

SHAKESPEARE

Peyre, Henri, The Failures of Criticism (Cornell University Press) New York, 1967
First edition Writers and Their Critics: A Study of Misunderstanding copyright
1944, emended edition entitled The Failures of Criticism copyright 1967

// Peyre is Sterling Professor of French, Yale University

p. 33 The history of Shakespearean criticism has not yet been written with
the accuracy and amplitude that the subject deserves. . .

p. 34 But on the whole in the hundred and fifty years which followed Shakespeare's
death England was more than chary of praise and more than slow in her recognition
of genius (even in the guarded and moderate appreciations of Shakespeare's
excellence written by Dryden and, in 1711, by John Dennis). Several ingenious
and impartial critical minds (Ben Jonson in his Discoveries, Sir John Denham,
Cartwright, Rymer) preferred one of his contemporaries (Fletcher, or Ben Jonson
himself) to Shakespeare. Milton hardly admired Shakespeare as a tragic writer and
ranked him below the Greeks. Dryden thought fit to rewrite Antony and Cleopatra
and Troilus and Cressida. Davenant rewrote Macbeth and, together with Dryden,
The Tempest. Nahum Tate cut up and "arranged" King Lear. Samuel Pepys saw
nothing but insipid foolishness in Twelfth Night and called A Midsummer Night's
Dream "the most insipid ridiculous play that I ever saw in my life." Romeo and
Juliet again is condemned by him as "a play of itself the worst I ever heard in
my life." . . . In the middle of the eighteenth century, Blair, David Hume, and
Chesterfield were very severe on Shakespeare's extravagances and unclassical
license.

Mack, Maynard, King Lear in Our Time (University of California Press) 1965

p. 9 During the first seventy-five years of its existence, we can make only
guesses like these about the history of King Lear onstage. We know that on the
reopening of the theatres after the Restoration it continued to be played for a
time "as Mr. Shakespeare wrote it, before it was altered by Mr. Tate" - so

John Downes assures us in his Roscius Anglicanus (1708)¹⁴ - but we do not know
what interpretation it was given or what success it met. There may, however, be
an answer to the latter question in the fact that the play was before long wholly
rewritten by Nahum Tate, so that between 1681, the date of Tate's redaction, and
1838, the year in which Macready restored almost the whole of Shakespeare's
original text in a historic production at Covent Garden, Shakespeare's King Lear
was never, as far as is known, seen in performance. Tate's King Lear occupied
the stage and throne.

Tate's King Lear invites ridicule and deserves it, but is nonetheless illuminating.
A line in its verse prologue may be taken to mean (what would not be at all
surprising) that Shakespeare's version had ceased to appeal to Restoration play-
goers, whose favored diet, apart from comedy, consisted mainly of heroic plays and
other subspecies of epic romance.