

Language Features and Chronology

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Can Style help establish the Chronology of Shakespeare's works?

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Members will recall an illuminating meeting at Montacute House a few years back, in which many distinguished speakers presented brief papers about the basis for assigning dates to plays post 1604. I myself had the straightforward brief of summarising the reasons for dating *Coriolanus* to the year 1608.

My task was easy because there is NO evidence for the dating of this play (or *All's Well* or *Timon of Athens*) before the First Folio; the main argument for *Coriolanus*' late date is derived from style and versification. I toyed with a number of tables dealing with various features, such as the proportion of blank verse, rhyme and hypermetric syllables. In the end, such an approach seemed inconclusive and problematic.

Today I wish to consider the background to such an approach. In what ways can a study of style and verse reveal the chronology of composition for any author? Have stylistic tests been used to date the works of other authors? I am hoping to develop this into a chapter in the society's publication on the dating of the plays, complete with detailed appendices. I would be most grateful for any contribution to the subject, especially with regard to similar studies on other authors.

Since the advent of computational or corpus analysis in the mid 1970s, other Elizabethan authors have been analysed for their style. The main purpose of these more recent studies has been to establish authorship, or at least to demonstrate that the verse of Marlowe is significantly and sufficiently different from Shakespeare's. These studies of style have NOT been used to establish evolution of style and from that a chronology of his works. Since Marlowe's plays are not convincingly dated, it is surprising that a technique used to date some of Shakespeare's plays has not been applied to a contemporary author.

No theory of how a study of style and/or verse can help with dating an author's works. It seems to run as follows: there is a discernible, measurable and relatively consistent evolution in an author's use of language across a significant number or works and a significant period of time. For this to be useful in dating otherwise updateable texts, I suggest that the following features need to be established.

Unrevised texts

Some authors this is difficult as it is known or suspected that some works were significantly altered between their original composition and their eventual first publication. Jane Austen's novel *First Impressions* was completed in 1797, but was only published after considerable revisions in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*. It is impossible to reconstruct which part belongs to the original (ie waqs written pre 1797) and which to the revised part (written between 1797 and 1813).

Similarly with Shakespeare's works: were the plays ever or even extensively revised? Wells and Taylor think so for in 1987 they published the complete works with two versions of *King Lear*, one based on the Quarto of 1608 and one on the First Folio of 1623, which they take to be an authorial revision. If the author revised one play why not others? Such a question calls into doubt the actual basis for making any kind of decision.

To continue to use metrical or other stylistic tests on Shakespeare's plays is to assume that they were composed and 'set in stone', as it were, with no revisions, rather than dynamic texts that were altered at different periods of composition. So this is the first point: core texts (those used for establishing style) must be known to have been composed within one short time span.

Which data? Metre and Chronology

The first commentator to link metre and chronology was Walker in 1854, closely followed by Bathurst in 1857. By 1898, Sidney Lee was able to assert:

'[In Shakespeare] metre undergoes emancipation from the hampering restraints of fixed rule and becomes flexible enough to respond to every phase of human feeling. In the blank verse of the early plays, a pause is closely observed at the close of each line, and rhyming couplets are frequent. Gradually the poet overrides such artificial restrictions; rhyme largely disappears; recourse is made more frequently to prose; the pause is varied indefinitely; extra syllables are, contrary to strict metrical law, introduced at the end of lines, and at times at the middle; the last word of the line is often a weak and unemphatic conjunction or preposition.'

This fluent argument seems impressive but falls down when applied to individual plays:

LEE (1898)	Early	Late
Prose / verse	Henry VIII	Merry Wives
Rhyme	As You Like It	Julius Caesar
Extra syllables	Merry Wives	Richard II

Most commenators would place Merry Wives as an early to middle play and Henry VIII as a late play; similarly both As You Like It and Julius Caesar are taken to be middle plays, while Richard II is usually taken to be among the earlier plays and to pre-date Merry Wives.

According to Lee, such features seem to be deliberate, predictable and closely indicative of period. He is thus able to assert: 'Metrical characteristics prove [Coriolanus] to have been written about the same period as Antony and Cleopatra, probably in 1609.' Sir Sidney continues with a paradox: 'In its austere temper, it contrasts at all points with its predecessor.' (246-7) If there is such a contrast, perhaps the plays were written at different times after all and the author was able to return to his metrical style when composing another Roman play. After all, Julius Caesar displays similar characteristics to both of them yet is said to date seven or eight years earlier.

The use of verse to date the otherwise undated plays was developed by Chambers (1930) and reached a final expression in 1951 by Wentersdorf. Rather than rely on one or another of these indicators, he lumped four of them together and produced a 'metrical index'.

The four features were: extra syllables, overflows or enjambment (where the sense runs on into the next line), pauses in unsplit lines ie where a speaker has a mark of punctuation eg full stop, colon, question mark or exclamation mark in the middle of one line and lines split between two speakers. The results of calculating these four features into a metrical index produces a chronology very similar to one established by Chambers.

