

*Francis Meres, the Ovidian poet-playwright,
and Shakespeare criticism*

In 1598, Francis Meres prints a valuable portrait of an author largely lost since the early seventeenth century:

As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagorus: so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare, witnes his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends, &c.

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witnes his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loves labors lost*, his *Loves labours wonne*, his *Midsummers night dreame* & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2.* *Richard the 3.* *Henry the 4.* *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*. (*Riverside*, 1970)

The Meres miniature, as we might view it, is of particular value, because it helps us to restore some erased features to the critical portrait of Shakespeare in his original stature as an early modern author.

The Meres miniature is “justly famous,” writes Jonathan Bate, for its inventory of Shakespeare’s works at the mid-point of his career, but also for its portrait of Shakespeare as an Elizabethan Ovid. Thus, Bate opens *Shakespeare and Ovid* precisely with this portrait in order to answer the question: “what better model [than Ovid] for the ambitious young Elizabethan writer?” (2). “In support of Meres,” Bate continues, “one could list many points of similarity,” and from his list of six he singles out Ovid’s and Shakespeare’s shared “interest” in “the flexible self” (3). For Bate, in other words, the central point of connection between the English and the Roman author is that of subjectivity.

Bate makes two further remarks that merit emphasis. The first is that Meres’ allusion to “the fifteenth book of the *Metamorphoses*” – where Euphorbus’ soul does live in Pythagorus – is quite precise, since “Pythagorean metempsychosis . . . becomes a figure for the translation of one poet into another” (3). The second is that Meres’ comparison of Shakespeare with Ovid should not be “restricted to Shakespeare’s

non-dramatic works, for the comparison with Plautus and Seneca is simply made in terms of shared excellence, whereas that with Ovid is phrased in such a way as to imply both stylistic and spiritual resemblance. The soul that has been metamorphosed into Shakespeare is that of Ovid, the poet of metamorphosis" (3).

Bate's first point specifies individual subjectivity as the author's subjectivity and suggests that authorial subjectivity originates in the subjectivity of an earlier poet. Here Meres self-consciously uses a model of literary relations to present Shakespeare as an Ovidian writer par excellence. Bate's second point shows the material productions of the author's translated subjectivity and suggests that an author's works originate in the works of a predecessor. Here Meres extends the Ovidian model beyond Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to include his dramatic ones. By combining the two points, we can infer how Bate understands the Meres portrait: Shakespeare is an author who self-consciously models himself on Ovid in order to discover his sweet voice and his flexible self in both his dramatic and his non-dramatic works.

What Bate does not say provides a point of departure for this chapter: that Meres is portraying Shakespeare as a new kind of European writer. More accurately, Meres is portraying Shakespeare as the reincarnation of an ancient Roman writer. This reincarnated, Ovidian writer pens both poems and plays. He is the author of both *Venus and Adonis* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Richard III*. In fact, by 1598 Shakespeare has penned three important poems and twelve important plays – six "comedies" and six "tragedies." The symmetrical numbers look deliberate – an equation that balances comedy and tragedy and then puts the drama into a ratio with the poems: a one-to-four ratio. According to Meres, Shakespeare writes more plays than poems, but Shakespeare still writes poems, and what is more his poems are to be introduced before his plays, and they are to be classified according to the Roman author whom Meres and Bate see living most vitally in all of "mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare." This new author is an Ovidian poet-playwright.

In this chapter, we shall look into the genealogy and reception of this author, from antiquity to today. The chapter divides into five sets of evidence external to Shakespeare's works, each of which suggests a need to redraw his portrait as an early modern author; collectively, the evidence may make the need imperative. Since the scope of the material is vast, with each set warranting a study in itself, a broad map will need to suffice. Hopefully, readers will bring their own examples, qualifications, and refinements.

POEMS AND PLAYS, HOMER TO TASSO

A historical survey of poems and plays from Homer to Tasso reveals the need to re-identify Shakespeare as a poet-playwright.¹ Within this survey, Shakespeare emerges as merely one author among many during the European Renaissance who helps recover and re-invent what was originally a Roman writing practice. The origins of this practice go even further back.

The clearest way to view the origins is to take Meres' cue and dust off the generic site of authorship, insofar as we can. When we do, we discover that almost all of the more famous authors, from classical Greece and Rome through late fifteenth-century Italy, France, and Spain, wrote either poetry or drama but did not write both together. Famous poets who bequeathed no plays to posterity include Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Sappho, Callimachus, Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus, Lucan, Statius, the medieval Troubadours, Guillaume de Loris and Jean de Meun, the Italian *stil novisti*, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Sannazaro, Boiardo, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Gower.² Famous dramatists who bequeathed no body of poetry to posterity include Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, and Seneca (the only authors to whom the European Renaissance had access).³

For a few of these classical dramatists, we do possess scraps of poetry. For instance, we possess at least one poem by Aeschylus: his epitaph on himself (reprinted in *Oresteia*, 1). Richmond Lattimore refers to the legend by which Aeschylus "left Athens for Sicily in chagrin because he was defeated by Simonides, the great lyric poet, in a competition for writing the epitaph of the dead at Marathon" (Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, 2). This may be the earliest recorded instance of a phenomenon we will see arising nearly two thousand years later with respect to Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and Turtle": a famous dramatist turns his hand to poetry during a competitive environment. As Lattimore also records, the origins of tragedy trace to the "choral lyric," even though "the early phases of the course by which dramatic lyric was transformed into lyric drama are now invisible to us" (3). Finally, Lattimore observes that the origins of the *Oresteia* are themselves

¹ Cf. critics who examine lyric, drama, and narrative: e.g., Frye, *Anatomy*, 243–337; Hernadi, *Beyond genre*, chs. 2 and 3; Dubrow, *Victors*, 175, esp. 117.

² As indicated in chapter 1, Petrarch wrote one comedy, not extant; and certainly English authors like Lydgate were interested in theatrical art.

³ On the Graeco-Roman tradition, see Farrell, "Careers," who confirms these statistics.

poetic, including works by Homer, Stesichorus, and Pindar (7). A version of the same complication characterizes Roman tragedy and comedy as well.⁴

The historical relation between poetry and theatre may be lost to us, but a study of their relation may profitably acknowledge the best scholarly conjecture: of an originary moment of generic succession, in which theatre grows out of poetry, staged drama out of lyric song. While the choral lyrics of Greek tragedy register a trace of this moment, we might be interested in representations that preserve such an origin. One appears in the portrait of Iphigeneia in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (239–47). When her father is offering her up for sacrifice, Iphigeneia's looks of "pity" are said to be "lovely as in a painted scene"; but in a subsequent use of the word "as," the playwright moves beyond simile into example:

as many times
at the kind festive table of her father
she had sung, and in the clear course of a stainless maiden
with love she had graced the song
of worship when the third cup was poured. (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 243–47)

This astonishing image presents Iphigeneia as a singer within a play. While it is traditional for a young girl to sing, in Greek as in Renaissance culture, we might be struck by the kind of girl being represented here. She bears an uncanny congruence with the form of the play itself: a tragic heroine is herself a singer of tragic song. Aeschylus does masculinize the representation, as when the male Chorus literally sings the choral origin of this tragedy: "Still the spirit sings, drawing deep / from within this unlyric threnody of the Fury" (990–01). But this "spirit" remains more powerfully feminine, and nowhere more hauntingly than in the doomed prophetess Cassandra, who voices it herself: "This pain flooding the song of sorrow is mine alone" (1137). The song Cassandra sings is that of the nightingale Philomela, as the prophetess sings her own "death song, the wild lyric" – what she also calls "the trebled song of [her] . . . agony" (1165) and "the death song of [her] . . . passionate suffering" (1176). At lines 1186–97, Cassandra locates the origin of this tragic song in the Eryines, later to be called the Eumenides (1186–92). Not all Greek tragedies are as self-reflexive as this, but some (Sophocles' *Electra* is another striking example) appear to represent their art through figures of tragic song that record a succession from lyric to tragedy as a form of continuity.

