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The Dating and Attribution of *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany*

Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany is usually considered to be an Elizabethan revenge tragedy, with 1594 often suggested as a likely date of composition; some scholars have attributed the play to George Peele. Martin Wiggins has, however, recently contested the traditional date in *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, giving 1630 as his own ‘best guess’. This note questions the premises behind Wiggins’s decision while putting forward new arguments in support of the traditional dating on dramaturgical grounds — arguments that perhaps lend weight to the idea that Peele had a hand in the play.

Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany was first published in 1654. The title page draws attention to the success of this flawed but fascinating revenge tragedy in the Caroline era: ‘As it hath been very often Acted (with great applause) at the Privat house in BLACKFRIERS by his late MAJESTIES servants’.¹ It was staged at court in 1630 and revived again in 1636 in a Blackfriars production attended by Queen Henrietta Maria and the Elector Palatine.² Rather than considering the play to have been written in the Caroline period, however, most commentators believe that a work of the 1590s was revived (and probably revised) at this time. No external evidence supports this view, but internal evidence highlights certain features (lexical, prosodic, and dramaturgical) that would be distinctly archaic in a play of Caroline origin.³ 1594 is the most commonly proposed date of composition, leading some scholars to see *Alphonsus* as an innovative work, one that helps to establish theatrical conventions such as the bed trick and the gulled revenger.⁴

Seventeenth-century cataloguers all seem to assume a pre-Caroline date of composition, given that they (with varying degrees of reliability) ascribe the play either to George Peele or George Chapman — the former died in 1596 and the latter appears to have stopped writing for the stage around 1612.⁵ The play was first printed under Chapman’s name, but the large majority of commentators have

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long considered this a misattribution.⁶ The 1653 Stationers' Register gives *John Peele* as the author, which some have taken as evidence for a *George Peele* attribution. Peele was the main focus of twentieth-century discussion of authorship, but no consensus has emerged. Questionable claims have been made on both sides of a sometimes-heated debate. Some scholars have overconfidently assigned *Alphonsus* to Peele on the basis of diction and parallel passages alone (the evidence, while suggestive, is not conclusive).⁷ Others have doubted or rejected Peele as an authorial candidate on the dubious grounds that the plot is too well handled.⁸ There has not, of course, been anything equivalent to the critical firepower aimed at establishing Peele as a co-author of *Titus Andronicus*. Although a few modern critics treat *Alphonsus* as Peele's, the play usually (and properly) goes unattributed.

The notion of *Alphonsus* as an Elizabethan play, with Peele as a possible author, has, however, been recently challenged by Martin Wiggins in *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*. He singles out the play in his introduction as an example of traditional dating that is founded on error:

Some inaccurate traditional datings ... arise from a conservative reluctance to dispose of older scholarly hypotheses, no matter how dubious: *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* is traditionally dated 1594 only because somebody once thought it might have been written by George Peele, even though all the external evidence points unerringly to around 1630.⁹

Wiggins supports this contention by placing his entry for *Alphonsus* in 1630, stating:

This is a play written in five acts, indicating composition after 1608, and its narrative is obviously conceived as a refraction of the early stages of the Thirty Years War, indicating composition after 1619. It was still fresh enough to be considered worth protecting as part of the King's Men's repertory in 1641 ... The play cannot be by George Peele: it draws on a translation of Gentillet that was first published six years after he died ... There is no good reason to perpetuate the notion that the play was an entire generation earlier than all the evidence of its existence.¹⁰

To some extent Wiggins's skepticism is warranted given that cavalier attributions of anonymous plays to Peele were once commonplace. But is Wiggins's reading of the external evidence entirely reliable? And is it right to leave *internal* evidence out of the equation?¹¹ In what follows I challenge Wiggins's premises and make a case for the traditional dating of the play. I should say beforehand, however, that

I consider Wiggins's catalogue to be a research tool of great value even in those instances where I disagree with his chronological decisions.

