

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Nietzsche  
Stockton Turgenev Balzac Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch  
Darwin Thoreau Thoreau Twain Plato Scott  
Potter Freud Zola Lawrence Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
Kant Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott  
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte  
London Descartes Wells Wells  
Poe Aristotle Wells Wells  
Hale James Hastings James Hastings Cooke  
Bunner Shakespeare Shakespeare Irving  
Richter Chambers Chambers Irving  
Doré Chekhov Chekhov da Shakespeare Irving  
Swift Dante Shaw Shakespeare Irving  
Wodehouse Wodehouse Wodehouse  
Pushkin Alcott Alcott  
Newton Newton Newton



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# **A Study of Shakespeare**

Algernon Charles Swinburne

# Imprint

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# A STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE BY ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.

## PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

Begun in the winter of 1874, a first instalment of "A Study of Shakespeare" appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* for May 1875, and a second in the number for June 1876, but the completed work was not issued in book form until June 1880. In a letter to me (January 31, 1875), Swinburne said:

"I am now at work on my long-designed essay or study on the metrical progress or development of Shakespeare, as traceable by ear and *not* by finger, and the general changes of tone and stages of mind expressed or involved in this change or progress of style."

The book was produced at the moment when controversy with regard to the internal evidence of composition in the writings attributed to Shakespeare was raging high, and the amusing appendices were added at the last moment that they might infuriate the pedants of the New Shakespeare Society. They amply fulfilled that amiable purpose.

EDMUND GOSSE

September 1918



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## A STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE.

### I.

The greatest poet of our age has drawn a parallel of elaborate eloquence between Shakespeare and the sea; and the likeness holds good in many points of less significance than those which have been set down by the master-hand. For two hundred years at least have students of every kind put forth in every sort of boat on a longer or a shorter voyage of research across the waters of that unsounded sea. From the paltriest fishing-craft to such majestic galleys as were steered by Coleridge and by Goethe, each division of the fleet has done or has essayed its turn of work; some busied in dredging alongshore, some taking surveys of this or that gulf or headland, some putting forth through shine and shadow into the darkness of the great deep. Nor does it seem as if there would sooner be an end to men's labour on this than on the other sea. But here a difference is perceptible. The material ocean has been so far mastered by the wisdom and the heroism of man that we may look for a time to come when the mystery shall be manifest of its furthest north and south, and men resolve the secret of the uttermost parts of the sea: the poles also may find their Columbus. But the limits of that other ocean, the laws of its tides, the motive of its forces, the mystery of its unity and the secret of its change, no seafarer of us all may ever think thoroughly to know. No wind-gauge will help us to the science of its storms, no lead-line sound for us the depth of its divine and terrible serenity.

As, however, each generation for some two centuries now or more has witnessed fresh attempts at pilotage and fresh expeditions of discovery undertaken in the seas of Shakespeare, it may be well to study a little the laws of navigation in such waters as these, and look well to compass and rudder before we accept the guidance of a strange helmsman or make proffer for trial of our own. There are shoals and quicksands on which many a seafarer has run his craft aground in time past, and others of more special peril to adventurers of the present day. The chances of shipwreck vary in a certain degree with each new change of vessel and each fresh muster of hands. At one time a main rock of offence on which the stoutest