⁴ On these origins, see Winnington-Ingram, "Origins of Tragedy"; Handley, "Earliest Comic Drama"; Gratwick, "Origins of Roman Drama."

By contrast, Seneca is notable for representing his art through figures that separate song and performance, poetry and theatre, creating discontinuity. In the play that Elizabethan writers singled out as typifying Senecan tragedy, *Thyestes*, Atreus self-styles himself as the play's tragedian.⁵ More to the point, Atreus thinks he derives his plan of revenge against his brother Thyestes from reading the Greek tragedy of Philomela (2. 97–98; trans. J. Heywood), even though the audience knows differently, since the Fury has invented the plot in the opening scene (1. 56–57). Within the fiction, Atreus is recalling the dynastic history important to his own bloodline; but of his author we might wonder, who has Seneca been reading? The answer is surely compound: the great Greek tragedians like Aeschylus whom Seneca imitates – and who often included the Philomela myth in their plays – but also the most famous teller of the myth, Ovid, in his verse epic the *Metamorphoses*. Perhaps indebted to Ovid's interest in performance (Wheeler, *Wonder*; Hardie, *Poetics*), Seneca shows Atreus relying on deceptive strategies to triumph over his brother.

Atreus' self-conscious tragic show contrasts with Thyestes' drunken choral song, in which the younger brother sings happily – a song the audience views as hapless because the singer is ignorant about the tragedy quite literally within him: "To joyful state return thy cheerful face" (5. 2. 17). For Seneca, lyric is at odds with tragedy, as Thyestes rehearses what we experience as the impotence of affirmation. The irony of course is that Seneca's plays were probably never performed in the public theater; they were (we think) closet dramas, more book than spectacle. In a curious way, this historical phenomenon looks forward to the closing of the Roman theatre during the early Christian era, which in turn led to the fundamentally poetic profession during the Middle Ages.

In the works of St. Augustine, we can witness the changing of the cultural guard right where we might expect it. Augustine appears to have written both poems and plays. In *The City of God*, he preserved three lines of an evening hymn composed for singing at the lighting of the candle (15. 22). And in *The Confessions* he informs us that he has been writing for a "theatrical prize" (4. 2). As his autobiography reveals, he spent his sinful early life not simply stealing figs or sleeping with his mistress, but also reading Virgil (1. 13–14) and watching plays (1. 2).

While the dramatic profession survives most memorably in the miracle, mystery, and morality plays written to support Christian faith, it

⁵ On "the ultimate theatricality of Senecan drama," see Braden, *Anger*, 61. On *Thyestes* for the Elizabethans, see Cheney, *Profession*, 286n34.

simultaneously goes underground in much of the great poetry of the Middle Ages. Consider the English case of Lydgate, who reduces the thirty-five short books of his source text for his 1420 poem, *Troy Book*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*, to five books, in "a gesture of acknowledgement and homage to Chaucer's 'litel tragedye'" in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Edwards, ed., *John Lydgate*, 1). Here we find a fundamental medieval configuration relating poetry to theatre: writers like Chaucer and Lydgate structure their long poems as plays (cf. Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*). The most famous example is Dante's *Commedia*, a Christian epic in the form of a divine comedy designed to overgo Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Roman epic in the form of a human tragedy. Thus, at the end of *Inferno*, 20 the guide Virgil tells the pilgrim Dante, "a certain passage / of my high tragedy has sung" the story of Euryphus, too (112–13), while at the very beginning of the next canto, Dante reports that he and Virgil were "talking of things my Comedy is not / concerned to sing" (21. 2–3) – the juxtaposition of "my high tragedy" with "my Comedy" sounding the terms of this intertextual rivalry. In Lydgate's later version of Homeric epic, the English national poet is working in the Dantean medieval tradition – and perhaps crowning it, as his position in fifteenth-century England suggests.

During the English Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney will extend this tradition by dividing his prose romance, the *Arcadia* (finished c. 1580), into five "acts" derived from the structure of Roman comedy, at about the very time James Burbage was building The Theatre (1576). In 1591, Thomas Nashe may be taking Sidney's cue when referring to *Astrophil and Stella* as a "tragicomedy of love . . . performed by starlight" (G. G. Smith, ed., *Essays*, 2: 223), but it is also possible that the new commercial theatre intensified such cross-generic discourse. This discourse is precisely what gives Nashe his voice during his famous preface to *Astrophil and Stella*: "here you shall find a paper stage streud with pearle, an artificial heav'n to overshadow the fair frame, & cristal wals to encounter your curious eyes" (G. G. Smith, ed., *Essays*, 2: 223). It is as if Nashe has just come from a performance at the Rose, the gorgeous architecture of the new commercial theatre providing the apt metaphor for entry into the luxury of Sidney's "paper stage," since Nashe finds in the Sidneian book the very spectacle of performance he has witnessed in the playhouse.

What we notice is that all around sixteenth-century Europe authors do not simply use theatre as a metaphor for poetry; they also regularly produce both poems and plays in a single career. In Italy, notable examples include Ariosto, Aretino, to some extent Machiavelli, all of whom wrote comedy alongside their verse, and of course Tasso, who wrote the tragedy *Torismondo*

to complement such major achievements as the epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the pastoral drama *Aminta*, and the vast collection of sonnets and lyrics, the *Rime*.⁶ While none of the major French poets of the later sixteenth century – Du Bartas, Du Bellay, Ronsard, Desportes, or Marot – wrote plays per se, Ronsard did some dramatic experiments, and his lesser-known colleague Baif did write plays. As Anne Lake Prescott observes, the Pleiade included drama in its program, but in practice operated through "a sort of division of labor," with Du Bellay and Ronsard writing poetry and Jodelle and Garnier writing drama (personal communication, 10 June 1998), although in the end Jodelle published several collections of poems alongside his plays and Garnier penned an elegy on the death of Ronsard. Earlier in the century, however, Marguerite de Navarre did interweave drama not merely with poetry but also with prose fiction (the novella). She may be the first recorded woman writer to do so; certainly, she is the most famous. French drama does not achieve international prominence until the seventeenth century, first with Corneille, especially with Molière, and finally with Racine, all of whom were "men of the theatre." In Spain, after the opening of the commercial public theatres in the 1570s, such writers as Lope de Vega, Calderón, and (we have seen) Cervantes write both poems and plays. In fact, if we wish to find a literary scene analogous to that in England in the late sixteenth century, we must turn to Spain, where Lope and his colleagues are even more prodigious than their English counterparts, although Spanish dramatists of the Golden Age tended to limit their production to comedies (Frederick A. de Armas, personal communication, 15 June 1998). Around 1613–14, Leonard Digges made an inscription on the flyleaf of his copy of Lope's *Rimas* (1613): "this Booke of Sonets, wch [sic] with Spaniards here is accounted of their lope de Vega as in Englande wee sholde of o[u]r: Will Shakespeare" (quoted in Morgan, "Our Will Shakespeare," 118). The inscription makes sense only if we know that these two sonneteers were famous men of the theatre.