I will address each of Wiggins's points in turn, starting with his puzzling assertion that a five-act structure indicates composition after 1608. Although this is roughly the point at which it became standard for printed plays to be divided into acts, numerous earlier examples of five-act structures in English drama exist. Mid-sixteenth-century plays such as *Ralph Roister Doister* and *Gorbuduc* were written (and printed) in five acts, as were Lyly's boy-company plays of the 1580s. The practice was not restricted to neoclassical drama or to elite court productions. Some of the early populist works by the 'university wits' — plays such as Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (ca 1587) and Greene's *James IV* (ca 1590) — appear as five-act structures in editions published in the 1590s. Even where Elizabethan plays are undivided in printed form, markers such as 'Actus Primus' or 'Actus primus Scæna prima' head a number of them.¹² Many playwrights of the period to which *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* is usually assigned were mindful of act and scene division, particularly within five-act structures.

Wiggins's claim that *Alphonsus* is 'obviously conceived as a refraction of the early stages of the Thirty Years War' is more tenable: the play, loosely based on a thirteenth-century contention over whether Alphonso X of Castile or Richard, earl of Cornwall would be the Holy Roman Emperor, depicts factional division and the outbreak of war among the German principalities. This said, the propagandist manner in which the play pits English honesty against Spanish perfidy is of equal relevance to the post-Armada 1590s. Noting 'the fierce anti-Spanish and anti-Papal prejudice' of the late Elizabethan period, T.M. Parrott suggests that the playwright's wilful distortion of the historical record corresponds 'more closely to Peele's own anti-Spanish animus than to that of any other possible author'.¹³ The liberties taken with sources — Alphonso X never visited Germany let alone ruled there as a bloody tyrant; he never married or abused Isabella of England — are similar to those taken in Peele's *Edward I*, which tarnishes Eleanor of Castile with various unhistorical calumnies. Spanish diabolism is met in both plays with a steadfast (if somewhat naïve) English heroism. A likely reason for the revived play's popularity in the Caroline era, Martin Butler suggests, is its stirring patriotic appeal in the context of the Thirty Years' War.¹⁴

What of Wiggins's notion that *Alphonsus* was 'still fresh enough to be considered worth protecting as part of the King's Men's repertory in 1641'? The company, seeking to prevent pirated publications, drew up a list for the Stationers' Company of about sixty plays they wished to protect. Many of the older plays in their repertory had already been published, and *Alphonsus* is without question

an anomaly on the list if it does indeed date from the 1590s. It should be noted, though, that only a third or so of the protected plays date from the period 1630–41, and a number (by playwrights such as Fletcher, Tourneur, and Middleton) are up to thirty years old. Being ‘fresh’ is not a criterion for inclusion on the list. My own surmise — given the lack of any earlier record of *Alphonsus* — is that a relatively unfamiliar 1590s revenge tragedy (perhaps a flop or one that went unperformed for some reason) became a surprise hit in the 1630s.

Wiggins’s final assertion that Peele cannot be the author because he died before the publication of a source is also open to question. Wiggins refers here to Innocent Gentillet’s 1576 discourse upon sound government, commonly titled *Discours Contre Machiavel* (or *Anti-Machiavel*). It is true that Simon Patericke’s English translation was not published until 1602, six years after Peele’s death,¹⁵ but is it the case that the author of *Alphonsus* was dependent on Patericke’s version? A Latin translation of Gentillet’s work appeared in 1577 which ‘was directed at an English audience’.¹⁶ Gentillet, as András Kiséry observes, effectively reduced Machiavelli to ‘a series of decontextualized, quotable maxims’ which may have circulated independently from the work as a whole.¹⁷ Act 1, scene 1 of *Alphonsus* contains six maxims, most of which clearly derive from Gentillet, though the playwright shows significant independence, expanding upon some maxims, synthesizing others, and also demonstrating a possible familiarity with Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* itself.¹⁸ A couple of the maxims resemble Patericke’s versions but the wording in general is markedly different,¹⁹ with the playwright perhaps making his own translation or quoting from a non-extant source; nothing verbatim irrefutably supports Wiggins’s post-1602 dating of the play. Playwrights such as Kyd and Marlowe introduced Machiavels to the English stage in the late 1580s and early 1590s. The opening scene of *Alphonsus*, a lengthy Machiavellian primer, is considerably more characteristic of late Elizabethan drama than anything from the Caroline era.²⁰ This is as strong a reason as any to stick with the traditional dating for *Alphonsus* — in fact, Wiggins himself suggests that *Edmund Ironside* is a play of the 1590s on similar grounds.²¹

