A SUGGESTION FOR A HISTORY OF SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICISM BY PLAYS

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The field of Shakespearean study has been and is so rapidly enlarging that even the most limited and modest contribution has now to be preceded by extended research, if the student is to orient himself accurately enough to be sure what has and what has not already been done on the point he has in mind—if he is to get out to the frontiers of his subject and know positively that he has succeeded in doing so. Valuable as are the recent bibliographies and surveys, a more complete apparatus of orientation is greatly needed.*

It may be very soundly argued that it is more possible to do an original interpretation of a play if we do not know too much about what has been said on it already. Even so, the most independent of critics is or ought to be glad to check his own findings with those of others before giving his own their final form, especially if the checking can be done without too great outlay of energy and time. And it is all to the good to have the means of arriving at the weight of opinion on any issue and to see how ideas recur and with what varying emphasis.

The writer would suggest that a history of Shakespearean criticism more complete than any at present available be undertaken by plays—a volume being devoted to each play—to include for each play a chronological survey of research and criticism from the beginning to the present time.

If the work is to fulfill its purpose, the following fields at least would have to be taken into consideration:

(1) textual criticism
(2) line by line criticism
(3) studies of background and sources

* Since this suggestion was presented at the meeting of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters in June, 1936, the need has been met in part in the case of Hamlet by the invaluable work of Mr. Anton Adolf Raven, A Hamlet Bibliography and Reference Guide, 1877-1935 (University of Chicago Press, 1936). This work does not, however, undertake to give a chronological development of the subject.
(4) the stage history of the play
(5) various types of interpretative criticism

Now the first two—textual and line by line criticism—have been dealt with in the Variorum down to the date of publication or will be dealt with as the work of the Variorum is continued. This work of course should not be duplicated. The other fields, however,—more especially studies of background and sources, and general criticism,—would have to be thoroughly surveyed, and all fields would have to be chronologically correlated.

The exhaustive bibliography which Dr. S. A. Tannenbaum, secretary of the Shakespeare Association of America, has in hand would be invaluable as a starting point.

It would be of the utmost advantage to the present project to proceed in the rear of the Variorum and to make use of the winnowed harvest of material in the volumes already issued and the forthcoming volumes. It must be re-emphasized, however, that the purpose of the history is quite different from that of the Variorum. The Variorum is concerned primarily with providing an apparatus for understanding the play. The object of the history of criticism, on the other hand, is to throw into perspective the story of the impact of the play on the human mind, to give a chronological account of the growth of knowledge of the play, and the development of thought about it. It would proceed by years, decades, half centuries, summing its findings at regular intervals, or as organic divisions might appear in the material in consequence of conditioning events or influences. Even negative results would have to be included to some extent, for it is important to know when a line of investigation has led only to a dead end. The order of the emergence, the acceptance, the rejection, perhaps the re-emergence of ideas would be examined, and their interaction, and also the thought of the period in which specific ideas occur in so far as it throws light on their significance. The method should be descriptive and objective, though evaluation will be implied in the record of the fate of ideas, as well as in proportion of treatment.

It is true that much of this material has been and is being dealt with in period histories of Shakespearean criticism. The history by plays, however, proceeding on a different scale, and at right angles, as it were, to the period histories, will not only deal with some of the elements more exhaustively but will or-
ganize them all in a different way, will endeavor to trace period changes in continuity for its own purposes, and will have its own special task to interpret them organically in relation to the single play. It does not need to be said that Shakespeare criticism, national and international, is a highly significant aspect of the history of thought. We believe that it is in relation to the single play that it can, on some sides at least, be most precisely studied.

Ideally the work ought to be kept up to date in future supplements, but to complete it to any definite date would be worth while.

The most economical way to do the work would be to collect the material for all plays simultaneously, since many of the same sources would have to be gone through for all. The difficulties of organizing these labors would be very great. Collaborators would have to keep in touch for purposes of division of labor and exchange of data. Even if the work has to be done a section at a time over a long period, each worker or group of workers will incidentally file much material toward the general project.

While the task as a whole is one for co-operative scholarship, any part of it could if necessary be separately undertaken, such as a history of the scholarship and criticism in the field of one play, or one group of plays (say, one tragedy, or the early comedies, or the early histories). This, if well done, ought to be useful even if nothing more came of it.