

Take the greatest figure in modern literature. The civilization of the western world has by a majority vote conferred that distinction upon Shakespeare. But there is still a small but respectable minority who refuse to yield to his spell. In the past there was frequently a respectable majority against him. And whether a majority or a minority, the list was mainly composed of fellow-poets, or at least authors who were not professional critics.

The earliest voice raised against Shakespeare was that of his contemporary Robert Greene, a dramatist like himself. He writes of him: "Here is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the rest of you, and being an absolute Joannes factotum, is, in his own conceit, the only shake-scene in the country." Then there is Dryden. Shakespeare had been dead too long to be considered a dangerous rival. Dryden himself, though he wrote criticisms, was only secondarily a critic; he had not failed in literature, but had made a most brilliant and enduring success. Yet he finds in every page of Shakespeare "either some solecism of speech, or some notorious flaw in sense." He denounces the lameness of his plots, "made up of some ridiculous incoherent story.

I suppose I need not mention *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, or the historical plays of Shakespeare; besides many others, as the *Winter's Tale*, *Love's Labor Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, which were either grounded on impossibilities, or at least so meanly written that the comedy neither caused your mirth nor the serious part your concernment." These gems of thought may be found in his "Defense of the epilogue," a postscript to his tragedy of the "Conquest of Granada," elsewhere he notes that Shakespeare "writes in many places below the dullest writers of our or of any precedent age. Never did any author precipitate himself from such heights of thought to do so low expressions as he often does. He is the very Janus of poets; he wears almost everywhere two faces; and you have scarce begun to admire the one ere you despise the other."

Samuel Pepys accounted "*Romeo and Juliet*" the worst play that ever he heard; "*Othello*" he considered a mean thing. "*Twelfth Night*" a silly play, while with "*Midsummer Night's*