To my knowledge, only two major authors before the sixteenth century qualify as notable exceptions to this historical practice of generic exclusivity: Ennius and Ovid.⁷ Ennius (239–169 BC) was famous as the author of both tragedies and comedies (especially tragedies), but he was best known for

⁶ See Malago, "Shakespeare and Tasso," who contextualizes Shakespeare's poems and plays in terms of Tasso's combination.

⁷ Livius Andronicus, the first Roman writer we know about (born c. 272 BC), is the author of poems and plays (Farrell, "Careers," 35–36). St. Hildegard (1098–1179), perhaps medieval Christianity's first woman poet-playwright, is the author of liturgical hymns and the first extant morality play, *Ordo Virtutum* (c. 1151; see Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, 150).

his eighteen-book epic masterpiece on the history of Rome, the *Annales*. He also penned a number of minor works in various meters and forms (Farrell, "Careers," 37–40). Perhaps because Ennius' works existed only in fragments, but also surely because Ovid's genius managed to eclipse Ennius' generic eclecticism, the great Naso, we may hypothesize, emerged as the premier model of the poet-playwright for Renaissance writers and scholars.

Throughout the twentieth century, Renaissance scholars have understood Ovid to be only a poet (mostly of elegy, both amorous and exilic, but occasionally a poet of epic), and they have told a recurrent story: "Shakespeare lived during a period in which ways of reading Ovid underwent radical transformation, as a newly unapologetic delight in the poetic and erotic qualities of the *Metamorphoses* came to compete with the predominant medieval practice of moralizing and even Christianizing them."⁸ What at least a few Renaissance scholars mention, most neglect: not merely that Ovid was a poet, but that he was a dramatist (Bate, *Ovid*, 28n53, 239; Miola, *Tragedy*, 102). In addition to elegy and epic, he wrote tragedy. As indicated in the last chapter, two lines of Ovid's historically priceless play have been preserved, while tributes to its genius exist in the Elder Seneca (*Suasoriae*, 3. 7), Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, 7. 5. 6, 10. 1. 98), and Tacitus (*Dialogus de oratoribus*, 12). Classicists believe that Ovid mentions his *Medea* at least three times: twice in his inaugural volume, the *Amores* (2. 18. 13–14, 3. 1. 29) and again in his valedictory work, the *Tristia* (2. 547–56).⁹ In fact, classicists argue that Ovid's *Medea* served as the primary model for Senecan tragedy (Currie, "Ovid and the Roman Stage"; Tarrant, "Senecan Drama"), which Renaissance scholars agree served as the model for Renaissance tragedy, including Shakespearean tragedy (Miola, *Tragedy*). What we may wish to recall is the formal way in which the English Senecan movement is "Ovidian."¹⁰

Hence, on the title page to his 1648 translation of Seneca's *Medea*, Edward Sherburne includes an epigraph from Ovid's *Amores*: "Non estis teneris apta Theatra Modis" (1. 2). Accordingly, Ovid shows up often in Sherburne's "Annotations." Moreover, "Some" sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars, writes George Sandys, even "conjectred that Seneca's *Medea* belongeth to Ovid" (b3^v), while others, like John Gower, think that Ovid wrote more than one tragedy: "He penned also some Tragedies: Of

⁸ Bate, *Ovid*, 25. For bibliography on the Renaissance Ovid, see Cheney, *Profession*, 283n6.

⁹ See Currie, "Ovid and the Roman Stage"; Tarrant, "Senecan Drama"; Nikolaidis, "Some Observations."

¹⁰ Professor Robert Miola writes, "Everywhere I looked for Seneca I saw Naso's shadow in the period" (personal communication, 7 April 1997). On Seneca and Ovid, see also McCabe, *Incest*, 100–02.

which *Medea* is highly approved by Quintilianus and Corn. Tacitus, and not without desert" (B^r). In his 1612 *Apology for Actors*, Thomas Heywood even includes Ovid in his short list of excellent writers of "Roman tragedy," alongside Accius, Pacuvius, and Seneca (D1^v). In his *Refutation of the Apology for Actors* (1615), John Green articulates what archival research confirms and what remains a neglected feature of "Renaissance Ovid" criticism: "the next proove of Antiquity for Stage-Playes by M. Actor alledged, is out of Ovids works" (*A Refutation*, 8). That is, like Heywood (also known as "M. Actor"), Renaissance commentators recurrently turn to Ovid as their primary authority on the theatre (see Gosson, *Schoole of Abuse* B3^r, B4^r, C1^r). Not surprisingly, Green reports that "Vives also writeth, that Ovid was most justly banished as an instrument of wantonnesse, for making love bookes, enterludes, and such amorous trumpery" (*A Refutation*, 50).¹¹ Evidently, since only two lines of Ovidian drama formally survive, English Renaissance scholars felt inclined to invent an Ovidian dramatic canon. These seventeenth-century English scholars confirm the research of such Continental sixteenth-century scholars as Angelo Poliziano, Daniel Hensius, Martin Del Rio, and Giovambattista Giraldi Cinthio, all of whom speak about Ovid as the author of tragedy.¹²

Ovid, then, is not simply a poet of wit and eroticism but the first author to become famed as both a poet and a playwright. By recalling this fact, we supply a significant piece of information missing in literary histories of the Renaissance, including arguments about Shakespeare's role in the period. Most likely, Renaissance scholars and writers became interested in the original Ovid once the recovery of classical texts, Greek and Roman, increased the stature of drama in the literary system. The *Amores* is the key text here because it presents Ovid as an elegist-tragedian: "Horned Bacchus greater fury doth distil, / A greater ground with great horse is to till. / Weak elegies, delightful Muse, farewell."¹³ Not simply does Marlowe translate Ovid's inaugural work (c. 1585), but he goes on to make the new Ovidian author as poet-playwright his model.¹⁴ In terms of the English literary tradition up through the early 1590s, Marlowe's substantive combination of Ovidian poetry and drama within a single literary career is unique. The

¹¹ See also Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, lviii^r.

¹² See Poliziano's poem on Ovid, which refers to *Medea* (trans. Sandys, *Metamorphoses*, 10 and marginal notes); Hensius, ed., *L. Annaei Senecae*, 544–45, 552–53; Del Rio, ed., *L. Annaei Senecae Cordubensis*, prefatory poem titled "Ioan, Dominici Florentii Romani Carmen" (n.p.); Cinthio, *Discorsidi*, 222–23, 235.

¹³ *Amores*, 3. 15. 17–19; in *Ovid's Elegies*, 3. 14. 17–19, trans. Marlowe. For Ovid as elegist-tragedian, see *Amores*, 2. 18 and 3. 1.

