

The New Shakspere Society, 1873-1894

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Abstract

This essay traces the rise and fall of the New Shakspere Society (1873-1894). Its founder, F. J. Furnivall, promoted the newest scientific advances to apply to Shakespeare's plays in order to produce the correct order in which they had been written. Furnivall was joined in this enterprise by Frederick Gard Fleay, who took meter-measurement tests of Shakespeare to an illogical extreme. Offended by such pseudo-scientific speculation, Algernon Charles Swinburne publicly assaulted both the methods and the members of the Society, ultimately contributing to the demise of the group. Discredited and disgraced, Furnivall formally disbanded the Society in 1894.

In 1873, F. J. Furnivall founded the New Shakspere Society,¹ an important Shakespeare forum that lasted from its inception until 1894. While its prospectus encouraged papers on the conditions under which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote, they were mainly concerned with producing the correct order in which the plays had been written; this chronology, presumably, would shed light on the progress and development of Shakespeare's own mind. The Society also published the proceedings of their meetings, numerous reprints of the plays, and ancillary documents such as Phillip Stubbs's *The Anatomy of Abuses*.

Although Furnivall began his career as a barrister, his enthusiasm for philological matters consumed most of his life. Educated at University College, London, as well as Trinity College, Cambridge, Furnivall founded the Early English Text Society in 1864, the Chaucer Society in 1868, the New Shakspere Society in 1873, the Browning Society in 1881, and the Shelley Society in 1886. For workers who could not attend the more middle-class meetings of the New Shakspere Society, which met on Friday evenings, Furnivall later instituted the Sunday Shakspere Society. Of all these groups, however, the New Shakspere Society dominated his later years. According to Terence Hawkes, the Shakspere Society's "central project" was "nothing less than Darwinian," their methods of measurement "stand[ing] as the very model of Victorian scientism." By tracing the growth and evolution of Shakespeare's works, the Society hoped to "get his life and times straight, his plays accurately edited and classified, to align the one exactly with the other, to fix the shape

of both irretrievably, and to weld them together forever as a single, comprehensible and coherent unity" (Hawkes 2002, 118-19). When Charles Darwin was offered the Presidency of the Society he refused, but it makes a kind of strange sense that the person whose name is most closely associated with evolution would be tapped to be the titular head of a body devoted to tracing the evolution of England's most famous poet.

Begun with Furnivall's characteristic zeal, the society included members such as George Bernard Shaw, Horace H. Furness, John Ruskin, Thomas Huxley, and Hermann Ulrici. Robert Browning accepted the honorary presidency, and scholar Edward Dowden held one of the original vice presidential positions.² To its credit, the Society also encouraged participation by women, and the membership rolls include a number of female participants. In fact, according to Ann Thompson, Furnivall was in love with a member named Teena Rochfort Smith, who was also editing a four-text edition of *Hamlet* for the Society right before her untimely death in 1883 (Thompson 1998, 133).³

Furnivall and the Scientific Method

The time was ripe for the Society's emergence, partly because of new scientific methodology and partly because of the void left by the scandal surrounding the earlier Shakespeare Society (1840-53) and its most prominent members: J. P. Collier, Alexander Dyce, Charles Knight, and James O. Halliwell-Phillipps. In the Founder's Prospectus for his New Shakspeare Society, Furnivall contrasted his goals with theirs, proclaiming that "[a]ntiquarian illustration, emendation, and verbal criticism", the main objectives of the older Society — "to say nothing of forgery, or at least publication of forg'd documents," a by-product of Collier's personal problems — "were of the first school" (New Shakspeare Society 1874, 6). Now, however, Furnivall declared that the "subject of growth, the oneness of Shakspeare, the links between his successive plays, the distinctive characteristics of each period and its contrasts with the others" should be "the special business" of the "second school of Victorian students," such as the Society membership (1874, 6). Moreover, Furnivall insisted that the Society employ German critical scholarship, specifically August von Schlegel's and Georg Gervinus's criticism, in order to set, once and for all, the chronology of the plays.⁴

