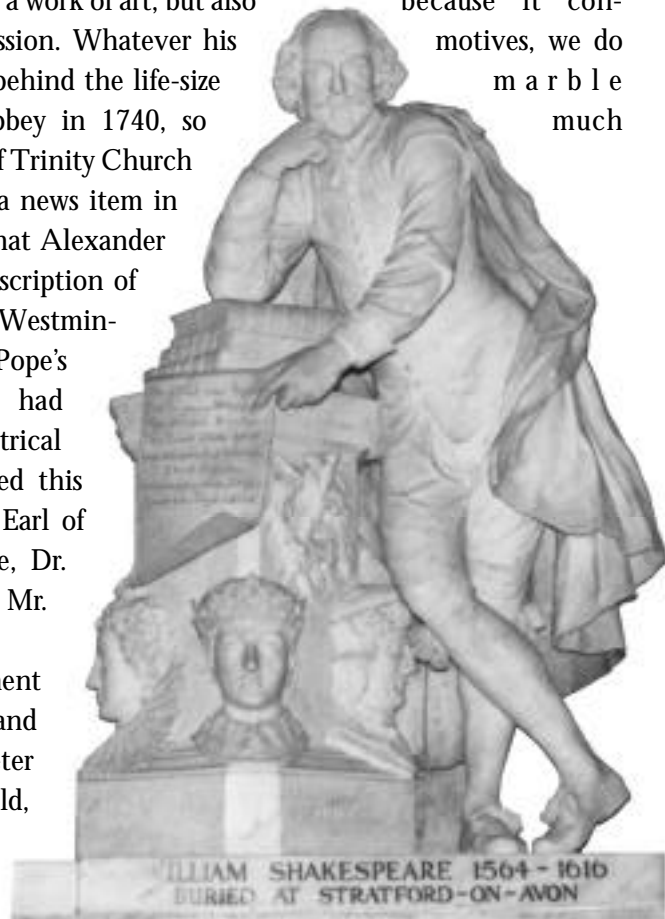
As a man of innate genius himself, an artist of consummate craftsmanship, broad knowledge, and sensitivity to the nuances of character, Pope speaks with an authority that comes from experience. He thoroughly demolishes the contention that great literature can spring full blown from the imagination without benefit of learning, experience, or craft. The exaltation of the natural virtues of primitives during the Romantic Period of the early nineteenth century would soon make it fashionable to see Shakespeare as a born genius, as Wordsworth would phrase it: "warbling woodnotes wild." Despite the fact that the tendency towards realism began to increase later in the century, one that has continued on into our own time, Shakespeare's innovative use of characters, applauded by Pope and Johnson as realistic, did not generate much re-examination by later critics, just as the opinions of poets such as Walt Whitman and Samuel Taylor Coleridge also went largely unheeded.

Pope and the images of Shakespeare

Pope was understandably humiliated by Theobald’s revelation of the flaws in his Shakespeare edition, but it did not diminish his love of the great playwright himself, as can be inferred from his efforts to give the public some images of Shakespeare that they might admire. In his 1725 edition of the plays, Pope reproduced an engraving of the Stratford monument done by George Vertue in 1723. Vertue’s engraving shows a smooth flattened cushion with tassels on the corners, the left hand resting flat on a piece of paper, the right hand curled around a quill pen. This engraving is pictured in a sequence of Shakespeare images on the web site of Clark J. Holloway, a Stratfordian (see Works Cited). According to Holloway, Vertue had “corrected” some errors of Wenceslaus Hollar, whose 1656 engraving showed flat hands resting on a lumpy sack, enshrined as the frontispiece in Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition.

Pope would have seen the Hollar image in Rowe’s book, but he would naturally have preferred Vertue’s engraving, not only as a work of art, but also because it connects Shakespeare to the writing profession. Whatever his motives, we do know that Pope was the moving force behind the life-size marble monument placed in Westminster Abbey in 1740, so grander and more impressive than that of Trinity Church in Stratford. On December 21, 1737, a news item in the London Evening Post announced that Alexander Pope was receiving proposals for the inscription of the new monument to Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey. By that date, according to Pope’s chronographer, Reginald Berry, £300 had been raised toward its cost through theatrical benefits. The committee that arranged this tribute was chaired by Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, and included, besides Pope, Dr. Mead, the Queen’s physician, and a Mr. Martin (Westminster Abbey Librarian).

The Westminster Abbey monument was designed by an artist named Kent and carved by the renowned sculptor Peter Scheemasters. It dominates, as it should, that section of the Abbey known as Poet’s Corner, the spot where so many of England’s greatest poets and



writers are buried or have memorial plaques or busts. It has been reproduced in art and photography so often that it may be the image that most people see when they envision Shakespeare in their minds.⁶ Whether true to life or not, it is certainly a far more satisfying image than either the Droeshout or the Hollar engravings, the Dugdale sketch, or the Stratford monument. In the Abbey monument, Shakespeare leans on his elbow on a stack of books; untitled, but representing, we may guess, the vast learning that he poured into his works. The fingers of his left hand point towards a scroll containing a passage adapted from *The Tempest* about mutability, certainly a more appropriate inscription than the peculiar legends carved on the bust and tombstone at Trinity Church.