ships of discovery were wont to split was the narrow and slippery reef of verbal emendation; and upon this our native pilots were too many of them prone to steer. Others fell becalmed offshore in a German fog of philosophic theories, and would not be persuaded that the house of words they had built in honour of Shakespeare was "dark as hell," seeing "it had bay-windows transparent as barricadoes, and the clear-stories towards the south-north were as lustrous as ebony." These are not the most besetting dangers of more modern steersmen: what we have to guard against now is neither a repetition of the pedantries of Steevens nor a recrudescence of the moralities of Ulrici. Fresh follies spring up in new paths of criticism, and fresh labourers in a fruitless field are at hand to gather them and to garner. A discovery of some importance has recently been proclaimed as with blare of vociferous trumpets and flutter of triumphal flags; no less a discovery than this—that a singer must be tested by his song. Well, it is something that criticism should at length be awake to that wholly indisputable fact; that learned and laborious men who can hear only with their fingers should open their eyes to admit such a novelty, their minds to accept such a paradox, as that a painter should be studied in his pictures and a poet in his verse. To the common herd of students and lovers of either art this may perhaps appear no great discovery; but that it should at length have dawned even upon the race of commentators is a sign which in itself might be taken as a presage of new light to come in an epoch of miracle yet to be. Unhappily it is as yet but a partial revelation that has been vouchsafed to them. To the recognition of the apocalyptic fact that a workman can only be known by his work, and that without examination of his method and material that work can hardly be studied to much purpose, they have yet to add the knowledge of a further truth no less recondite and abstruse than this; that as the technical work of a painter appeals to the eye, so the technical work of a poet appeals to the ear. It follows that men who have none are as likely to arrive at any profitable end by the application of metrical tests to the work of Shakespeare as a blind man by the application of his theory of colours to the work of Titian.

It is certainly no news to other than professional critics that no means of study can be more precious or more necessary to a student of Shakespeare than this of tracing the course of his work by the

growth and development, through various modes and changes, of his metre. But the faculty of using such means of study is not to be had for the asking; it is not to be earned by the most assiduous toil, it is not to be secured by the learning of years, it is not to be attained by the devotion of a life. No proficiency in grammar and arithmetic, no science of numeration and no scheme of prosody, will be here of the least avail. Though the pedagogue were Briareus himself who would thus bring Shakespeare under the rule of his rod or Shelley within the limit of his line, he would lack fingers on which to count the syllables that make up their music, the infinite varieties of measure that complete the changes and the chimes of perfect verse. It is but lost labour that they rise up so early, and so late take rest; not a Scaliger or Salmasius of them all will sooner solve the riddle of the simplest than of the subtlest melody. Least of all will the method of a scholiast be likely to serve him as a clue to the hidden things of Shakespeare. For all the counting up of numbers and casting up of figures that a whole university—nay, a whole universe of pedants could accomplish, no teacher and no learner will ever be a whit the nearer to the haven where they would be. In spite of all tabulated statements and regulated summaries of research, the music which will not be dissected or defined, the “spirit of sense” which is one and indivisible from the body or the raiment of speech that clothes it, keeps safe the secret of its sound. Yet it is no less a task than this that the scholiasts have girt themselves to achieve: they will pluck out the heart not of Hamlet’s but of Shakespeare’s mystery by the means of a metrical test; and this test is to be applied by a purely arithmetical process. It is useless to pretend or to protest that they work by any rule but the rule of thumb and finger: that they have no ear to work by, whatever outward show they may make of unmistakable ears, the very nature of their project gives full and damning proof. Properly understood, this that they call the metrical test is doubtless, as they say, the surest or the sole sure key to one side of the secret of Shakespeare; but they will never understand it properly who propose to secure it by the ingenious device of numbering the syllables and tabulating the results of a computation which shall attest in exact sequence the quantity, order, and proportion of single and double endings, of rhyme and blank verse, of regular lines and irregular, to be traced in each play by the horny eye and the callous finger of a pedant. “I am ill at these numbers”;

those in which I have sought to become an expert are numbers of another sort; but having, from wellnigh the first years I can remember, made of the study of Shakespeare the chief intellectual business and found in it the chief spiritual delight of my whole life, I can hardly think myself less qualified than another to offer an opinion on the metrical points at issue.

