.A.P. Rossiter's Unwitting Case for Shakespeare

Protégé of the formidable E.M.W Tillyard of Jesus College, Cambridge, and a rising star in the university's English faculty in his own right, Arthur Percival Rossiter undertook *Woodstock, a Moral History* (1946) during the war years. His goals included rescuing the play from the now-scandalously Teutonic Keller, whom he took time to patriotically vilify and misrepresent,[1] while more importantly committing himself to settling once and for all the drama's outstanding questions, especially the nagging authorship matter.

Still the best-known and most widely read edition of the play, Rossiter's flawed version, as we must unfortunately report it to be, is nonetheless thoroughly researched, equipped with two sets of small-print endnotes (*Text* and *General*), several appendices, and a comprehensive introduction. His long-anticipated conclusion was unequivocal and capitalized, almost like a defiant shout:

> There is not the smallest chance that he [the writer] was Shakespeare...his verse too rarely rises...his mind never moves fast enough...I must leave him as I found him, a quiet ghost among the great majority who must, for all the troublings of their lives and labours, rest ANON.[2]

This, however, was followed, at what level of consciousness I cannot say, by several pages decisively proving the reverse. 'Yet there is something of a simplified Shakespeare in him,' Rossiter immediately concedes, noting among other things that Anon characteristically

> tries to see History in a big way...has a marked sense of humour of an unusually unbawdy kind: and an interest in human pride of gesture in dramatic situations: much in politics and in the common people—of whom he is not afraid. He knows something of the law and can turn a point with legal jargon; so perhaps he was an Inns of Court man. He recognizes twisty law as a social plague, though he makes rogue-comedy of it; and he can read up a long story and make a case of it.[3]

Rossiter also grants that in addition to these notable abilities and talents, Anon had a strong sense of social justice. In his feeling for the common man, 'the author stands a little apart from his times.'[4]

Rossiter notes too that the author views Simon Ignorance, Dunstable's bloviant mayor and arguably the original of Dogberry, with amused detestation,[5] while understanding that he is 'a small tyrant swollen to a danger by toadying to a large.'[6] Anon has a more humane and moral mind than Marlowe and gives the impression that the world would go very well if only people would be a little more reasonable, moderate and responsible. Above all, he was an accomplished dramatist who 'knew how a plot should run, beginning, middle and end,' and could skillfully render an effective scene:

> Each part—and he mainly planned the play in determinate parts —hangs together and leads to his point. The high spots come off in themselves, and also fit the argument of the whole. Neither in structure nor in the passing episode nor in the detail of touches of 'character' and wry humour did the man write like a hack...His scenes and acts are well diversified by change of tone, but almost all his variations bear on his theme.[7]

---

[1] See my detailed critique of Rossiter in *Richard II, Part One* (2006).
[2] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* pp. 73, 76. I discuss Rossiter's flawed edition in more detail in Egan (2006).
[3] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* p. 73.
[4] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* p. 31.
[5] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* pp. 42, 224, 225. The Dogberry/Bailiff equation was first made by Boas in 1923 (*Shakespeare and the Universities*, pp. 151, 153), repeated in 1931 by Millett (*The Date and Literary Relations of 'Woodstock*', p. 9), and by almost everyone else since.
[6] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* p. 74
[7] Rossiter, *Woodstock,* pp. 74-5, 33

This isn't simplified Shakespeare; this is Shakespeare. Rossiter adds that Anon was discerning enough to resist making stage-villains out of Woodstock's murderers,[8] and used farce seriously, recalling Hamlet's admonition to the clowns:

In all these cases the farce has a function. It is not there merely as funny (skilled clownery is that, whether relevant or not) but to throw a twisted pattern across the serious theme...In nearly all the comical or farcical matter so skillfully blended in *Woodstock* there is a suggestion of that frightening inclusiveness of the Elizabethan mind which attains its full scope only in Shakespeare...Its maker, whoever he was, had gone quite as far as Shakespeare in showing what subtleties could be worked on his rather unpromising frame.[9]

'Quite as far as Shakespeare' is a phrase that goes quite as far as our broader argument requires, for Shakespeare alone among Elizabethan playwrights can be said to have brought together farce and tragedy 'in ways so frighteningly inclusive.' Who else but he could have conceived the Porter scene in *Macbeth* and the grim political humor in the Dunstable episode in *1 Richard II*? It's the combination of politics and gallows humor that is unique to Shakespeare and Anon, and quite unlike anything else in Elizabethan or Jacobean drama.

A. P. Rossiter: ANON

From *Woodstock, a Moral History*, pp 97-103

No authoritative identification of the writer of the play has ever been offered. But since even educated folk assume that a man who writes a story puts his character in their hands, we may take a few liberties here, with a spirit forever beyond disturbance by our libel or contempt, our praise or patronage.

There is not the smallest chance that he was Shakespeare: his verse too rarely rises, it is (in Dryden's phrase) too little 'pestered with figurative expressions,' his mind never moves fast enough. A William-the-Schoolmaster who wrote in extreme artistic infancy would be unrecognizable as 'Shakespeare', unless transition-works were discovered (or invented!) to explain the 'golden metamorphosis.' The attachment of the play's 'plain English frieze' to *2 Henry VI* makes this an unprofitable fancy.

Yet there is something of a simplified Shakespeare in him. He tries to see history in a big way (unlike Peele, Greene or Heywood): he has a marked sense of humor, of an unusually unbawdy kind: an interest in human pride of gesture in dramatic situations: much in politics and in the common people —of whom he is not afraid. He knows something of the law and can turn a point with legal jargon; so perhaps he was an Inns of Court man. He recognizes twisty law as a social plague, though he makes rogue-comedy of it; and he can read up a long story and make a case of it.