While I do not agree that the evidence (whether internal or external) ‘points unerringly to around 1630’ as a date for the play, I welcome Wiggins’s reopening of the debate. Revenge tragedy as a genre saw a resurgence in the 1630s, prompted perhaps by popular revivals of plays such as Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Chettle’s *The Tragedy of Hoffman*.²² Is *Alphonsus* to be counted alongside them as a successfully revived Elizabethan play, or is it possible that a Caroline dramatist produced a deliberately archaic tragedy? Writers frequently echo or imitate their artistic forebears, but the process of reworking outmoded styles tends to result

in new hybrid forms.²³ Fredson Bowers offers a useful (if hostile) survey of how revenge tragedy was refashioned in the Caroline era, with Fletcherian mannerisms to the fore.²⁴ He detects no such influence on *Alphonsus*, though, seeing the play as very much of the Elizabethan moment, written under the sway of Kyd and Marlowe.²⁵ To count it as a Caroline work would be to acknowledge a remarkable replica of an earlier mode.²⁶

Bowers also considers *Titus Andronicus* an important model for *Alphonsus*, a notion that brings me to the Peele attribution. Interested readers might like to consider the dozen or so possible links to a 'putatively Peelean' *Alphonsus* highlighted in Charles Forker's edition of *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England*.²⁷ Scholars have convincingly, in my view, ascribed the latter play (along with sections of *Titus Andronicus*) to Peele.²⁸ An extended Peele canon is starting to take more reliable shape. Could the fact that *Alphonsus* depicts Edward Longshanks in his youth suggest a link to Peele? It is tempting to see the penurious playwright trying in 1594 (or thereabouts) to capitalize on his popular hero by offering a prequel of sorts.²⁹ Might the ear-boxing scene that so perturbs Edward in *Alphonsus* be an intertextual nod to *Edward I*, where Queen Eleanor boxes the king's ears?³⁰ Peele presents Eleanor as manipulative and murderous, but, like *Alphonsus*, she repents at the last, confessing that she was unfaithful to Edward with his brother on the bridal couch on the night before their wedding. Here is another marriage in which the hapless Edward does not taste the first fruits — the central plot-hinge of *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany*.

Alphonsus has various thematic and dramaturgical links to other plays by Peele, or by Peele and Shakespeare, especially in scenes that border on absurdity and gratuitousness. Like *Titus Andronicus*, the play shows a violated daughter stabbed in an honour killing by her maddened father who likens himself to Virginius. Both plays see the introduction, late in the action, of a newborn child whose life is instantly in the balance. Grotesque cannibalistic motifs recur as well — the Thyestian feast in *Titus*, and the flinging of the baby's corpse as meat for its supposed father in *Alphonsus*. Other Peele plays (*Troublesome Reign*, *David and Bethsabe*, *The Battle of Alcazar*) have plots that depict or relate the deaths of young children. And then there is the threat to marriage — this is not, of course, a uniquely Peelean theme, but he seems to have gone further than most playwrights of his era in the tragic foregrounding of sexual dilemmas and dangers, as evidenced by *Titus Andronicus*, *David and Bethsabe*, and the lost play *The Turkish Muhammad and Irene the Fair Greek*.³¹

Alphonsus concludes with the Spanish tyrant binding two English royals into chairs to be tormented and killed, though in the end it is the tyrant himself

who meets such a fate. This spectacle might recall the chair-binding murder that occurs in *Edward I*, where Eleanor uses a poisonous snake to kill her victim. A chair-binding murder also occurs in the act 1 dumb show of Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*. Most tellingly, perhaps, Peele makes frequent use of the upper tier for dramatic, often violent action such as the nose-slitting torture in *Edward I* and a boy's fall to his death in *Troublesome Reign*. *Titus* also offers striking use of the gallery, both in the turbulent opening and at the close when the Andronici offer to fling themselves from the walls.³² Do any other playwrights of the era make such sensational use of the upper tier? Significantly, perhaps, this space is used on three separate occasions in *Alphonsus* for scenes of murder and torture.

