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CRABTREE MARGINALIA
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Which one of us, upon completing the third and last of Mary Carlton Clark's volumes on the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines, does not find himself peculiarly compelled to go in search of her other, I dare not say inferior, critical work. I refer, as this scholarly audience will immediately realise, to her article entitled 'Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend', which is to be found in the *Girl's Own Paper* 4 June 1887. Seeking the piece myself during the last long vacation, I found myself in what has been described, by one who is not, I must add, a member of the Athenaeum, as the best club in London, namely the North Library of the British Museum. There, beneath the rancid grinding of the microfilm machines and the watchful eyes of the staff, I sought to reduce my ignorance of Shakespeare in preparation for a series of intercollegiate lectures.

My enthralled reading was interrupted in the course of the afternoon by an enquiry as to how long I should have need of the volume before me. For, I was told, it was urgently required by another reader whose stay in the country was reaching its conclusion. Before I could enquire who this gentleman was, the man himself appeared. And I was greeted in the quiet Irish brogue of my good friend Mr. Quintin O'Connell from County Down. In the course of what, for want of a better phrase, we later agreed to describe as an informal lunch at the 'Museum Tavern', Mr. O'Connell, knowing my particular interests well, told me how, at a recent sale at a country house in the West of Ireland, he had found listed a few personal effects of one Joseph William Baudouin, the sum of which he had bought. I recalled at once how Crabb Robinson had accompanied Mr. and Mrs. William Wordsworth to the Continent in 1820 where, he tells us, he was introduced to a Mrs. Baudouin, a mild, amiable little woman in appearance. 'I liked everything about her', he says, 'except that she called Wordsworth 'Father', which I thought indelicate'. It will be enough if at this stage I refer members of the Foundation to the contents of the first Oration, delivered by Professor James Sutherland. Needless to say, I accepted my friend's invitation to return with him to his home in County Down in the shadow of the Mourne Mountains. On the way across the water I explained to him something of the Foundation's work. He was at once inclined to argue that as certain books he had acquired at the Baudouin sale bore on their title-pages the initials J.C., they could well have been the property of Joseph Crabtree.

Even in the unsympathetic milieu of the Heysham-to-Larne boat, second-class saloon, I felt compelled in the interests of scholarly accuracy to point out the insufficiencies of this argument. To make the story as short as possible, I found on arrival at his home at the very foot of Slieve Donard that he had become the possessor of a small collection of 17th and 18th century books, all of which did indeed have their title-pages initialled as he described. Several indeed bore something slightly different. The first of these that I was privileged to hold in my hand was one of three volumes entitled *Dramatic Tabletalk*, published in London in 1830. This is a work of its author's anecdotal, bearing much the same relationship to an authentic history of the English stage as Sidney Lee's account of Shakespeare's life bears to that of E. K. Chambers. Like its fellows, its title page bore a device carefully executed in ink. We were in those remote and undeveloped parts without benefit of professional photography, but what amateur equipment was to hand proved sufficient to provide the reproductions that the Secretary of the Foundation has set before you. They reveal the device as a rebus. At once we recall what Dr. Tancock, quoting Mr. Arthur Brown, referred to as 'the light-hearted punning on his own name so characteristic of our poet'. The components of the device have proved beyond any doubt the particular surname to be attached to the second initial. I began to entertain Mr. O'Connell's suggestion, at least as a temporary tenable hypothesis. It is to be expected that I paid particular attention to the three volumes that I held there in my hand when I was rewarded by discovering in the third on pages 228, 229 and 230 the following passage heavily scored in the margin and annotated. It is headed *Shakespeare's Crab Tree* and reads as follows:

There is a tradition in Warwickshire that our great dramatic bard was a very boon companion. And the fame of two illustrious denominations of 'The Topers' and 'The Sippers' is not yet forgotten in that county. The Topers, who were the stouter fellows of the two, challenged all England, it is said, to contend with them in deep potations of the good old English beverage, a challenge which Shakespeare and a party of his young friends at Stratford readily accepted. But going on a Whitsunday to meet them at Bidford, a village about seven miles distant, they were much mortified to find that the Topers had that very day, owing to some misunderstanding about the place and the time appointed, gone to a neighbouring fair on a similar intent with that which brought them there. Being thus disappointed, they were obliged to take up with the Sippers, whom they found assembled in that village and whom they held in great contempt. On trial, however, the Stratfordians proved to be so unequal to the combat that

they were obliged to yield. And while they had the power, they scampered off towards home. Unfortunately our great Shakespeare's head and that of one of his companions not being of quite so hard a temperament as those of their associates in drinking, they found themselves unable to proceed further and, laying themselves down, they took up their abode for the night under the shelter of a large, wide-spreading crab tree.