He had studied the chronicles extensively, perhaps neither wisely nor too well: he is fallible on names and dates—or arithmetic—even when they could easily have been got right. Were he married, it is odd that he did not wonder how Queen Philippa came to have the celebrated seven sons all in a heap. Much of what he has to offer about men, and most of all he gives to women, is grasped from without rather than felt from within. Yet he is not un-understanding with the half-feminine caprice of Richard, though (like the pranks of Greene) it is observed without much sympathy.

---

[8] Rossiter, *Woodstock*, p. 74
[9] Rossiter, *Woodstock*, pp. 35-7.

In a similar way, despite his sense of social injustice, he has observed Bailey Ignorance with detached amusement, not losing his judgment that the man is a small tyrant swollen to a danger by toadying to a large.

In general we may infer that he looked at his world and saw how it wagged, but without being ever likely to reach any very deep conclusions about it. Of individual philosophic reflection his play is strikingly innocent. For all that, he has an appreciation of the irony of things; and the good sense not to overstress it. Of the tragic ironies of Fate he has none. Contrasting him with Marlowe, H. B. Charlton aptly remarks that he had 'a much more humane and moral mind': indeed, if he wrote under that influence, it must have been a strong mind, to resist the fascinations of the Will-to-Power in that dramatic demiurge. As we see him, the Marlovian *Obermännerei* left him untouched. He constantly gives the impression that the world would go very well if only men would be a little more reasonable, moderate and responsible. None the less, he enjoys his violent murder immensely, and makes neither Lapoole nor his ruffians into mere stage-villains.

Though his shortcomings might make one reconsider the brusque Jonsonian formula, 'an honest man but no poet,' he was a dramatist. He knew how a plot should run, beginning, middle and end, and saw his way to uniting elements as far apart as the clown-vice of Morality and the list of Articles of Objection brought against Richard when he was deposed. In this last item his tactful transfer of a sad weight of unkingliness from the monarch to those better able to answer for it (in a Tudor world, at all events) again suggests the trained advocate: as perhaps, too, does the clever equivoque of Cynthia's speech in the masque, where Richard is *really* the 'great prince' addressed, though Woodstock must suppose that *he* is. Here as elsewhere the writer knew what made a scene. Each part—and he mainly planned the play in determinate parts—hangs together and leads to his point. The high spots come off in themselves, and also fit the argument of the whole. Neither in structure nor in the passing episode nor in the detail of touches of 'character' and wry humor did the man write like a hack.

In language he is almost always clear and direct, though he had a taste for neologisms such as *a good invoke, his tomb elate, the nonage king*; and once, unless the copyist is to blame, committed a horrible solecism in *our predecessors yet to come* (III.i.91 Text-note). He does not flourish his classical names, but drops Bucephalus, surly Rhadamanth, and the Calydonian boar unostentatiously: his murderer has heard of grim Hercules. His metaphors are visual, and he picked out from Stowe details on dress which gave him costume-effects on the stage; and also mis-read Holinshed once through visualizing in the wrong context. His most 'poetic' phrase (in the accepted sense) is where he says there is no need to stare up to see

> Whether the sun shine clear or no, 'tis found
> By the small light should beautify the ground.

But even this little flourish [I.i.165-6 ff.] bears on the theme, for the 'sun' thus sought in vain is respect for kingship among the 'groundlings.' His verse has the same to-the-point limitations as his language. It keeps the middle way, and leaves the emotion to the situation. It is less end-stopped than was usual in the early '90's, and often overruns into rough alexandrines, sometimes beyond. Couplets are fairly frequent, and in Cynthia's prologue to the masque used throughout, to change the tone suitably. End-couplets in the speeches are at the average level of badness, some very hazily rhymed so that it is not always easy to tell whether a rhyme is intended or not (e.g. *comes-wrongs, win-king, time-mine* all from scene-ends, make one wonder).[10] This taking of rhyme where he finds it rather suggests a man who wrote for pleasure than by profession: though the blank-verse mainly suggests a practised hand. Finally, his prose is noteworthy

[10] Robinson makes a similar point, and my reaction is the same. These are not so much bad as half rhymes; they strike me as interesting and perhaps reflect a period of experimentation in the author's development. —MEE

for its time, being unusually uncomplicated or fussy (in one place he gibes at euphuistic niceties), and not restricted to comic characters. It is used much more from the Third Act on than in the first two; but that is partly because the favourites are given more, after their first decline at the end of II.ii and the king himself descends to their level later. The contrast between the legal contract (IV.i), Woodstock's chat with the horse (III.ii), the murderers (V.i), and the contrasted flippancies of Nimble and Green show that the writer's range in prose went well past his range with verse. If he continued writing as late as 1600, I should expect to find him in prose-comedy. But perhaps [Shakespeare's *Richard II*] silenced him forever with the discouragement of an impossible competition.

All this, so far as it reaches for the man beyond the style, is plain guess and extenuated inference. But if some such name as Willowby Smith or Antony Wadeson were attached to this play on a 'humorous' Duke of Gloster, as much and more would be extracted from it to give us at any rate a myth of the man. I have tried to associate him with many plays and all the (to me) known dramatists of the time; but for all that, with this respectful but entirely conjectural sketch of what he may have been like, at least on paper, I must leave him, as I found him, a quiet ghost among that great majority who must for all the troublings of their lives and labours rest ANON.