

All's Well that Ends Well: an attribution refuted

Brian Vickers and Marcus Dahl

Towards the end of their article claiming to have identified Thomas Middleton as the co-author of *All's Well that Ends Well*,¹ Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith record that only one previous critic had anticipated them, John Dover Wilson.² That ought to have given them pause, for to follow the path of the Grand Disintegrator eighty years after his methods have been discredited is to risk a similar fate. When faced with some aspects of a Shakespeare play that he didn't like or understand Wilson was always ready to postulate some "inferior dramatist" or the relic of "an old play" as the explanation. For *All's Well* he suggested a dramatist who also worked on *Measure for Measure* and "had a passion for sententious couplets and a mind running on sexual disease", a fiction that conveniently excused Shakespeare of both "faults". It is rather shocking to find such antiquated attitudes taken seriously, after four decades of scholarship has established authorship attribution as a serious discipline.

Although Maguire and Smith do their best to detach *All's Well* from its place within Shakespeare's canon by treating it as an isolated and suspect oddity, it has many links with *Measure for Measure*. Both have the basic plot-structure of tricking a man who has reneged on a marriage contract (Angelo, Bertram) into consummating it by sleeping with the woman he has forsaken, the so-called "bed trick"; both have a lesser character (Lucio, Parolles) whose parallel deceit and corruption are exposed; both feature women of exceptional virtue and strength of character (Helena, Isabella and Mariana in *Measure*). Maguire and Smith attempt to dissolve the standard classification of *All's Well* as a "problem play", alongside *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* (in all three a sexual relationship is

¹ See their essay, "Many hands. A new Shakespeare collaboration?", *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 April 2012, pp. 13-15. A fuller, annotated version is available at <http://www.cems-oxford.org>.

² See his edition of *All's Well that Ends Well* (Cambridge, 1929).

consummated during the action), and christen it a Middletonian prodigal-son comedy -- although Bertram neither wastes his inheritance nor returns to be forgiven. Having reclassified it, they complain that “unusually among both prodigal and Shakespeare heroes” Bertram commits further “crimes” in the final scene. But, exactly like Angelo, he goes on lying until incontrovertible evidence finally convicts him. Trying to fit this play into a Middletonian mould, Maguire and Smith reduce Helena to “a strumpet”, and convict the virtuous Countess of Roussillion (Bertram’s mother) and a Florentine Widow, both women who help Helena to get her man, of “essentially bawd-like activities”, downgrading them to the level of some of Middleton’s “pragmatic mothers”. To produce such unsympathetic readings of Shakespeare’s heroines is a high price to pay for this co-authorship claim.

The new disintegrators ignore existing scholarship and misinterpret what evidence they do cite. They concede that irregularities in the text first printed in the 1623 Folio show that the printer’s copy was based on a messy Shakespeare manuscript, but claim that “the number, variety, and inconsistency of problems” call for some other explanation. They cite Gary Taylor on the “paucity of Shakespearian spellings”, but do not record that he explained them as partly due to the Folio compositor who set the play and imposed his own spelling preferences. Yet, Taylor added, “a few such spellings do nevertheless appear”, listing four examples.³

Maguire and Smith claim to find “textual anomalies” in the speech-prefixes and stage directions. It is true that the speech-prefixes in *All's Well* are variable, the Countess’s name appearing in five different abbreviations. But such inconsistencies are found in many texts based on Shakespeare’s “foul papers”: in *Henry IV* he referred to Mistress Quickly’s name in six different forms. Maguire and Smith claim that the speech prefixes in this play do not show “Shakespeare’s scene specific view of a character’s identity”, that is, referring to a

³ See Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare, A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), p. 492.

character's role or function. But the soldier who volunteers to act as "th'Interpreter" in 4.1 -- a wonderful scene where the braggart Parolles' cowardice and disloyalty are exposed by making him think he has been captured by the enemy -- becomes "*Inter.*" or "*Int.*" later in this scene and its continuation in 4.3. Another instance where Shakespeare changed the name to reflect a changing role is the Countess, who is "*Mo.*" while she is saying farewell to her son, but "*Cou.*" when conversing with Helena.