None of these features can be taken in isolation as an authorial fingerprint but, placed alongside the seventeenth-century attributions and the verbal parallels highlighted by various scholars, they might add to the impression that Peele had a hand in the play. It is no more than an impression though. Further work is required before *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* can be attributed to Peele or any other candidate, if indeed an author can ever be confidently identified. With regard to dating the play, I see no reason to jettison the working hypothesis that it is a revenge tragedy of Elizabethan provenance.

Notes

- 1 *The Tragedy of Alphonsus Emperour of Germany* (London, 1654; STC: C1952).
- 2 G.E. Bentley records the Caroline stage history, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* 7 vols (Oxford, 1941–68), 5.1285–8.
- 3 For discussion of internal evidence see, most notably, the introduction and notes to *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* in *The Plays and Poems of George Chapman: The Tragedies*, ed. T.M. Parrott (London, 1910), 683–711.
- 4 See Marliiss C. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama* (Newark, 1994), 143–51, and Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642* (Princeton, 1940), 246.
- 5 For more on seventeenth-century attributions, see discussions by Parrott, ed. *Alphonsus*, 683–4, and H. Dugdale Sykes, *Sidelights in Elizabethan Drama* (London, 1924), 80–3.
- 6 Parrott, for example, includes the play in his edition of Chapman’s tragedies but dismisses the idea that he could be responsible for it, 684–8.
- 7 Sykes 79–98 and J.M. Robertson, *Did Shakespeare Write ‘Titus Andronicus’?: A Study in Elizabethan Literature* (London, 1905), 126–30, ascribe the play to Peele; rebuttals are offered by A.M. Sampley, “Verbal Tests” for Peele’s Plays’, *Studies in Philology* 30.3 (1933), 473–96, and L.R.N. Ashley, *Authorship and Evidence: A Study of Attribution and the Renaissance Drama* (Geneva, 1968), 30–7.
- 8 See, for example, A.M. Sampley, ‘Plot Structure in Peele’s Plays’, *PMLA* 51.3 (1936), 689–701; Peele’s structural capabilities have been assessed in a more balanced fashion by others. For example, see Werner Senn, *Studies in the Dramatic Construction of Robert Greene and George Peele* (Bern, 1973).
- 9 Martin Wiggins, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 8 vols (2011–), 1.xl.
- 10 Wiggins, *British Drama*, vol. 8, entry 2290.
- 11 Internal evidence is an essential component of dating methodology, especially where external evidence is ambiguous or unreliable. See S. Schoenbaum’s *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* (London, 1966) on the value and limitations of both internal and external evidence; Schoenbaum is concerned with authorship but many of the principles apply to dating as well.
- 12 From Kyd’s (?) *Soliman and Perseda* and Munday’s or Wilson’s (?) *Fair Em* respectively, both ca 1590.
- 13 Parrott, ed., *Alphonsus*, 687, 688–9. Parrott retains an open mind over authorship, finding both Peelean and non-Peelean features, perhaps as a result of collaboration or revision.