Using all the deductive methods of the scientific approach, the group proposed to classify and dissect Shakespeare's works. Furnivall, together with the Reverend F. G. Fleay, emphasized two major points for the group: their role as scientists and the value of allegedly scientific measurements. Above all, Furnivall and Fleay agreed on their role as scientific investigators. Furnivall once called himself a "scientific botanist," while Fleay, who had been nicknamed

the "industrious flea" while at Trinity College, went even further. He used extensive scientific tabulations and reported on his results throughout the first year, while Furnivall contributed his own treatise on the subject at one of the first meetings. Referring to the metrical tests as extremely useful instruments in Shakespearean criticism, both believed that these analytical tests could help to decide the correct chronology of the plays, as Furnivall's "Introductory Address" points out. "[B]y a very close study of the metrical and phraseological peculiarities of Shakspeare," the Society could "get his plays as nearly as possible into the order in which he wrote them" (New Shakspeare Society 1874, 6). The Society could then

use that revised order for the purpose of studying the progress and meaning of Shakspeare's mind, the passage of it from the fun and word-play, the lightness, the passion, of the Comedies of Youth, through the patriotism . . . of the Histories of Middle Age, to the great Tragedies dealing with the deepest questions of man in Later Life; and then at last to the poet's peaceful and quiet home-life again in Stratford, where he ends with his Prospero and Miranda, his Leontes finding again his wife and daughter in Hermione and Perdita. (vi)

Thus, the circle of Shakespeare's life was complete, beginning with the "greenwood life and his pleasant youth in Stratford," seen in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, continuing through the emotional turmoil of the middle plays that reflect his life in London, and concluding with his final rest and repose in "his country home again" (vi). The obvious subjectivity of such an overview would seem to undermine any objective measure, but that fact did not stop either the Society's founder or Fleay himself.

Fleay and Metrical Testing

In an early address to the Society, Fleay proclaimed that the "great need for any critic who attempts to use these tests is to have had a thorough training in the Natural Sciences, especially in Mineralogy, classificatory Botany, and above all, in Chemical Analysis," concluding that "the methods of all these sciences are applicable to this kind of criticism, which, indeed, can scarcely be understood without them" (New Shakspeare Society *Transactions*, reprinted in Fleay 1970, 108). What Fleay decided was that the Shakespeare authorship tests should be composed of "two Distinct classes, External and Internal: External tests are subdivided into Direct tests, referring to "definitive and positive statements made by authorities whose veracity and ability can be depended on", and Indirect Tests, which are "deductions from direct statements" (Fleay 1970, 106). The second major category, Internal tests, included 1) Allusive, 2) Aesthetic, 3) Language, and 4) Metre tests. Of these four, Fleay concluded that the Metre test was the "most valuable of all internal tests,

because in it, and in it only, can quantitative results be obtained" (108). In "a play of 3,000 lines of verse," he continued, "every line must have a masculine or feminine termination"; by tabulating and classifying such occurrences (as a botanist or mineralogist might), Fleay felt he could determine origin, revealing who the author of a given passage might be (107).⁵

Fleay threw his energy into analyzing Shakespeare's plays. Occasionally correct, more often not, Fleay would take positions on certain questions of authorship and then alter his position by the next meeting, taking an equally closed-minded stance on the other side of the issue. Yet this waffling did not deter Fleay from publishing at least four more books on Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama: *Introduction to Shakespearian Study* (1877), a revised, corrected, and condensed version of the 1876 *Manual*; *A Chronicle History of the Life and Work of William Shakespeare* (1886); *A Chronicle History of the London Stage, 1559-1642* (1890); and the two-volume *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama, 1559-1642* (1891). In his works on Shakespeare, he makes a number of speculative claims, including the argument that Ben Jonson contributed to *Julius Caesar*, that *Macbeth* was the first of the four great tragedies, and that Shakespeare did not write either *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Titus Andronicus*. For these reasons, Fleay is considered to be one of the first prominent "disintegrators" of Shakespeare, and Samuel Schoenbaum correctly concludes that Fleay's efforts "initiated a wasteful misdirection of energies that went on for decades"; while Fleay may have "meant well," as a "Shakespearean he can be regarded only as a mischief-maker" (Schoenbaum 1970, 489).