When they awoke in the morning, Shakespeare's friend proposed that they return to the place of combat, but Shakespeare probably wearied of his company and refused. Therefore, he exclaimed:

Farewell, piping Pebworth, dancing Marston,
Haunting Hillborough, hungry Grafton,
Dodging Exhall, popish Wixford,
Beggary Broom and drunken Bidford.

These rhymes are certainly not so exact as he would have produced in his closet, but as field measures they are well enough. And the epithets are strongly characteristic of his manner, being peculiarly and happily applied to the several villages from whence the miscellaneous company of the Sippers had proceeded. This celebrated tree, we believe, is still standing and is known far and near by the name of 'Shakespeare's Crab Tree'.

The anecdote was well authenticated by a clergyman, a native of Warwickshire, who died at Stratford about sixty years ago.

And there, gentlemen, my quotation ends.

Now this story, while of some general interest in itself, must be of peculiar concern to this gathering. For at the end of the anecdote in the O'Connell library's volume I remarked and instinctively copied down — on the back, I may add, of a copy of *The Northern Whig* — a marginal comment entered in a faint, unsteady but perfectly legible hand. It occurred next to the words 'a clergyman, a native of Warwickshire', and it read as follows:

I knew this blackcoated scoundrel well, and many a coarse tale did he tell of what greater and lesser bards had done beneath and against that tree. My good family name was besmirched by his loose babbling. With respect to his cloth, etc.

Now *Dramatic Tabletalk* was, as I said, published in 1830, so that its author's remark that the clergyman died about sixty years ago must refer to the year 1770 or earlier, a time when, if arithmetic and memory serve, Joseph Crabtree was rising sixteen, a sensitive and impressionable adolescent.

It will already have been appreciated that there is a possible objection to the hypothesis that what survived in the possession of Mr. O'Connell is a small fragment of the personal library of Crabtree the poet. Nothing I have said so far has established that the letter 'J', forming part of the rebus, stands for the name 'Joseph'. Crabtree studies have already been seriously beset with false attributions, but who are we, engaged as we are in the common pursuit of learning, if we cannot benefit by one another's mistakes? How was I to determine whether at that moment I grasped volumes that had once been held by the author of the celebrated *Ode to Claret* or, to go no further, by the author of *Diseases of the Cow*? It was a situation fraught with possibilities.

I spent a few hours' research in other volumes in the collection. The stimulus provided by this work — I suppress the details only in the interests of brevity — may in part be communicated if I mention that among the books I found copies of such works as Dr. John Armstrong's *The Economy of Love*, first edition 1736. This poem offers practical advice to the young 18th-century blood on the art of love-making. And of it a recent critic, a Mr. Lewis M. Crapp, whose words I take from the *PMLA* volume for 1944, has said: 'Its seeming lack of humour has suggested that the author's intention was partly didactic'. This book also bore on its title-page an example of the rebus, a copy of which is now before you, and inside the back cover was pencilled in the same hand as the one found in the margin of *Dramatic Tabletalk Vol 3*, the following short remark: 'Would I had followed the chaste example of my namesake! *Genesis* 39, 7-23'. In view of this manuscript note and the nature of the volume in which it appears, we may reasonably suggest that the rebus and the books in which it appears were the mark and the property of the man we are all so willing to honour this evening. I do not offer this of course as a positive conclusion — the world must have seen many Joseph Crabtrees in addition to the celebrated poet. But when it is borne in mind that the books I have been privileged to peruse had but recently belonged to Mr. J. Baudouin, then the evidence seems well-nigh conclusive.