¹⁴ This paragraph summarizes Cheney, *Profession*.

youth from Canterbury qualifies as the founding father of the new English author.

It is precisely Ovid the poet-playwright – the writer as both elegist and tragedian, author of the *Amores* and the *Medea* – whom “the legitimate heir of Marlowe” (Eliot, *Elizabethan Dramatists*, 75) puts on stage to open his 1601 *Poetaster*. While Ovid’s servant, Luscus, speaks of Ovid’s “songs, and sonnets” (1. 1. 5) and Ovid himself recites Jonson’s own translation of *Amores*, 1. 15, his father accosts him with a paternal tirade: “Ovid, whom I thought to see the pleader, become Ovid the play-maker? . . . I hear of a tragodie of yours comming foorth for the common players there, call’d Medea.”¹⁵ Perhaps because of such representations, at the end of the Renaissance, Milton models his figure of “Tragodea” in *Elegia Prima* (2. 37–46) on Ovid’s portrait of Tragedy in *Amores*, 3. 1. 11–15 (Milton, *Complete Poems*, 8).

Certainly, the Humanist educational movement provided the greatest single impetus for the rupture of the poetic profession by the dramatic one. Thus a number of writers stage plays before the re-opening of the commercial theatre. Several other early modern movements also played decisive, integrative roles, including the change from a feudal to a capitalist society, but for the present argument the invention of the printing press proves decisive. Indeed, with the recovery, translation, printing, dissemination, study, and imitation of classical texts, Elizabethan school teachers combined poetry and drama in their curricula, so that students like Shakespeare, even through a grammar-school education, could see the literary tradition in a new light. They could see, for instance, Plautus and Terence seated alongside Virgil and Horace, with both groups contributing decisively to the formation of the Roman literary system. The building of the public theatres in the 1570s in both England and Spain joins the printing press to form the most powerful agents in this historical process.

THE ENGLISH POET-PLAYWRIGHT

A historical survey of the English poet-playwright in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries also reveals the need to re-identify Shakespeare as a poet-playwright. For the first sustained time, in England (as in Spain, but not in Italy or France) individual writers combine poems and plays within a single literary career. Indeed, everywhere we look among Shakespeare’s contemporaries we discover the presence of the new poet-playwright: “For

¹⁵ Jonson, *Poetaster*, 1. 2. 8–11 (in Herford and Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*).

Bacchus fruite is frend to Phoebus wise,” writes Spenser in 1579 (*October*, 106). In this important line, published just a few years after the building of The Theatre, Spenser calls on his colleagues to create a professional friendship between the god of tragic drama and the god of poetry, between tragedy and epic (Cheney, *Profession*, 61–64).

Certainly, English origins of the poet-playwright exist before the theatres open (as they do in Italy). The most notable examples appear in the writings of Skelton, Sackville, and Gascoigne, all of whom wrote at least one play and some significant poems. Only Gascoigne, however, wrote in more than one dramatic genre, combining comedy and tragedy, although his *Supposes* is a translation from Ariosto and his *Jocasta* a collaborative translation from Lodovico Dolce’s *Giocasta*, which in turn draws from Euripides’ *Phoenissae*. After 1576, writers of quite different stripes start to combine poems with plays, as if this were a natural practice (as we have seen, it is not). In addition to Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, writers penning both genres, men as well as women, include Watson, Lyly, Greene, Peele, Nashe, Lodge, Kyd, Greville, Chapman, Daniel, Drayton (whose tragedies have not survived), Mary Sidney, Marston, Jonson, Tourneur, Middleton, Webster, Ford, and Wroth. Between the opening of the theatres in the mid-1570s and their closing in 1642, this group constitutes the mainstream of influential writers at work in Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline England. To this list, we can add Queen Elizabeth, who wrote a number of poems still extant, as well as translated Seneca’s *Hercules Oetaeus* (*Collected Works*).

While all of these writers produced canons comprised of both poems and plays, we might be interested to see them representing the relation between poems and plays in their works. Such representations abound. To cite but one example, Daniel writes in his *Dedicatory Epistle* to Mary Sidney prefacing his 1602 *Works* that the Countess

Call’d up my spirits from out their low repose,
To sing of State, and tragicke notes to frame . . .
I . . .
Made musique to my self that pleasd me best,
And onelie told of *Delia* . . .
Madam, had not thy well grac’d *Antony* . . .
Requir’d his *Cleopatras* company.

(Daniel, *Dedicatory Epistle* to Mary Sidney, 7–16, in *Works*)

Here Daniel records his own generic history, together with its gender paradigm for artistic inspiration: left to himself as a young writer, Daniel wrote only amatory verse; but under Mary Sidney’s inspiration, he turned

to the higher form of tragedy. Daniel is not alone in presenting himself as a poet-playwright; his colleagues saw Daniel this way as well. Spenser, for instance, was alert to his younger colleague's combination; in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, he encourages Daniel to move beyond "loves soft laies and looser thoughts delight" to "Tragick plaints and passionate mischance" (423–27).¹⁶

While versions of the poet-playwright appear in such treatises as William Webbe's *Discourse of English Poetrie*, such fiction as Sidney's *New Arcadia*, and such poetry as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, it is the dramatists themselves who produce perhaps the most intriguing manifestation; they recurrently put the poet-playwright on the stage.¹⁷ While Jonson's "Ovid" in *Poetaster* recalls the Roman origins of the new author for the Elizabethans, the most important early character is probably old Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Since Kyd's play is often regarded as one of the founding plays of English Renaissance tragedy, and since *The Spanish Tragedy* exerts a strong influence on subsequent drama, including *Hamlet*, we might recall Hieronimo's authorial career.

Most memorably, Hieronimo writes and stages two plays. At the end of Act 1, he presents a heroic "masque" about the martial victory of the English over Portugal and Spain (4. 137–74, in Tydeman, ed., *Two Tudor Tragedies*); then, at the end of Act 4 (scene 3), he resurrects the "tragedy" of Soliman and Perseda that he had written while he "studied" in Toledo (1. 70–77).¹⁸ For this last play, he supplies a "book" (s.d.); he sets the stage for the play that he himself produces; he acts in it; and he serves as its principal commentator. While Hieronimo is best remembered as a "man of the theatre," Kyd also presents him as a student of "fruitless poetry" (1. 71) and even as the composer of a remarkable fourteen-line "funeral hymn" – a Latin "mish-mash of invented lines and selective quotations from Latin poets including Tibullus, Virgil, Ovid and Lucretius" (Tydeman, ed., *Two Tudor Tragedies*, 313). Thus, Kyd twice associates Hieronimo with the legendary founder of poetry, Orpheus: first, when Hieronimo tells the Senex, Bazulto, "be my Orpheus . . . The Thracian poet thou shalt

¹⁶ Oram glosses "Tragick plaints" here with Daniel's *Cleopatra* (Oram, et al., *Yale Edition*, 542). On Daniel's "Senecan tragedies," see Hulse, *Verses*, 12.

¹⁷ For Webbe, see *Discourse on English Poetrie*, G. G. Smith, ed., *Essays*, 1: 249–50, 300; Sidney, *The New Arcadia*, where Pyrochles and Musidorus sing songs and put on disguises to woo their respective beloveds, Philoclea and Pamela; and Spenser, Book 3, cantos 11–12 of *The Faerie Queene*, where the "vile Enchaunter" Busirane (12.31) functions as a critique of the poet-playwright, with his Ovidian tapestries and Masque of Cupid.