But early on in his career, Fleay found an attentive and interested audience in the membership of the New Shakspeare Society. At the first formal meeting at University College on 13 March, 1874, Fleay read a paper entitled "On Metrical Tests as Applied to Dramatic Poetry: Part I. Shakspeare," following it with another paper on the same topic two weeks later. In his introduction to the first of the essays, Fleay announced his agenda:

[O]ur analysis, which has hitherto been qualitative, must become quantitative; we must cease to be empirical, and become scientific; in criticism as in other matters, the test that decides between science and empiricism is this: "Can you say, not only of what kind, but how much? If you cannot weigh, measure, number your results, however, you may be convinced yourself, you must not hope to convince others, or claim the position of investigator; you are merely a guesser, a propounder of hypotheses." (Fleay 1970, 122)

To demonstrate how we can "always distinguish the great men from each other by sufficient care," Fleay went on to rewrite a stanza of Dryden's *All for Love* in the style of five other poets: Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, Greene, and Rowley. Arguing that metre-measuring has a two-fold purpose —

first, "for determining the chronological order of [a poet's] production," but "far more important," for demonstrating "the genuineness of the works traditionally assigned to a writer" — he proceeds to a discussion of Shakespeare's plays, adding that his metrical tests have made the "genuineness" of a number of them "suspect" (126).

At a later meeting, Fleay delivered a paper on *Twelfth Night*, borrowing from his geological lexicon in order to illuminate his argument that the play was begun in the first period of Shakespeare and finished in the second. Using another comedy's revision process for the sake of comparison, Fleay first characterizes *All's Well That Ends Well* as a work that "has been broken up, and only pieces of it can be recognized as boulders embedded in the later strata," much unlike *Twelfth Night*, where "only the surface has been denuded and scratched a little, and some new material has been deposited here and there" (Fleay 1970, 228). Mineralogical metaphors notwithstanding, ultimately Fleay was attempting to propose a "plausible theory why just at this period, 1594-5, Shakespeare should have written nothing but unfinished fragments of plays" (229). Switching scientific hats in mid-sentence, Fleay uses the language of a botanist to explain that there "are periods in all organic growth when secretion is lessened for a time, and all the forces of the organism are busy in assimilation: there are also periods when assimilation ceases for a time, and all the forces are occupied in laying up new stores for future development" (229). Fleay concludes that "such periods" are concurrent with the "dividing epochs in Shakespeare's" style, in this case from the First Period of "the dreams of youth" to the "sad realities" of the Second Period (229). In other words, the plays, like plants, need a time of gestation before they can reach true maturity, and this accounts for the time between the early sketches of *Twelfth Night* and its final form.

But Fleay still needed to apply his cherished measurement tests to "see if they confirm or refute" his theory on *Twelfth Night*. Partly because the "weak-ending test" and the "caesura-test" did not apply to this work, Fleay relies solely on the rhyme tests (Fleay 1970, 231). Not surprisingly, he is "quite content to find the results" of the tests confirm his speculation that the "original draft of the story of Viola was made about the date of 1594" (231). Although Fleay was on the right track with some of his speculations, such as his detection of a second hand in *Pericles*, his focus and faulty evidence soon caused him to fall out of favour, even with the often scientifically-oriented Society.⁶

A. C. Swinburne and Aesthetics

The pseudo-scientific methodology of the Society, however, was continually challenged by more aesthetically-minded critics. The principal opponent in the battle of science versus aesthetics was Algernon Charles Swinburne, who parodied the group in an appendix to his work *A Study of Shakespeare* (first published in 1880). In this appendix, entitled *REPORT ON THE*

PROCEEDINGS ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY SESSION OF THE NEWEST SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY, Swinburne begins his essay by mocking the counting of syllables and the "tabulated" statements of the Society in a parody of a debate over the authorship of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Later, a Mr. C. presents a paper arguing that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo was "obviously designed as a satire on Lord Burghley," adding that the "first and perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of this proposition was the extreme difficulty, he might almost say the utter impossibility, of discovering a single point of likeness between the two characters" (Swinburne 1920, 277). Comparing apples and oranges, it seems, not only fails to deter the made-up Mr. C., but actually supports his pretzel logic.