The progress and expansion of style and harmony in the successive works of Shakespeare must in some indefinite degree be perceptible to the youngest as to the oldest, to the dullest as to the keenest of Shakespearean students. But to trace and verify the various shades and gradations of this progress, the ebb and flow of alternate influences, the delicate and infinite subtleties of change and growth discernible in the spirit and the speech of the greatest among poets, is a task not less beyond the reach of a scholiast than beyond the faculties of a child. He who would attempt it with any chance of profit must above all things remember at starting that the inner and the outer qualities of a poet's work are of their very nature indivisible; that any criticism is of necessity worthless which looks to one side only, whether it be to the outer or to the inner quality of the work; that the fatuity of pedantic ignorance never devised a grosser absurdity than the attempt to separate æsthetic from scientific criticism by a strict line of demarcation, and to bring all critical work under one or the other head of this exhaustive division. Criticism without accurate science of the thing criticised can indeed have no other value than may belong to the genuine record of a spontaneous impression; but it is not less certain that criticism which busies itself only with the outer husk or technical shell of a great artist's work, taking no account of the spirit or the thought which informs it, cannot have even so much value as this. Without study of his forms of metre or his scheme of colours we shall certainly fail to appreciate or even to apprehend the gist or the worth of a painter's or a poet's design; but to note down the number of special words and cast up the sum of superfluous syllables used once or twice or twenty times in the structure of a single poem will help us exactly as much as a naked catalogue of the colours employed in a particular picture. A tabulated statement or summary of the precise number of blue or green, red or white draperies to be found in a precise number of paintings by the same hand will not of

itself afford much enlightenment to any but the youngest of possible students; nor will a mere list of double or single, masculine or feminine terminations discoverable in a given amount of verse from the same quarter prove of much use or benefit to an adult reader of common intelligence. What such an one requires is the guidance which can be given by no metremonger or colour-grinder: the suggestion which may help him to discern at once the cause and the effect of every choice or change of metre and of colour; which may show him at one glance the reason and the result of every shade and of every tone which tends to compose and to complete the gradual scale of their final harmonies. This method of study is generally accepted as the only one applicable to the work of a great painter by any criticism worthy of the name: it should also be recognised as the sole method by which the work of a great poet can be studied to any serious purpose. For the student it can be no less useful, for the expert it should be no less easy, to trace through its several stages of expansion and transfiguration the genius of Chaucer or of Shakespeare, of Milton or of Shelley, than the genius of Titian or of Raffaele, of Turner or of Rossetti. Some great artists there are of either kind in whom no such process of growth or transformation is perceptible: of these are Coleridge and Blake; from the sunrise to the sunset of their working day we can trace no demonstrable increase and no visible diminution of the divine capacities or the inborn defects of either man's genius; but not of such, as a rule, are the greatest among artists of any sort.

Another rock on which modern steersmen of a more skilful hand than these are yet liable to run through too much confidence is the love of their own conjectures as to the actual date or the secret history of a particular play or passage. To err on this side requires more thought, more learning, and more ingenuity than we need think to find in a whole tribe of finger-counters and figure-casters; but the outcome of these good gifts, if strained or perverted to capricious use, may prove no less barren of profit than the labours of a pedant on the letter of the text. It is a tempting exercise of intelligence for a dexterous and keen-witted scholar to apply his solid learning and his vivid fancy to the detection or the interpretation of some new or obscure point in a great man's life or work; but none the less is it a perilous pastime to give the reins to a learned fancy, and let loose

conjecture on the trail of any dubious crotchet or the scent of any supposed allusion that may spring up in the way of its confident and eager quest. To start a new solution of some crucial problem, to track some new undercurrent of concealed significance in a passage hitherto neglected or misconstrued, is to a critic of this higher class a delight as keen as that of scientific discovery to students of another sort: the pity is that he can bring no such certain or immediate test to verify the value of his discovery as lies ready to the hand of the man of science. Whether he have lit upon a windfall or a mare's nest can be decided by no direct proof, but only by time and the general acceptance of competent judges; and this cannot often be reasonably expected for theories which can appeal for support or confirmation to no positive evidence, but at best to a cloudy and shifting probability. What personal or political allusions may lurk under the text of Shakespeare we can never know, and should consequently forbear to hang upon a hypothesis of this floating and nebulous kind any serious opinion which might gravely affect our estimate of his work or his position in regard to other men, with whom some public or private interest may possibly have brought him into contact or collision.