Why did Pope undertake Shakespeare's works?

Pope was pressed for time and money in 1724. Struggling to recoup investment losses, he was working on a translation of *The Odyssey*, attempting to produce fifty lines of verse each day while editing the six-volume Shakespeare as a work-for-hire on the side. Either of these would have been monumental undertakings; taken together, the work must have been staggering. The pittance (£217 12 s.) that he received for the Shakespeare edition offered little incentive to invest a great amount of time (Johnson). And, as both Lounsbury and Mack recognize, Pope was ill-suited by nature to the tedious tasks of editing and collating. Then why did he take it on? Not in the hope of making money, surely, because all profits went to the publisher. More likely he desired to see his idol presented in a better light than any of the earlier editions had made possible.

To judge Pope fairly as an editor we should consider what he really did do, not what he might have done. Had the world of letters been more willing to give him credit for his original insights, Shakespearean scholarship might have taken a different turn and scholars might have saved themselves much trouble and pointless acrimony through the centuries.

Similarly, Lewis Theobald, despite his own harsh criticism of Pope, should be recognized for producing the first really well-edited version of the Shakespearean plays. Theobald's background in the archaic vocabulary and customs of sixteenth-century drama enabled him to interpret and clarify many passages that had caused Pope confusion. But, had Pope not tried and failed—failed at least by modern standards—Theobald might not have been able to attract the attention he needed to finance his own edition a year later. To linger over their feuds and faults is to perpetuate the follies of the past two centuries.⁷ Belated awareness of these two pioneers of Shakespeare scholarship will not compensate them for past neglect, but for us, that acknowledgment is both a courtesy and a duty. _____ ©

NOTES

1 The Encyclopedia Britannica Online, launched in 2001, offers a feature entitled “Shakespeare and The Globe: Then and Now.” Inexplicably, in its list of Shakespearean scholars and critics, neither Alexander Pope nor Samuel Johnson has been included, though Nicholas Rowe (who did far less) is there, and also Lewis Theobald, who built upon Pope’s work by discrediting it. Pope had established his literary reputation by 1720 at the age of thirty-two with his brilliant translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. His fame now rests primarily upon his satirical poems, such as “The Rape of the Lock” and “The Dunciad”; his essays and epistles rendered in witty heroic couplets, including “Essay on Man,” “Essay on Criticism,” “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,” and enough aphorisms to fill several pages in Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* and other collections of wit and wisdom.

2 Theobald did more than anyone else to establish an authentic text. His famous emendation changing “table of green fields” to “babbled of green fields” is just one example of his talent for comprehending and clarifying Shakespeare’s lines. Shakespeare lovers owe him a tremendous debt for rescuing the plays from the jumble of prompt book copies, pirated versions, and adulterated scripts encompassed in the First Folio.

3 Pope was writing before scholars had succeeded in tracing Shakespeare’s debt to classical sources and contemporary English, French, and Italian writers.

4 [Ed: Pope’s view of the relation of such plays to the versions in the First Folio agrees with those who hold that Shakespeare himself wrote, in his youth, a number of the works that most orthodox scholars now hold were his “sources”; that is, while they believe that they were written by earlier, though often unknown writers, Pope saw them as Shakespeare’s own early work./ SHH.]

5 In his Preface, Pope wrote: “If I may judge from all the distinguishing marks of his style, and his manner of thinking and writing, I make no doubt to declare that those wretched plays, *Pericles*, *Lochrine*, *Sir John Oldcastle*, *Yorkshire Tragedy*, *Lord Cromwell*, *The Puritan*, and *London Prodigal* cannot be admitted as his. And I should conjecture of some of the others . . . that only some characters, single scenes, or perhaps a few particular passages were of his hand.” Pope’s friend, the actor Thomas Betterton, would have admitted *Pericles*, but Betterton also rejected the other six plays saying that not so much as a single line would lead anyone to think them of Shakespeare’s composition (Lounsbury 113).

6 The Westminster Abbey website names the benefactors who erected the marble statue to Shakespeare in the Poets Corner, provides an illustration of the monument, and gives some details about the inscriptions. See this web page at www.westminster-abbey.org/library/burial/Shakespeare.

7 When the native-genius-versus-artistry argument resurfaced again during the Romantic period, Pope’s opinions were viewed as outdated or ossified examples of the neoclassical tastes of his time. However, the pendulum may now be swinging back the other way. Writing in 1986, Pope’s biographer Maynard Mack observes that, although this romantic view influenced the literary world of the early twentieth century, the contemporary viewpoint seems more closely allied to that of Pope.

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