These metrical characteristics are, however, capable of a very different analysis. George Wright (1999: 163) describes how an extra syllable or feminine ending may introduce a note of hesitation, of subtlety, of casualness, or simply of difference. Wright quotes from both As You Like It (a play supposedly of the middle period) and The Rape of Lucrece, which is presumed to be an early work. Again, a double onset, or extra syllable at the

beginning of a line, occurs to great effect in another middle period play:

Let's be sac | ri fi | cers
but | not but | chers Gai | us (Julius Caesar,
II i 166)

Similarly, the initial unstressed syllable is omitted not just in late palsy but also in so-called early plays such as Comedy of Errors. (^ Jailer, take him to thy custody, I i 155) Or in the middle of lines in plays such as Richard II (Your grace mistakes | ^ On ly to be brief Left I his title out III iii 10-11). In short, Wright demonstrates that these deviances in metrical characteristics serve a dramatic function. Since Wentersdorf indexes of 1951, metrical texts have fallen into disuse, although their resulting chronology has remained the consensus.

Which Data? 'Colloquialisms' and Chronology

Wells and Taylor (1987) are among those who disparage metrical tests. Instead, they transfer the idea of lumping together language features, in their case 26 colloquialisms. They hope to demonstrate a (presumably unconscious) evolution in style, perhaps influenced by changes in society.

Of course the notion of colloquialism is problematic. It is usually defined as an informal use of language but what this is today is hard to say, even harder to recover from the Elizabethan era. Most of their features (19 out of 26) involve elisions eg it, the, them. But they omit 'tis, 'twas, and 'twere as well as I'll, here's on the grounds that such usage shows no sign of evolving. One feature is the use of syllabic -ed on verbs although clearly this has important use when an unstressed syllable is required. Taking this feature alone would place Henry V as a very early play and Taming of the Shrew as a late play.

Other colloquialisms taken individually give the following strange results; the incidence of: -

't, places Hamlet as a very late play and Troilus as an early play
i'th', places Coriolanus as the last play and Timon as an early play
o'th', places Pericles as an early play
th', places Richard III as a late play
'em, places Two Gentlemen as a late play
'll, places Tempest as an early play
does places Hamlet much later than Coriolanus
-th places Antony much later than

Other colloquialisms include: 'rt, 're, d'/ld, 'lt/'t, st/'ve, I'm, as, this', 'a/ha', a', o', 's (us, his), 's (is), has, does, eth, -ion (trisyllabic).

Taking all 26 colloquialisms together, Wells & Taylor produce a graph where the plays come out in the usual order, with the exception of *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Hamlet*, which would appear to coincide with *Measure for Measure*, or 1604 in their chronology. What is not explained is why these particular colloquialisms should indicate an evolving style. Why not other features or only some of these? *Coriolanus*, which has a large number of speeches by plebeians, comes out as having the highest ratio of colloquialisms. Does this make it a late play? Or is the bard using a stylistic feature appropriately according to context? Similarly, history plays such as *1 Henry VI*, *King John* and *2 Henry IV* have the lowest ratio of 'colloquialisms'. Shouldn't this make them the earliest plays rather than spread over seven or eight years between 1590 and 1598? Or does this relative lack of colloquialism reflect the aristocratic and royal context of these plays? What about *Titus Andronicus* which also has the lowest ratio of colloquialisms?

Using colloquialisms to date plays remains very uncertain.

Deliberate changes in style

A more prolific novelist, with less opportunity for revising his works was Charles Dickens. His stories were transferred from pen to press very quickly so his published texts are close to what he wrote with little revision.

Could metrical tests be used to demonstrate an evolving style? This seems to me unlikely; a novel such as *Great Expectations* is known to have been composed over a 12 month period from 1860-61. Did his style change in that period? Did he start to split more infinitives or leave more sentences pithily unfinished? Is the approach valid? After all, we know that before Dickens wrote *Great Expectations*, he re-read an earlier novel (1850) written in the first person, *David Copperfield*. Surely re-reading his own work would have had some influence on style, one way or the other. I have not heard of a study about Dickens (or any other prolific author) which seeks to establish a sub-consciously evolving style.

So why is Shakespeare the only writer to have works dated on stylistic tests? My tentative

References

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conclusion is that there is a gaping void in the dating of the plays which scholars are anxious to fill. In my view, metrical and other stylistic tests are interesting, but in themselves they are not a reliable basis for establishing a chronology of composition of the plays.

Accuracy of dating core texts

Some kind of framework needs to be established within which problem texts can be located. If the dates of ten plays are established with certainty, for the exact time of composition, then it might be possible to plot other texts along the gradients of change and allocate them to a likely year. Such a case does not yet exist for Shakespeare since there is no consistency for the dating of any play. Most commentators have Shakespeare beginning his writing career in about 1590, but there are some early starters, eg Honigman and Duncan-Jones, who date his early works to about 1586. Nor is there any consensus on which play stands as his earliest. Some say *Comedy of Errors* is the first play, which others date to 1594. Some say *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is the first play but others (eg Chambers) date to 1595. If *Two Gentlemen* is an early work because of inconsistencies of plot and character, why not also *Cymbeline* where coincidence surpasses and contemporary soap opera and where the final scene clumsily re-lives the action for anyone who missed the first four and a half Acts; or early 'clumsy staging seems evident in *The Tempest*, where about a quarter of the text involves Prospero instructing Miranda about the background to their isolation.

The existing chronology for Shakespeare's plays is entirely speculative or 'conjectural' to use the term applied by Wells and Taylor (1987: 97). If a play was entered into the Stationers' register and printed, then it must have just been composed. If a performance is mentioned, then it must have just been composed. If it is satirised in a contemporary pamphlet, then it must have just been composed. If a line or passage is similar to a line or passage in another play perhaps by Marlowe or Jonson, then Shakespeare must be quoting from it immediately afterwards, except of course where those works are echoing him. Or is it the other way round?