\* \* \* \* \*

The aim of the present study is simply to set down what the writer believes to be certain demonstrable truths as to the progress and development of style, the outer and the inner changes of manner as of matter, of method as of design, which may be discerned in the work of Shakespeare. The principle here adopted and the views here put forward have not been suddenly discovered or lightly taken up out of any desire to make a show of theoretical ingenuity. For years past I have held and maintained, in private discussion with friends and fellow-students, the opinions which I now submit to more public judgment. How far they may coincide with those advanced by others I cannot say, and have not been careful to inquire. The mere fact of coincidence or of dissent on such a question is of less importance than the principle accepted by either student as the groundwork of his theory, the mainstay of his opinion. It is no part of my project or my hope to establish the actual date of any among the various plays, or to determine point by point the lineal order of their succession. I have examined no table or catalogue of

recent or of earlier date, from the time of Malone onwards, with a view to confute by my reasoning the conclusions of another, or by the assistance of his theories to corroborate my own. It is impossible to fix or decide by inner or outer evidence the precise order of production, much less of composition, which critics of the present or the past may have set their wits to verify in vain; but it is quite possible to show that the work of Shakespeare is naturally divisible into classes which may serve us to distinguish and determine as by landmarks the several stages or periods of his mind and art.

Of these the three chief periods or stages are so unmistakably indicated by the mere text itself, and so easily recognisable by the veriest tiro in the school of Shakespeare, that even were I as certain of being the first to point them out as I am conscious of having long since discovered and verified them without assistance or suggestion from any but Shakespeare himself, I should be disposed to claim but little credit for a discovery which must in all likelihood have been forestalled by the common insight of some hundred or more students in time past. The difficulty begins with the really debatable question of subdivisions. There are certain plays which may be said to hang on the borderland between one period and the next, with one foot lingering and one advanced; and these must be classed according to the dominant note of their style, the greater or lesser proportion of qualities proper to the earlier or the later stage of thought and writing. At one time I was inclined to think the whole catalogue more accurately divisible into four classes; but the line of demarcation between the third and fourth would have been so much fainter than those which mark off the first period from the second, and the second from the third, that it seemed on the whole a more correct and adequate arrangement to assume that the last period might be subdivided if necessary into a first and second stage. This somewhat precise and pedantic scheme of study I have adopted from no love of rigid or formal system, but simply to make the method of my critical process as clear as the design. That design is to examine by internal evidence alone the growth and the expression of spirit and of speech, the ebb and flow of thought and style, discernible in the successive periods of Shakespeare's work; to study the phases of mind, the changes of tone, the passage or progress from an old manner to a new, the reversion or relapse from a

later to an earlier habit, which may assuredly be traced in the modulations of his varying verse, but can only be traced by ear and not by finger. I have busied myself with no baseless speculations as to the possible or probable date of the first appearance of this play or of that on the stage; and it is not unlikely that the order of succession here adopted or suggested may not always coincide with the chronological order of production; nor will the principle or theory by which I have undertaken to class the successive plays of each period be affected or impaired though it should chance that a play ranked by me as belonging to a later stage of work should actually have been produced earlier than others which in my lists are assigned to a subsequent date. It is not, so to speak, the literal but the spiritual order which I have studied to observe and to indicate: the periods which I seek to define belong not to chronology but to art. No student need be reminded how common a thing it is to recognise in the later work of a great artist some partial reappearance of his early tone or manner, some passing return to his early lines of work and to habits of style since modified or abandoned. Such work, in part at least, may properly be said to belong rather to the earlier stage whose manner it resumes than to the later stage at which it was actually produced, and in which it stands out as a marked exception among the works of the same period. A famous and a most singularly beautiful example of this reflorescence as in a Saint Martin's summer of undecaying genius is the exquisite and crowning love-scene in the opera or "ballet-tragedy" of *Psyche*, written in his sixty-fifth year by the august Roman hand of Pierre Corneille; a lyric symphony of spirit and of song fulfilled with all the colour and all the music that autumn could steal from spring if October had leave to go a Maying in some Olympian masquerade of melody and sunlight. And it is not easier, easy as it is, to discern and to define the three main stages of Shakespeare's work and progress, than to classify under their several heads the representative plays belonging to each period by the law of their nature, if not by the accident of their date. There are certain dominant qualities which do on the whole distinguish not only the later from the earlier plays, but the second period from the first, the third period from the second; and it is with these qualities alone that the higher criticism, be it aesthetic or scientific, has properly anything to do.