A recurrent tactic of these new disintegrators is to pick on what they claim is an unusual feature in *All's Well* and link it with supposedly analogous features in Middleton, without attempting to establish the norm in Elizabethan drama, or elsewhere in Shakespeare. There are thousands of stage-directions in Elizabethan drama (no-one knows how many) and serious scholarly study is still in its infancy. It used to be thought that dramatists wrote "literary" directions, reflecting the story line, which the company scribe converted into "theatrical" ones. But W.W.Greg, in his authoritative *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses* (1931), noted that surviving playhouse manuscripts are full of directions that seem at first sight literary, and that the theatre scribe did not bother to amend the author's signals unless they were unintelligible.⁴ Maguire and Smith describe the stage directions in *All's Well* as "curiously narrative" or "novelistically explanatory", such as "Parolles and Lafew stay behind, commenting of this wedding". But this signal reveals Shakespeare's conception of the onstage action, and is in no way unusual (or Middletonian). Shakespeare wrote a similar direction for the climax of the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice*: "A Song the whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets to himself." As for the phrase "stay behind", in their valuable *Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642*

⁴ W.W.Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1931), i.208, 213. See also Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 21-9; William B. Long, "Stage-Directions: A Misinterpreted Factor in Determining Textual Provenance", *Text*, 2 (1985): 121-37, and "'A bed / for woodstock': A Warning for the Unwary", *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 2 (1985): 91-118; Anthony Hammond, "Encounters of the Third Kind in Stage-Directions in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama", *Studies in Philology*, 89 (1992): 71-99.

(1999) Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson list roughly forty examples of this instruction to remain when others depart.⁵ The fact that *All's Well* has the stage direction “*Flourish Cornets*” to announce the entrance of the King of France and his party does not necessarily link it to “the soundscape” of the boys’ company for whom Marston and Middleton wrote. Dessen and Thomson list over 120 directions calling for this instrument, including instances in the Folio text of *Merchant of Venice* (of which the Quarto appeared in 1600), *Coriolanus* (which also has several long, descriptive stage directions) and in Shakespeare’s scenes in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.⁶

In their zeal to identify Middleton as co-author Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith have given a tendentious account of the evidence. These failings are especially damaging in their account of what seem to them the play’s “unusual stylistic features”, such as its “unusually high percentage of rhyming couplets”, which “form 19 percent of the play”, a figure which “accords with Middleton’s norm of 20 percent in his contribution to *Timon of Athens*”. This is an instance of the statistical fallacy, that mere counts of a linguistic feature, without consideration of its function, can provide valid authorship markers. But to stay at this level for a moment, Maguire and Smith cite the *Oxford Textual Companion* as showing that “Shakespeare’s Jacobean norm for rhyme is... 5 percent”. What they do not reveal from this source is that at 19 percent *All's Well* has the same proportion of rhyme as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like it*.⁷

But mere statistics cannot reduce Shakespeare’s claim to sole authorship. Formal features of Shakespeare’s style have been sadly neglected by recent critics, but the old monograph by F.W. Ness, *The Use of Rhyme in Shakespeare’s Plays* (1941) established that he used couplet rhyme for several dramatic functions: to end a speech or scene, to make a

⁵ See Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (Cambridge, 1999), pp.27-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷ *Textual Companion*, p. 96.

pause within a speech and alter the thought-progression, to emphasise omens and prophecies, to formulate a moral.⁸ Most rhyme in Shakespeare consists of extended passages of monologue and dialogue, and although he used this resource less after the lyrical works of the mid-1590s, he re-energised it in *All's Well*. For Helena, the most important character, he switches from blank verse to rhyme for a soliloquy (resembling Edgar's in *Lear*), for a letter in sonnet form, and for the crucial dialogue in which she persuades the King to let her treat his illness, a fistula or abscess on the chest, with a remedy bequeathed by her physician father. (Maguire and Smith transform this to a fistula *in ano* on no good grounds, apart from Middleton's use of this term.) In this crucial dialogue, on which the whole plot turns -- for Helena asks in return the hand of Count Bertram in marriage -- Shakespeare used rhyme to create a norm of courteous repartee against which he could chart Helena's gradual capturing of the King's attention. Susan Snyder has noted that Shakespeare, setting up a "real debate" between them, moved from blank verse to couplets: but "the effect is not so much greater formality as increased intensity", for the King switches his address to Helena from "you" to "thou", an intimacy which establishes trust.⁹ Once she has won his assent, Helena invokes "the greatest grace" to aid her and raises her couplets to a higher level, producing what G.K.Hunter well described as "an effect of incantation against sickness":¹⁰

Ere twice the horses of the sunne shall bring
Their fiery torcher his diurnall ring,
Ere twice in murke and occidentall dampe
Moist Hesperus hath quench'd her sleepy Lampe:
Or foure and twenty times the Pylots glasse
Hath told the theeuish minutes, how they passe:
What is infirme, from your sound parts shall flie,

⁸ See F.W. Ness, *The Use of Rhyme in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven and London, 1941), pp. 25-94.