Toward the close of the fictional meeting, and this is my favorite part of the parody, a Mr. E. brings "forward a subject of singular interest and importance — 'The lameness of Shakespeare — was it moral or physical?'" Mr. E. begins by claiming he will not insult the intelligence of his audience by "dwelling on the absurd and exploded hypothesis that this expression was allegorical," but he would instead "at once assume that the infirmity in question was physical," upon which "there arose the question — In which leg?" (Swinburne 1920, 284). Without hesitation, however, Mr. E. "was prepared, on the evidence of an early play, to prove to demonstration that the injured and interesting limb was the left" (284). As proof, he quotes Launce in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when he claims that his "left shoe is my father," then changes his mind and claims "no, no this left shoe is my mother; nay, that cannot be so neither; yes it is so, it is so; *it hath the worser sole*" (Shakespeare 2003, 2.3.15-17, italics in original).⁷ Concluding that "this passage was not necessary either to the progress of the play or the development of character," Mr. E. deduces that the passage must have been a personal allusion to Shakespeare's infirmity, an infirmity alluded to again in Sonnet 37, when Shakespeare's speaker describes himself as one "made lame by Fortune's dearest spite" (Shakespeare 2003, p. 1720, line 4). This second reference not only confirms the injury, according to Mr. E., but also suggests where the accident actually occurred, for the lameness must have "befallen Shakespeare in early life while acting at the Fortune theatre" (Swinburne 1920, 285).

Swinburne's wicked parody helped to still such silly speculation by the Society itself, and the prominent journals of the day congratulated Swinburne for doing so. *The Examiner*, for example, argued that Swinburne's book would help end the "absurd antics in which Shakesperian criticism has for some time been indulging," so much so that most of the public believes that the "average Shakesperian commentator is *ipso facto* an ass" (Review 1880, 49). Certainly,

a person who counts the number of times of occurrence of a certain word in a certain poem or play, is a harmless but pressingly deserving candidate for Bedlam, and that a whole society of gentlemen who spend their time in allotting to their own satisfaction separate scenes and acts of Shakespeare to different authors among his contemporaries, must be a candidate of the same class. (49-50)

These critics also suggest that "it would be a very sensible thing if the New Shakspeare Society were to buy up [Swinburne's] edition and distribute it among their members," both "to show them what they should for the future avoid, and what they should in the future imitate" (Review 1880, 50). Even a conservative journal such as *The Spectator* sided with Swinburne, claiming that his work will strike "hard blows at the metre-measures, and also at the too prevalent mode of solving difficulties by the easy method of double authorship" (*Spectator* 1880, 851). *The Saturday Review* made particular mention of the Appendix, calling it "a parody of the funniest description, which is yet quite within the limits of good taste" (*Saturday Review* 1880, 159).⁸

Public Debate: Science vs. Aesthetics

The quarrel between Swinburne and the Society, particularly with Fleay and Furnivall, also reads like a parody, but it seems to have been taken very seriously by the combatants. In 1874, Fleay had, according to Aron Stavisky, "inadvertently (for he seems to have been a man without personal malice) belittled Swinburne when he claimed "the trick of Swinburne's melody" is "easily acquired and reproduced" (Stavisky 1969, 87). Swinburne fired back in the *Fortnightly Review* (the material becoming the foundation for *A Study of Shakespeare*), dismissing the "fatuity of pedantic ignorance" which never "devised a grosser absurdity" than the metrical tests; for scientific criticism, as practiced by Fleay, "busies itself only with the outer husk or technical shell of the great artist's work, taking no account of the spirit or the thought which informs it" (Swinburne 1875, 616). Fleay responded in the November issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*, chastising Swinburne for "the shallow arrogance of the would-be critic or poet who thinks that his capacity is large enough to serve as a measure of the myriad-minded Shakespeare" (Fleay 1875, 62).

Feeling his Society had been libeled, Furnivall soon joined the fray. If Fleay were above personal feuds (although I am yet to be convinced of Stavisky's stance on this), Furnivall relished such encounters. In the dedication to his 1880 facsimile of the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*, he referred to the "porcine vagaries" of "Pigsbrook and Co." — a reference to Swinburne formed linguistically from the Anglo-Saxon *swin*, meaning "pig" and *burn*, meaning "brook." Swinburne countered by calling Furnivall "Brothels-dyke," combining the Latin *fornix* and *vallum*. He would

later even stoop to calling Furnivall "Fartiwell." As the controversy spread across the pages of a number of journals, many important members, including the Duke of Devonshire, withdrew their memberships.⁹ Although the Society limped along for over a decade, it was obviously discredited, and it was finally disbanded in 1894.¹⁰

Conclusion

While amusing on the surface, this petty name-calling conceals a more serious critical issue. While it led to an abandonment of pure "science" to interpret Shakespeare's plays — at least as far as the Society was concerned — the debate suggests that neither aestheticism nor scientism is ideologically innocent. Nonetheless, with his two-pronged approach — promoting an aesthetic agenda and sinisterly satirizing the "metre-mongers," Swinburne's book obviously helped to topple other more technically-minded critics engaged in nineteenth-century Shakespeare scholarship.