¹⁸ Lukas Erne observes that both Hieronimo and Kyd, character and creator, wrote a play called *Soliman and Perseda* (personal communication, 9 May 2003; see also Erne, "Spanish Tragedy," 160–62). Effectively, Kyd offers a self-dramatization of his own authorship.

counterfeit" (3. 13. 116–21); and later, when the Ghost of Don Andrea says, "I'll lead Hieronimo where Orpheus plays, / Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days" (4. 5. 23–24). While Orpheus never formally writes plays in the classical myth(s) about him, Kyd's punning phrase "Orpheus plays" may register the great Bard of Rhodope as a type of poet-playwright.¹⁹

Somewhat surprisingly, the other candidate for the founder of Elizabethan tragedy does not represent the poet-playwright in his plays as clearly as does Kyd. Nonetheless, it is a commonplace that "Tamburlaine is a poet" (Hope, "Tamburlaine," 53). Hence, in Part 1 of *Tamburlaine* the Scythian shepherd's "talk [is] much sweeter than the Muses' song" (3. 2. 50), and during his only soliloquy he broods on "Beauty, mother to the Muses," who "comments volumes with her ivory pen" (5. 1. 144–45) – the same writing implement Tamburlaine soon identifies as "held" by the "poets" themselves (161). In Part 2, at Zenocrate's death, Tamburlaine attempts to outdo Homer, Catullus, and Ovid in memorializing his beloved (2. 4. 86–101), and throughout both parts he quotes, echoes, and revises "The Passionate Shepherd": "And if thou pitiest Tamburlaine the Great," he says to the departed spirit of his wife, "Come down from heaven and live with me again" (2 *Tamb.*, 2. 4. 117–18). Yet Tamburlaine is also a man of the theatre, as presented in Part 1 during his opening change of costume from Scythian shepherd to mighty monarch (1 *Tamb.*, 1. 2. 34–43) and during his closing costume change from warrior to husband (5. 1. 525). Thus he demonstrates superior power to "play the orator" (1. 2. 129), is attracted instinctively to the "mask" (1 *Tamb.*, 1. 2. 199, 4. 2. 108, 5. 1. 187; 2 *Tamb.*, 5. 1. 78), and ruthlessly stages his political maneuvers as "our pageant" (2 *Tamb.*, 4. 3. 90) or what Zenocrate simply terms "another bloody spectacle" (1 *Tamb.*, 5. 1. 340). Tamburlaine may display an acute knowledge of martial action, but it is astonishing how much of his characterization derives from a learned discourse of both poetry and theatre.²⁰

In early seventeenth-century drama, we can periodically witness the kind of representation that Marlowe and Kyd make available. In *Volpone*, enough time has passed for Jonson to display genuine self-consciousness about the representation. In one of the most famous scenes in Renaissance drama, the bed-ridden Volpone bolts from his couch to woo Celia: "I am now as fresh . . . / As, when, in that so celebrated scene, / At recitation of our comedy, / For entertainment of the great Valois, I acted young Antinous

¹⁹ On Orpheus and tragedy, see DeNeef, "Poetics of Orpheus."

²⁰ On sonnets imbedded in Tamburlaine's dramatic speeches, see Kocher, "Sonnet"; Eriksen, "Petrarch." For details on Marlowe's representation, see Cheney, "Biographical Representations."

and attracted the eyes and ears of all the ladies present, / To admire each graceful gesture, note, and footing.”

Song

Come, my Celia, let us prove
While we can, the sports of love . . .
(*Volpone*, 3. 3. 161–70, in Fraser and
Rabkin, eds.)

In this comedy, *Volpone* appears as a sick man, throws off his disguise to make love to a beautiful young woman, recalls his past career as a comedic actor, and turns from theatre to song (in a recasting of Catullus’ famous ode well documented to be modeled on Marlowe’s “Passionate Shepherd”). Jonson’s representation of *Volpone* as a playwright and a poet (as well as an actor for the comic stage) is among the most technically self-conscious in Renaissance drama. From *Volpone* to Hieronimo, *Justice Overdo* to *Dr. Faustus*, and even Dekker and Middleton’s *Moll Cutpurse* to Tourneur’s *Vindice*, the poet-playwright emerges as a significant artistic representation among English Renaissance dramatists. Their representations reflect a larger cultural formation emergent throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourse: not merely in drama, but in poetry and prose.

Shakespeare’s status as an English poet-playwright is thus part of a broad European phenomenon. Yet his status remains unique, because he is the first (certainly in England) to make the imprint of poetry and theatre absolutely vital to his authorial signature.²¹

PLAGUE THEORY

A critical look into *plague theory* in the mid-1590s similarly reveals the need to re-identify Shakespeare as a poet-playwright. Such a look questions

²¹ Here Lukas Erne helps us to distinguish Shakespeare from, say, Daniel: “Whereas Shakespeare is a poet-playwright who contributed plays to an entertainment industry, Daniel is a poet-dramatist who wrote closet drama for readers. What is remarkable is that Shakespeare was clearly a chief player in an entertainment industry, in a world of artistic production that seems far removed from that of the poet who pursues a career through print or manuscript publication and patronage. Thus, it seems less remarkable that Daniel, who wrote closet dramas for readers and prefaced them with dedications, also wrote collections of poetry like *Delia* (prefacing them with similar dedications) than that Shakespeare, who was working for the public stage, simultaneously continued to write poetry. In terms of the economics of artistic production, Shakespeare, contrary to Daniel, straddles the divide between the coterie and patronage system within which poetry circulates and an early modern capitalist entertainment industry. The dominant mode of production in the latter is collaborative writing. In a situation where two, three, or even more playwrights collaborated in order to produce theatrical fast food, the idea of a literary career must have seemed far-fetched to many. In short, Shakespeare, despite the socio-economic divide that separates the two realms of poet and commercial playwright in ways that Daniel did not, pursued a career as a poet-playwright” (personal communication, 9 May 2003).

the idea that Shakespeare became a poet *because* the theatres closed due to plague in 1592–93. That was the cause, but yet *per accidens*. Certainly, Shakespeare reacted to the plague to write poems, but this does not explain why our language’s greatest writer also wrote poetry. Yet few critics go beyond recording the commonplace, which today remains one of the most unexamined staples of the Shakespeare biography: “It was probably during the months following July 1592, when London theatres had to close because of plague, that Shakespeare sat down for the only time in his life to extended bursts of writing not intended for the stage” (S. Wells, *Life*, 115). Plague theory cannot bear the burden of historical accuracy.²²

For instance, in her recent biography Katherine Duncan-Jones writes, “Plague was a defining context for all of Shakespeare’s writing, but above all for his non-dramatic writing” (*Ungentle*, 54). This is no doubt true, and Duncan-Jones alludes to her work on the Sonnets, in which she argues that Shakespeare turned to the Petrarchan genre during “four probable phases of composition” that are bound to plague years: before 1598; 1599–1600; 1603–04; and August 1608 – May 1609 (Duncan Jones, ed., *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 12–13; see 1–28). Such an argument is factually true and simultaneously misleading; it neglects other forces at work. These include Shakespeare’s interest in the art of poetry before 1592–93, evident in such plays as *Two Gentlemen* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (with their references to Ovid, as we shall see) or the *Henry VI* plays (with their foregrounding of the Spenserian shepherd-king), and perhaps a sonnet like 145, which Andrew Gurr believes is Shakespeare’s earliest composition, dating to the mid 1580s. Such a scenario suggests that Shakespeare had long been interested in the art of the poet, and that he benefited from the closing of the theatres to pursue that interest.