A new method of solution has been applied to various difficulties which have been discovered or invented in the text by the care or the perversity of recent commentators, whose principle of explanation is easier to abuse than to use with any likelihood of profit. It is at least simple enough for the simplest of critics to apply or misapply: whenever they see or suspect an inequality or an incongruity which may be wholly imperceptible to eyes uninured to the use of their spectacles, they assume at once the presence of another workman, the intrusion of a stranger's hand. This supposition of a double authorship is naturally as impossible to refute as to establish by other than internal evidence and appeal to the private judgment or perception of the reader. But it is no better than the last resource of an empiric, the last refuge of a sciolist; a refuge which the soundest of scholars will be slowest to seek, a resource which the most competent of critics will be least ready to adopt. Once admitted as a principle of general application, there are no lengths to which it may not carry, there are none to which it has not carried, the audacious fatuity and the arrogant incompetence of tamperers with the authentic text. Recent editors who have taken on themselves the high office of guiding English youth in its first study of Shakespeare have proposed to excise or to obelise whole passages which the delight and wonder of youth and age alike, of the rawest as of the ripest among students, have agreed to consecrate as examples of his genius at its highest. In the last trumpet-notes of Macbeth's defiance and despair, in the last rallying cry of the hero reawakened in the tyrant at his utmost hour of need, there have been men and scholars, Englishmen and editors, who have detected the alien voice of a pretender, the false ring of a foreign blast that was not blown by Shakespeare; words that for centuries past have touched with fire the hearts of thousands in each age since they were first inspired—words with the whole sound in them of battle or a breaking sea, with the whole soul of pity and terror mingled and melted into each other in the fierce last speech of a spirit grown "awearry of the sun," have been calmly transferred from the account of Shakespeare to the score of Middleton. And this, forsooth, the student of the future is to accept on the authority of men who bring to the support of their decision the unanswerable plea of years spent in the collation and examination of texts never hitherto explored and compared with such energy of learned labour. If this be the issue of learning

and of industry, the most indolent and ignorant of readers who retains his natural capacity to be moved and mastered by the natural delight of contact with heavenly things is better off by far than the most studious and strenuous of all scholiasts who ever claimed acquiescence or challenged dissent on the strength of his lifelong labours and hard-earned knowledge of the letter of the text. Such an one is indeed "in a parlous state"; and any boy whose heart first begins to burn within him, who feels his blood kindle and his spirit dilate, his pulse leap and his eyes lighten, over a first study of Shakespeare, may say to such a teacher with better reason than Touchstone said to Corin, "Truly, thou art damned; like an ill-roasted egg, all on one side." Nor could charity itself hope much profit for him from the moving appeal and the pious prayer which temper that severity of sentence—"Wilt thou rest damned? God help thee, shallow man! God make incision in thee! Thou art raw." And raw he is like to remain for all his learning, and for all incisions that can be made in the horny hide of a self-conceit to be pierced by the puncture of no man's pen. It was bad enough while theorists of this breed confined themselves to the suggestion of a possible partnership with Fletcher, a possible interpolation by Jonson; but in the descent from these to the alleged adulteration of the text by Middleton and Rowley we have surely sounded the very lowest depth of folly attainable by the utmost alacrity in sinking which may yet be possible to the bastard brood of Scriblerus. For my part, I shall not be surprised though the next discoverer should assure us that half at least of *Hamlet* is evidently due to the collaboration of Heywood, while the greater part of *Othello* is as clearly assignable to the hand of Shirley.