⁹ See Susan Snyder (ed.), *All's Well that Ends Well* (Oxford, 1993), p.115.

¹⁰ See G.K.Hunter (ed.), *All's Well that Ends Well* (London, 1962), p. 43.

Health shall liue free, and sicknesse freely die. (2.1.160-8)

Every Shakespeare lover will recall similar passages in plays written around this time. The Duke in *Measure for Measure* promises to achieve something “Ere twice the Sun hath made his iournall greeting | To yond generation” (4.3.88-9). Macbeth tells his Lady that

ere the Bat hath flowne his

Cloyster'd flight, ere to black Heccats summons

The shard-borne Beetle, with his drowsie hums,

Hath rung Nights yawning Peale,

There shall be done a deed of dreadfull note. (3.2.40-4)

Beyond these verbal parallels the point is that in *All's Well* Shakespeare adapted rhyme to a new dramatic function. That the play contains 19 percent of rhyme merely shows that Shakespeare needed that much.

Maguire and Smith fragment the play's stylistic unity into a series of statistics detached both from their dramatic function and from the related plays. Turning to prosody, they claim that David Lake (a slight error: R.H. Barker made these calculations)¹¹ “gives a figure of 25 percent feminine endings in Middleton's earlier plays”, rising to 45 percent later, while the overall figure for feminine endings in *All's Well* is only 8 percent. This statistic actually disproves their claim, but the point again is that overall figures tell us nothing. Shakespeare's prosody has received (slightly) more attention than his rhyme, but the existing quantitative studies show that *All's Well* corresponds closely with *Measure for Measure*. Ants Oras, in *Pause Patterns in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (1960), bracketed the two plays together,¹² as did Marina Tarlinskaja in her more wide-ranging study, *Shakespeare's Verse* (1987).¹³ Both plays represent the same stage of Shakespeare's linguistic creativity. In 1943

¹¹ In their online version, n. 14, they credit R.H.Barker's essay in *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 20 (1945).

¹² See Ants Oras, *Pause Patterns in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (Gainesville, FL,1960) pp.68-9, 76.

¹³ See Marina Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare's Verse. Iambic Pentameter and the Poet's Idiosyncrasies* (New York, 1987), pp. 50, 70, 100-1.

a pioneering Australian scholar, Alfred Hart, calculated the growth of Shakespeare's vocabulary by charting in each play the percentage of "peculiar" or once-used words compared to the total. His result for *All's Well* was 5.9, while that for *Measure for Measure* was 6.1.¹⁴

Maguire and Smith lay considerable evidential weight on statistics for Middleton's "orthographical preferences" presented by some reputable attribution scholars. They take as unique to Middleton a liking for contractions, such as the enclitic "t" for "it" (as in "for't", "on't"), the forms "I'de", "ha's" for "has", "do's" for "does", and the more modern options of "does" for "doth" and "has" for "hath", which they claim to find matched in *All's Well*. But their discussion is rendered valueless by their unawareness of elementary facts concerning the spelling habits of scribes and printers. Scholars have long known that scribes favoured certain variant spellings and neglected others, while bibliographers have been aware since Charlton Hinman's epoch making study, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (1963) that compositors regularly imposed their own spelling and punctuation on their copy-texts.¹⁵ Many Folio texts received a further layer of intrusive alterations from printing-house editors who modernised Shakespeare's grammar, touched up his diction, and attempted to regularise his prosody. A compositor might contract a word's spelling so as to not over-run a line of type, or expand it to fill blank space. An editor might perform either operation if he were trying to fit Shakespeare's verse into a ten-syllable norm. (In the Folio *Lear* some 130 lines of verse have been tampered with.)¹⁶ Even more disconcerting for anyone attempting to identify authorial contractions in early modern books, compositors were not always consistent. They might change "hath" to "has" at one point, but

¹⁴ See Alfred Hart, "Vocabularies of Shakespeare's Plays", *Review of English Studies*, 19 (1943): 128-40, p. 132.