Another (more plausible) explanation for Shakespeare’s writing of poetry is that he was joining his generation as a practicing member of the new writing institution combining poems and plays in a single career, itself the product of a complex series of cultural events.²³ As the two *Dedicatory Epistles* to Southampton indicate, Shakespeare wishes to present himself as a poet in the English and European tradition – a tradition represented most prominently at this time by Spenser – and yet, simultaneously, he is compelled to become a poet by the closing of the theaters and the need for patronage. It makes little sense to say that Shakespeare wrote the Sonnets – arguably a world-class masterpiece – simply because he had nothing else to do. It makes more sense to see Shakespeare responding to and formed by

²² On the plague and theatre during the Stuart era, see Barroll, *Politics, Plague*.

²³ Burrow agrees (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 9–10).

specific cultural pressures: he is compelled to become a poet-playwright, and he takes a leadership role in forging a new kind of author that partly because of his genius establishes a new model of English authorship for the centuries to come.²⁴

CONTEMPORARY REPORTS

The critical reports from contemporaries provide some of the most decisive historical evidence for re-conceiving Shakespeare as a poet-playwright. During his lifetime, his colleagues certainly referred to his plays or remembered him in passing as a “writer . . . for the stage” (Bolton, *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 213); only one of his contemporaries, however, wrote a commemorative portrait of a playwright (Sir John Davies in 1611; *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 219). The rest of the known theatrical “allusions” refer to a playwright but do not mention Shakespeare by name (such as Robert Greene in his notorious indictment in 1592; *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 2), and most simply report the staging of individual plays (as when Nashe refers to *1 Henry VI*; *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 5).

By contrast, during Shakespeare’s lifetime many more commentators identify him in terms of his role as a poet, and several mention him by name; the extensive list includes Sir William Harbert in 1594; Thomas Edwards and W. Covell in 1595; Richard Carew in 1595–96; Richard Barnfield in 1598; John Lane in 1600; Robert Chester in 1601; Henry Chettle, William Camden, and I.C. in 1603; William Barkstead and Thomas Heywood in 1607; and Edward Howes and Sir William Drummond in 1614 (see *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 14–251). Many of these early reports place Shakespeare in the tradition of great Elizabethan poets. Edwards’ roll call, for instance, includes Spenser, Sidney, Daniel, Watson, and Marlowe (*Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 2), while Barnfield places *Venus* and *Lucrece* in the company of such “immortall Booke[s]” as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Daniel’s “sweet-chast Verse,” and Drayton’s “Tragedies, / And sweet Epistles” (*Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 51). Especially noteworthy here is Barnfield’s coupling of Shakespeare’s minor epics with two works in the higher genres, the epic of Spenser and the tragedies of Drayton. Several of such lists extend Shakespeare’s achievement as a poet from contemporary England, to

²⁴ On social construction, see Greenblatt, *Fashioning*. In “What is an Author?” Foucault has done much to quell interest in intentionality (101–20); see Orgel, “Text”; Masten, *Intercourse* and “Playwrighting.” Yet for post-revisionist commitments to intentionality, see Marcus, *Puzzling*, 19, 42, 68–70; Shapiro, *Rival*, 6; Bristol, *Big Time Shakespeare*, 49–58; Helgerson, *Forms*, 215; Montrose, “Domestic,” 92.

medieval England, to ancient Greece. In the 1600 *Return from Parnassus*, Part 1, it is not completely a joke when Gull quips, “Let this duncified worlde esteeme of Spenser and Chaucer, I’le worshipp sweet Mr. Shakespere, and to honoure him will lay his Venus and Adonis under my pillowe, as wee reade of one . . . [who] slept with Homer” (*Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 68). In fact, Shakespeare’s contemporaries more consistently identify him as a great poet in the English and European tradition than they do as a playwright.

References to Shakespeare the poet form the cornerstone of most recent attempts to discuss the poetry in light of the plays. Such attempts are useful as a corrective to the paradigm of Shakespeare the working dramatist, but they miss the real point and drive the wedge further between the two forms. While some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries do view him as a playwright, and more view him as a poet, both groups do not accurately map Shakespeare’s complete writing career, as is attested to by yet a third group.

During his lifetime, Shakespeare’s contemporaries also recurrently present him as a poet-playwright. The list includes an anonymous writer in 1593; John Weever in 1595; Gabriel Harvey around 1598; Meres also in 1598; the authors of the *Parnassus* plays between 1600 and 1602; I.C. in 1603; William Drummond in 1606 and 1611; an anonymous writer in 1609; and Thomas Freeman in 1614.²⁵ As we have seen, some, like Meres, even present Shakespeare as an Ovidian poet-playwright. To construct a more accurate portrait for Shakespeare’s authority and identity as an author, we need to return to Meres and his colleagues, who do not simply praise Shakespeare’s achievement as a poet but recurrently situate his poetry alongside his plays. Perhaps the most bizarre contemporary report occurs sometime between 1597 and 1603, when an anonymous writer scribbled a disordered series of words, phrases, quotations, and names on the title page to the Duke of Northumberland’s manuscript of Bacon’s “Of Tribute, or giving what is dew” (*Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 40). As Figure 4 reveals, the titles of two Shakespeare plays – *Richard II* and *Richard III* – appear at the top of the page, along with Shakespeare’s name, which is scattered in various forms down the page. The fragment toward the top left records line 1086 and part of 1087 from *The Rape of Lucrece*. Evidently, one did not have to be able to

²⁵ These all appear in the *Shakespeare Allusion-Book*. Thus, Bradbrook is simply mistaken: “Falstaff, Othello, Desdemona, Brutus, Iago and Hamlet (in that order) were what Shakespeare’s contemporaries and immediate successors thought, and spoke of whenever they thought of his art” (*Shakespeare*, 103). So is Schmidgall: “Harvey, Meres, Weever, and the *Parnassus* plays” indicate that “Shakespeare gained some considerable fame from his early poetical exertions” (2).