- 14 Martin Butler, 'Entertaining the Palatine Prince: Plays on Foreign Affairs 1635–1637', *English Literary Renaissance* 13 (1983), 319–44, <https://doi.org/10.1086/elrv13n3p319>.
- 15 Edward Meyer claims in *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama* (Weimar, 1897), 19–21, that Patericke's translation was made much earlier and circulated in manuscript; Randall Martin suggests that Anne Dowriche drew upon it for *The French History* (1589) in 'Anne Dowriche's *The French History*, Christopher Marlowe, and Machiavellian Agency', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 39.1 (1999), 69–87, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.1999.0005>. N.W. Bawcutt argues, however, that such claims are based on erroneous or unsupported assumptions and that Dowriche is more likely to have utilized a Latin translation of Gentillet, 'The "Myth of Gentillet" Reconsidered: An Aspect of Elizabethan Machiavellianism', *PMLA* 99.4 (2004), 863–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3738500>.
- 16 Bawcutt, 'The "Myth of Gentillet" Reconsidered', 873.
- 17 András Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2016), 63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198746201.001.0001>.
- 18 See Parrott's note on 1.1.100–2. The playwright's 'Tis more safety for a prince to be feared than loved' (1.1.157) is, as Parrott observes, nearer to Machiavelli's original than it is to Gentillet's less nuanced but strikingly direct 'It is better for a Prince to be feared than loved' (part 3, maxim 9, Patericke's translation). See also Alessandra Petrina on the availability of *Il Principe* in Elizabethan England despite an apparent injunction against publication, *Machiavelli in the British Isles* (Farnham and Burlington, 2009), 14–32, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315593142>.
- 19 Compare, for example, Patericke's rendering of Gentillet's part 3, maxim 6, 'It is folly to thinke, that with princes and great lords, new pleasures will cause them to forget old offences', with the playwright's more earthy 'Trust not a reconciled friend, for good turns cannot blot out old grudges' (1.1.117–18); even where the wording is closer there is no proof of direct imitation or indeed of which version preceded the other. Patericke's translation of Gentillet can be found at *Early English Books Online [EEBO]*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A01615.0001.001?view=toc>.
- 20 Extant Caroline drama displays little significant interest in Machiavelli. See Meyer, *Machiavelli*, 142ff.
- 21 Wiggins, *British Drama*, vol. 3, entry 1064. Both *Alphonsus* and *Edmund Ironside* contain references to the vice, Ambidexter, from Preston's *Cambises* (1569), another feature more likely in Elizabethan works.
- 22 The title pages of Caroline editions attest to the popularity of the revivals.

- 23 See Lucy Munro's *Archaic Style in English Literature, 1590–1674* (Cambridge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107337480> (chapters 4 and 5 in particular) for examples of this practice among early modern playwrights.
- 24 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, chapter 7.
- 25 Ibid, 272.
- 26 Parrott never considers *Alphonsus* to be anything other than Elizabethan in origin but he raises the possibility of an extensive revision of the play in the 1630s, with a reviser choosing 'to retain the old style rather than to tack on purple passages in the manner of Fletcher and Massinger'; he acknowledges, however, that 'the diction and metre of the play are remarkably archaic for any such thorough revision' (Parrott ed., *Alphonsus*, 692).
- 27 Charles R. Forker (ed.), *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England* (Manchester and New York, 2011), 22 and 98n29.
- 28 See Forker's introduction to *Troublesome Reign* and chapter 3 of Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Oxford, 2002), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199269167.001.0001>, for the evidence (based on studies of diction, parallel passages, prosody, imagery, staging, and scene construction) that supports these attributions.
- 29 One thing that could count against a Peele attribution is that the play refers to Edward as the Prince of Wales when this title was not established for an English prince until the birth of Edward of Caernarfon, the future Edward II, as depicted in the investiture ceremonials of Peele's *Edward I*. Henry III (Edward I's father) had, however, previously conquered part of north Wales and given the territory to his son, so perhaps the use of 'Prince of Wales' in *Alphonsus* has its own historical validity.
- 30 Eleanor was actually the half-sister of Alphonso X — the Edward of the two plays has little luck with this Castilian dynasty.
- 31 See Wiggins, *British Drama*, vol. 2, entry 803 for a probable plot.
- 32 The latter scene is Shakespeare's, but it might show Peele's influence if the pair were direct collaborators, or might be based on Peele's plot if Shakespeare acted as a reviser.