In any event, the New Shakspeare Society functioned as a central Shakespeare forum during its twenty-year history. And while we may chuckle at some of its methods, no group before the Society had spent so much time and energy sorting through the various external and internal evidence in order to determine the chronological order of the plays. Although occasionally wrong in some of their conclusions, they were often correct. For example, they were the first to place *The Tempest* at the end of Shakespeare's career rather than at the beginning; they reprinted a number of quartos and folios; and they collected numerous primary documents in volume form for the first time, including Robert Green's *Groatsworth of Wit* and Henry Chettle's *King-Hart's Dream*. Most important, however, the Society provided a forum for the various deliberations still dominating Shakespeare discussions today, including the debate between more historical, scientific, and linguistic critics of the playwright and more impressionistic and aesthetic interpreters of his work.

Notes

1. William Benzie explains that "Shakspeare" was Furnivall's "favorite spelling of the bard's name . . . and few members of the society dared use any other spelling." Furnivall also "claimed that all the signatures in existence" were spelled this way, although Benzie reminds us that the spelling on the will is actually "Shakespeare" (Benzie 1983, 183), a spelling used by both George Steevens and Edmund Malone in the last half of the 18th century (183). The modern spelling we use today was initiated by Collier's Shakespeare Society (1840-1853).
2. According to Furnivall's correspondence, Tennyson was the first to be offered the presidency, and Herbert Spencer and Matthew Arnold turned down personal invitations to be honorary vice-presidents.

3. Thompson's fascinating account of the relationship between Furnivall and Rochfort Smith, discovered while doing research for her new Arden three-text edition of *Hamlet*, should be required reading for anyone interested in his life and work. Thompson outlines the intellectual and emotional intensity between the two, as Rochfort Smith began to compile the parallel edition of *Hamlet* for the Society. Had it been completed before her death in a fire, the version would have been, according to Thompson, "the most complex presentation of the texts of *Hamlet* ever attempted" (1998, 131).
4. Furnivall also wrote the Introduction for the English translation of Gervinus's work, calling it the only work "known to [him] that comes near the true treatment and the dignity of the subject, or can be put into the hands of the student who wants to know the mind of Shakspeare" (Gervinus 1892, xxi). For more on the alleged Germanization of the Society, see Spevack 2002.
5. To be fair, Furnivall did not consider the rhyme test to be a final measure, stating in a later meeting that to "suppose that any one empirical test, like that of rhyme, can settle the stage of development of a myriad-sided mind like Shakspeare's is, to me, a notion never to be entertained" (New Shakspeare Society 1874, 9).
6. Furnivall had a more personal falling-out with Fleay in the second year of the Society's existence, calling him a "lying sneak & cad" (Benzie 1983, 189). After Fleay resigned his membership in July 1874, their debate about verse tests continued in a number of letters to the journal *Academy*. To stop the row, the editors announced that they would no longer print letters on the subject.
7. Textual references to Shakespeare are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington (2003).
8. Cecil Lang, the editor of the Swinburne letters, called Swinburne "the greatest parodist that English poetry has ever seen" (Lang 1975, 519). Jerome McGann recently agreed, stating that after Pope, only Tennyson had "extraordinary prosodic" skills, but goes on to admit that even Tennyson could not "match the range of Swinburne's work" (McGann 2004, 205). Although both Lang and McGann are referring specifically to Swinburne's prosodic poetry — McGann characterizes it as high comedy and "pure performance" — I believe it is true of his prose as well (McGann, 2004, 217).
9. The most detailed account of this feud is found in Benzie 1983, 198-209.
10. Although Furnivall's reputation was tarnished, he still had a number of supporters in literary and scientific circles. In the November 1899 issue of *Modern Language Notes*, there is a note reporting on the planning activities for Furnivall's 75th birthday. It is probably significant, when we remember Furnivall's focus on science and literary research, that the co-chairs of the event

are Alfred W. Pollard, of the British Museum, and Mr. Robert Steele, of the Chemical Society (Pollard 1899, 226).

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