Akin to this form of folly, but less pernicious though not more profitable, is the fancy of inventing some share for Shakespeare in the composition of plays which the veriest insanity of conjecture or caprice could not venture to lay wholly to his charge. This fancy, comparatively harmless as it is, requires no ground of proof to go upon, no prop of likelihood to support it; without so much help as may be borrowed from the faintest and most fitful of traditions, it spins its own evidence spider-like out of its own inner conscience or conceit, and proffers it with confident complacency for men's acceptance. Here again I cannot but see a mere waste of fruitless learn-

ing and bootless ingenuity. That Shakespeare began by retouching and recasting the work of elder and lesser men we all know; that he may afterwards have set his hand to the task of adding or altering a line or a passage here and there in some few of the plays brought out under his direction as manager or proprietor of a theatre is of course possible, but can neither be affirmed nor denied with any profit in default of the least fragment of historic or traditional evidence. Any attempt to verify the imaginary touch of his hand in plays of whose history we know no more than that they were acted on the boards of his theatre can be but a diversion for the restless leisure of ingenious and ambitious scholars; it will give no clue by which the student who simply seeks to know what can be known with certainty of the poet and his work may hope to be guided towards any safe issue or trustworthy result. Less pardonable and more presumptuous than this is the pretension of minor critics to dissect an authentic play of Shakespeare scene by scene, and assign different parts of the same poem to different dates by the same pedagogic rules of numeration and mensuration which they would apply to the general question of the order and succession of his collective works. This vivisection of a single poem is not defensible as a freak of scholarship, an excursion beyond the bounds of bare proof, from which the wanderer may chance to bring back, if not such treasure as he went out to seek, yet some stray godsend or rare literary windfall which may serve to excuse his indulgence in the seemingly profitless pastime of a truant disposition. It is a pure impertinence to affirm with oracular assurance what might perhaps be admissible as a suggestion offered with the due diffidence of modest and genuine scholarship; to assert on the strength of a private pedant's personal intuition that such must be the history or such the composition of a great work whose history he alone could tell, whose composition he alone could explain, who gave it to us as his genius had given it to him.

From these several rocks and quicksands I trust at least to keep my humbler course at a safe distance, and steer clear of all sandy shallows of theory or sunken shoals of hypothesis on which no pilot can be certain of safe anchorage; avoiding all assumption, though never so plausible, for which no ground but that of fancy can be shown, all suggestion though never so ingenious for which no proof

but that of conjecture can be advanced. For instance, I shall neither assume nor accept the theory of a double authorship or of a double date by which the supposed inequalities may be accounted for, the supposed difficulties may be swept away, which for certain readers disturb the study of certain plays of Shakespeare. Only where universal tradition and the general concurrence of all reasonable critics past and present combine to indicate an unmistakable difference of touch or an unmistakable diversity of date between this and that portion of the same play, or where the internal evidence of interpolation perceptible to the most careless and undeniable by the most perverse of readers is supported by the public judgment of men qualified to express and competent to defend an opinion, have I thought it allowable to adopt this facile method of explanation. No scholar, for example, believes in the single authorship of *Pericles* or *Andronicus*; none, I suppose, would now question the part taken by some hireling or journeyman in the arrangement or completion for the stage of *Timon of Athens*; and few probably would refuse to admit a doubt of the total authenticity or uniform workmanship of the *Taming of the Shrew*. As few, I hope, are prepared to follow the fantastic and confident suggestions of every unquiet and arrogant innovator who may seek to append his name to the long scroll of Shakespearean parasites by the display of a brand-new hypothesis as to the uncertain date or authorship of some passage or some play which has never before been subjected to the scientific scrutiny of such a pertinacious analyst. The more modest design of the present study has in part been already indicated, and will explain as it proceeds if there be anything in it worth explanation. It is no part of my ambition to loose the Gordian knots which others who found them indissoluble have sought in vain to cut in sunder with blunter swords than the Macedonian; but after so many adventures and attempts there may perhaps yet be room for an attempt yet unesayed; for a study by the ear alone of Shakespeare's metrical progress, and a study by light of the knowledge thus obtained of the corresponsive progress within, which found expression and embodiment in these outward and visible changes. The one study will be then seen to be the natural complement and the inevitable consequence of the other; and the patient pursuit of the simpler and more apprehensible object of research will appear as the only sure method by which a reasonable and faithful student may think to attain so