All subsequent items in the prefatory material confirm this impression. In the *Dedicatory Epistle* to the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, Heminge and Condell refer to “Shakespeare” in terms of “his playes” (*Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 313), while in their *Dedicatory Epistle* “To the great Variety of Readers” they refer to their readers as members of an audience “sit[ting] on the Stage at Black-Friers, or the Cock-pit, to arraigne Playes dailie,” even as such readers are assured that “these Playes have had their triall alreadie” (*Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 315). Subsequently, Hugh Holland titles his commendatory verse “Upon the Lines and Life of the Famous Scenicke Poet,” referring to “Shakespeares . . . dainty Playes, / Which make the Globe of heav’n and earth to ring,” and crowning Shakespeare “Poet first, then Poets King” by singling out his “Tragedies” (2–9; *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 317). By poet, Holland means playwright, as his pithy epithet “Scenicke Poet” conveys. Next, Leonard Digges writes a commendatory verse equating “Shake-speare[s] . . . Workes . . . Line . . . [and] Verse” with his “Stage,” citing the “Passions of Juliet, and her Romeo” and “thy half-sword parlying Romans” (1–18; *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 318) – a quite different portrait, we have seen, than the one Digges presents in Benson’s 1640 edition of the *Poems* or even on the flyleaf of his copy of Lope’s *Rimas*.²⁸ The subsequent commendatory verse by I. M. relies on a theatrical metaphor to stage Shakespeare’s immortality – “thou went’st so soone / From the Worlds-Stage, to the Graves-Tyring-roome” – and emphasizes that the publication of a play can extend a playwright’s life: “An Actors Art, / Can dye, and live, to acte a second part” (1–6; *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 319).

Even Jonson’s historically priceless “To the memory of my beloved, The Author” contributes to this project: “Soule of the Age! / The applause! delight! the wonder of our Stage! / My Shakespeare” (reprinted in *Riverside*, 97). Obedient to the First Folio’s promotion of the theatre, Jonson traces Shakespeare’s professional genealogy only in terms of the dramatic tradition: from the Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and the Greek comedian, Aristophanes; to the Roman comedians, Plautus and Terence, and the Roman tragedians, Pacuvius, Accius, and Seneca; to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English playwrights, Lyly, Kyd, Marlowe, and Beaumont. Moreover, the page listing “The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Playes” (including the first, “William Shakespeare”

²⁸ De Grazia observes that “Holland’s and Digges’s appropriative tributes [to Shakespeare in the First Folio are] drawn from Shakespeare’s sonnets” (*Verbatim*, 22–23), and in a note she specifies: Holland’s lines in the couplet of his sonnet “recall . . . Sonnets 16, 18, 74,” while Digges’s poem “draws” on Sonnets 55, 65, 81, 107 (23n30; see 37).

[*Riverside*, 105]) is headed with the title “The Workes of William Shakespeare, containing all his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies” (*Riverside*, 105) – an emphatic equation between Shakespeare’s “Workes” and the three dramatic genres. Finally, the opening page of the first work, *The Tempest*, prints its theatrical identity simply with its opening stage direction, centered immediately beneath the play’s title, set off by print larger than that of the play itself, and enclosed between a set of horizontal lines: “*Actus primus, Scena prima*” (*Riverside*, 107).

We do not know why the First Folio excludes Shakespeare’s poems. Colin Burrow speculates that the marketability of both *Venus* and *Lucrece* would have made it “difficult and expensive to obtain the right to print them” (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 8). This is certainly possible, but Burrow is merely speculating (“this may be one reason” [7]); to my knowledge, the issue has never been studied in detail. If marketability is the “reason,” why would Heminge and Condell not have said something about it in their prefatory material? Why are all the writers of commendatory verses silent about Shakespeare’s poems, especially Digges, who is on record for praising both the poems and plays? Surely, it would not have been out of place to mention the poems, even in passing. And why were such authors as Daniel and Jonson able to get the right to print both their poems and their plays in editions of their works? One wonders, rather, whether the two members of Shakespeare’s acting company, themselves men of the theatre, set about to memorialize their own profession – a worthy end in itself, but one that skews the historical record, momentous because of this very publication.

Perhaps because the First Folio prints Shakespeare as the working dramatist, subsequent commentators repeat or magnify the “Figure.” In 1627, for instance, Drayton, who, like Jonson should have known better, sees Shakespeare as only a comedian and a tragedian: “Shakespeare thou hadst as smooth a Comicke vaine . . . / . . . and as Cleere a rage, / As any one that trafiqu’d with the stage” (*Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 334; see Milton, *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 1: 342). After the 1642 closing of the theatres and their reopening during the Restoration, Shakespeare appears almost exclusively as a “Dramatick Writer” (Nahum Tate, 1680 preface, *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 2: 266). The key figure here is Dryden, for whom Shakespeare’s plays became something of an obsession; his arch-project was to re-dramatize Shakespeare’s plays, as revealed by the opening to his 1679 “Preface” for *Troilus and Cressida, Or, Truth Found too Late*: “The Poet Aeschylus was held in the same veneration by the Athenians of after Ages as Shakespeare is by us” (B. Vickers, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 1: 249).

From Rhymer in *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), to Pope in his edition of Shakespeare (1725), to Samuel Johnson in his proposal for an edition of "The Dramatick Works" (1756), to Coleridge in his unpublished lectures on Shakespeare (1811–12), to Hazlitt in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), the Bard is fundamentally a dramatic writer. However, Coleridge deserves special merit, because he reports that Shakespeare "had shown himself a poet, previously to his appearance as a dramatic poet" (quoted in Schmidgall, *Poet's Life*, 6), even though he sets the stage for commentary up to our own day:

our *myriad-minded* Shakspear. I mean the 'Venus and Adonis' and the 'Lucrece;' works which give at once strong promises of the strength, and yet obvious proofs of the immaturity, of his genius . . . I think, I should have conjectured from these poems, that even then the great instinct, which impelled the poet to the drama, was secretly working in him . . . In Shakespeare's *poems*, the creative power, and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace . . . At length, in the DRAMA they were reconciled. (Kolin, ed., "Venus and Adonis," 69–72; Coleridge's emphases)

Through the nineteenth century, most commentators would not dispute the eighteenth-century hyperbole of Dr. Johnson – "his drama is the mirror of life" (B. Vickers, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 5: 59–60) – or the exaltation of Pope: "he is justly and universally elevated above all other Dramatic Writers" (2: 403). But some, like Hazlitt, oppose Coleridge on even the developmental merits of the poems: "It has been the fashion of late to cry up on our author's poems, as equal to his plays: this is the desperate cry of modern criticism . . . The two poems of *Venus and Adonis* and of *Tarquin and Lucrece* appear to us like a couple of ice-houses. They are about as hard, as glittering, and as cold" (quoted in Kolin, ed., "Venus and Adonis," 14). The poles represented by Hazlitt and Coleridge characterize commentary up through the end of the millennium, even the recent spirited defenses of the poetry identified in the last chapter.

Nonetheless, for late nineteenth-century critics, as for twentieth and early twenty-first-century critics, Shakespeare remains fundamentally the working dramatist. As most histories of Shakespeare criticism acknowledge, Bradley's 1904 *Shakespearean Tragedy* established the benchmark for commentary in the twentieth century; as Harry Levin put it in 1986, "In the vast sea of secondary studies that have grown up around Shakespeare, no single book has gained wider acceptance than Bradley's" ("Critical Approaches," 228). What is significant is that this most influential book should examine only the drama – and only one genre within it. While Bradley's project proves vast in influence, well justifying an "Age of Bradley" in Michael

Taylor's recent analysis of Shakespearean Criticism in the twentieth century (*Shakespeare Criticism*, 39–84), in fact Bradley narrows the generic scope of Shakespeare's genius considerably.