¹⁵ See Charlton Hinman, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1963).

¹⁶ See Richard Knowles, "The evolution of the texts of *Lear*", in Jeffrey Kastan (ed.), *King Lear. New Critical Essays* (New York and London, 2008), pp. 124-54, pp. 143-4.

make the opposite choice at another. Attributionists need to consider every aspect of the texts they wish to re-assign.

We have checked the figures for contractions and other features of the text provided by Maguire and Smith, and found that none of them support Middleton's claims to co-authorship.¹⁷ In truth, the counts for this play are matched or exceeded by several other Folio texts. *The Winter's Tale* outscores *All's Well* on four of these supposed "Middleton markers": "ha's" (25 instances to 10), "do's" (24 to 10), "in't" (13 to 10), and "for't" (7 to 4). With 10 instances of "ha's" *All's Well* is outscored by *Coriolanus* (28) and *Macbeth* (17). Its score for "does" (11) is surpassed by *Antony and Cleopatra* (24), *Twelfth Night* (19), and *Hamlet* (18), while "for't" (4) occurs more frequently in *Othello* (5), *Coriolanus* (6), *Cymbeline* (5), and *The Tempest* (5). With 18 instances of "has" *All's Well* can be bracketed with four Folio plays: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (20), *Twelfth Night* (16), *Troilus and Cressida* (16) and *Twelfth Night* (16). We do not know the names of the scribes and editors employed in the Jaggards' printing-house, but five compositors have been confidently identified (conventionally labelled "A" to "E"). These agents in the transmission process all played some part in the choice of variant forms: they cannot be taken as straightforward authorial markers, and they certainly don't show a uniquely Middletonian "finger print".

Maguire and Smith also claim that Middleton favours "*All*" as a speech prefix, whereas Shakespeare prefers "*Omnes*". Although "*All*" appears "occasionally" in Shakespeare Quartos, they write, "it occurs only twice in the Folio, both times in *All's Well*". We cannot tell where Maguire and Smith found these totals, but our figures – checked against Marvin Spevack's *Complete and Systematic Concordance to Shakespeare* (1968-80)¹⁸ -- are strikingly different. The inauthentic or "Bad" Quartos, as they used to be called, certainly prefer "*Omnes*" to "*All*": *The Merry Wives of Windsor* scores 18 to 1, the *Contention* 18 to 9,

¹⁷ See the accompanying paper by my colleague, Dr. Marcus Dahl.

¹⁸ See Marvin Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, 9 vols. (Hildesheim, 1968-80).

and the *True Tragedy* 18 to 4. But the authentic Folio plays show the opposite preference. *Julius Caesar* has “*All*” 13 times and “*Omnes*” once, a pattern repeated in *Coriolanus* (37 to 4) and *Macbeth* (13 to 2). Thirteen sole-authored Folio plays favour “*All*”, whether representing the preference of author, editor, or compositor.¹⁹ Maguire and Smith have abjured “sophisticated statistical analyses” which only provide a “vener of laboratory verifiability”. The matter is much simpler: all you need is identify the relevant evidence and count it properly.

We could extend this rebuttal, but suffice to say that there is absolutely no evidence of another hand in this play. The world media get excited by any attempt, however weak, to take something away from Shakespeare. We hope that they will pay equal attention to this restitution. The Roman definition of justice was “*suum cuique tribuere*”, render to everyone his due. Whether or not you like the play, *All's Well* is all Shakespeare's.

[An annotated version of this article, with accompanying documentation, is available at <http://www.ies.ac.uk>.]

¹⁹ Richard Proudfoot (personal communication, 1 May 2012) reminds me that the stage-direction “*All*” is also found in Shakespeare's contribution to *Sir Thomas More*. In “The ‘Shakespearean’ additions in *The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore*: some aids to scholarly and critical Shakespearean studies” (Dubuque, Iowa, 1969; *Shakespeare Studies Monograph Series*, ed. J. Leeds Barroll) Thomas Clayton computes that in Addition IIc, of the “forty-nine speech-prefixes in Hand C” there are ten instances of “*All*” (p. 22).