We might find it striking, then, to see the extent to which three important 1997 editions of Shakespeare's works reproduce the tradition from the First Folio to Bradley (and beyond). The new *Riverside Shakespeare*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, and the *Longman Shakespeare* all inscribe the "dramatic" paradigm that has controlled the "vast sea" of Shakespeare studies since the seventeenth century. What is more to the point, they do so unconsciously. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, for instance, prints its contents page with the following headings: "Comedies," "Histories," "Tragedies," "Romances," "Poems." Evidently, the nonparallelism does not disrupt the reader's expectation; indeed, the theatrical paradigm is so widely held that no heading called "Plays" is required. Similarly, the opening sentence to Greenblatt's "Preface" in *The Norton Shakespeare* equates the theatrical principle of Shakespeare's career with the primary principle organizing his volume: "Since Shakespeare's principal medium, the drama, was thoroughly collaborative, it seems appropriate that this edition of his works is itself the result of a sustained collaboration" (xi). Moreover, the *Longman Shakespeare* relies on the conventional generic structure: "The Comedies," "The Histories," "The Tragedies," "The Romances," and "The Poems." David Bevington's "General Introduction" subtly equates Shakespeare's "Life" with Shakespeare's "Drama," as revealed by the titles of his first three units: "Life in Shakespeare's England," "The Drama Before Shakespeare," and "London Theaters and Dramatic Companies." *Life . . . Drama . . . Theatre*. In Shakespeare studies today, life *is* drama in the theatre.

This short history of Shakespeare criticism suggests that the notion of Shakespeare the working dramatist is the product of a partial taxonomy created seven years after the author's death, principally by the First Folio. Having looked into this history, we should not be surprised to see what has happened. We might be more surprised to discover that such seventeenth-century poet-playwrights as Jonson, Drayton, Milton, and Dryden could so misrepresent one of their kind. How do we account for this? One explanation is that Shakespeare turned out to be so much more gifted as a dramatist than as a poet. Although he wrote both poems and plays, he was so superior in talent as a dramatist that this achievement eclipsed his record as a poet and even his composite identity as a poet-playwright. If so, we can here see how futile was the enterprise of Benson, who in 1640 set about to print an edition of Shakespeare's poems that would do for the poet what the First Folio had done for the playwright. Had Benson succeeded in his venture

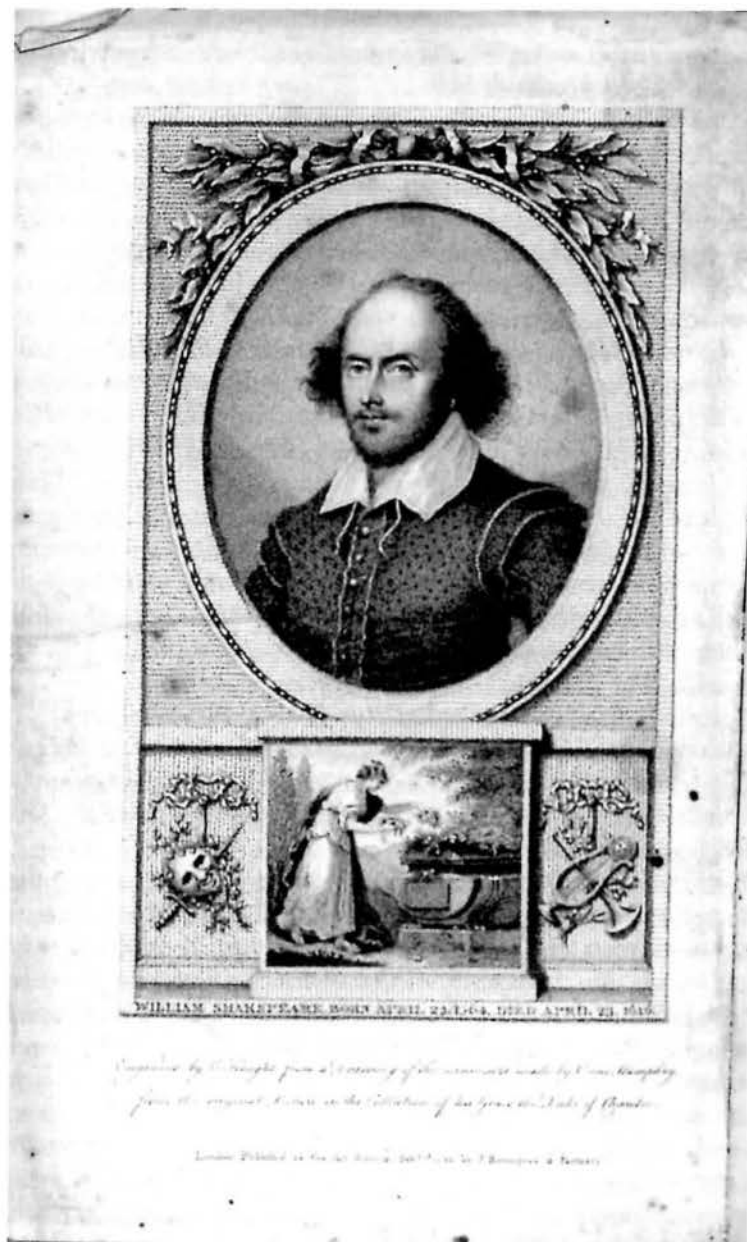


Figure 5. Frontispiece to *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, edited by Edmund Malone (London, 1790).

on the scale of Heminge and Condell, or if they, rather than he, had been able to print both forms in the same volume, we might wonder, would the history of Shakespeare criticism be different?

While the history of criticism from the seventeenth through to the twenty-first centuries reveals the paradigm of the working dramatist to be an anachronism, we might take the cue of Coleridge to recall that in each century commentators periodically emerge with a more accurate historicism. In the late seventeenth century, for instance, Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips, presents Shakespeare at least as a playwright-poet: "William Shakespeare, the Glory of the English Stage . . . : from an Actor of Tragedies and Comedies, he became a Maker . . . ; and in all his Writings hath an unvulgar style, as well in his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Rape of Lucrece* and other various Poems, as in his Dramatics" (*Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 2: 222–23). Similarly, in the late eighteenth century Edmund Malone remarks: "All that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespere, is – 'that he was born at Stratford upon Avon, married and had three children there, went to London, where he commenced actor, and *wrote poems and plays* – returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried'" (quoted in De Grazia, *Verbatim*, 135; emphasis added).

Poems and plays: Malone emerges as the pivotal figure in a counter-history of Shakespeare criticism, since he is "the first editor of Shakespeare to publish the 1609 Sonnets in an edition of the works, first in 1780 as a supplement to the Johnson–Steevens 1778 edition and then in the final volume of his own 1790 edition": "The title of the 1790 edition reflected their [the *Sonnets*'] new status; while previous editors had called their editions either *The Works* or *The Plays*, Malone entitled his edition *The Plays and Poems*" (De Grazia, *Verbatim*, 152, 154). Accordingly, we might recall the frontispiece to his edition (Figure 5), where the author of the Chandos portrait oversees a three-panel display, the left one with its theatrical mask clearly evocative of the plays and the right with its musical instruments perhaps evocative of the poems. Finally, Malone joins Coleridge and Phillips in preparing us to restore Shakespeare to the contours of what we have called the Meres miniature: Shakespeare's original status as an English Ovidian poet-playwright in the European tradition.

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