Difficulties naturally still remain. The remark 'Would I had followed the chaste example of my namesake!' might well apply to almost any period of the great Crabtree's life. I would ask you all to bear in mind with reference to a later stage in this discourse that the remark must come from a devout student of the Scriptures. The reference to Armstrong's partly didactic work *The Economy of Love* may have disconcerted some of those present. In view of the poem's content and in order to assuage any anxiety it may arouse as to Crabtree's wellbeing in later life, I hasten to add that Dr. John Armstrong's better-known though no less practical work is an entirely didactic poem entitled *The Art of Preserving Health*. This too Crabtree possessed in his library. We may suppose that he studied it as thoroughly as he did Armstrong's earlier work, for did he not die a centenarian!

You will remember, gentlemen, that the marginal outburst in *Dramatic Tabletalk* against a Warwickshire clergyman contains, as something of an afterthought, the expression 'With respect to his cloth'. The insertion of this qualifying remark was not unusual in either the 18th or the 19th centuries whenever the clergy were being exposed to impartial assessment. But I hasten to add, surely it is unusual to find it in marginal comments where space is limited and the writer is for the most part addressing himself in the form of an *aide-mémoire*. Why, we ask, why this reverence for the clergy, unusual for the age in which Crabtree lived, yet persisting even when, as in this particular case, his first impulse is to call one of the cloth 'a blackcoated scoundrel'? Because, as I hope to convince my audience, Crabtree once himself aspired to that very cloth for which he here acknowledges an abiding respect!

At this stage we enter a sombre and regrettably ill-documented part of the poet's life, the dark side as it were, or at least penumbra, of that intellectual and spiritual moon whose usually chaste brilliance shines upon us from the major aspects of the Crabtree ethos and, I beg to add, the Crabtree *oeuvre*.

We have proof, provided once more by a surviving copy complete with rebus, that the poet once possessed a copy of Thomas Boston's *Fourfold State of Man*, which contains, part of it Ms marginalia, the following: 'Free love better than going to Confession'. And just below this entry, as a later addition, very cryptic, the roman III, followed by the figure 173 and the remark, 'All not quite lost'.

At this point I hope I may be excused for reminding my learned audience that in matters of scholarship the more immediate and obvious conclusion is not necessarily the right one. This entry has the terse obscurity of the usual marginal comment, and it therefore inevitably presents something of a problem of interpretation. The expression 'free love' here is one of those unfortunate chance modernisms such as bedevil the reading of Chaucer in schools. Boston's *Fourfold State* is after all a Presbyterian classic, and in it the word 'Confession', written as it is here with a capital 'C', could be taken as referring not to the well-known sacrament of the Church of Rome but to the *Westminster Confession*, that great corpus of Calvinist doctrine fundamental to Presbyterian faith. In which, I would add, Crabtree could have found, Section 3 Chapter 5 (*Of God's Eternal Grace*), a mention of the free love of God. I quote:

Those of mankind that are predestined unto life God, before the foundation of the world was laid according to His eternal and immutable purpose and the secret counsel and good pleasures of His will, hath chosen in Christ and to everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love without any foresight of faith or good works or perseverance in either of them or any other thing in the creature as conditions or causes moving Him thereto, and all to the praise of His glorious grace.

There are in short the elect and the damned throughout eternity. Gratuitous election results solely from the pleasure of God, the individual being powerless to contribute in any way to his own salvation. Further dogma on this point may if necessary be found in Section 3 Chapter 7 of the said *Confession*.

Now my interpreting Crabtree's note on free love and confession in the light of this hard doctrine will doubtless at this stage seem open to a certain degree of question. And I am the first to appreciate and sympathise with whatever scholarly malaise members of the Foundation may be experiencing at this very moment. But I would ask them to consider the difficulties of the rest of the marginal annotation 'All not quite lost' III.173. At first I confess I found it even more obscure than the earlier terms that we have just been considering. And there is an added obligation placed upon us in this case that any correct interpretation of these remaining words must lead to a coherent explication of the whole of the marginal annotation. Difficulties began to clear only when I turned aside from my reading of the *Westminster Confession*. My mind was at once flooded with the luminous simplicity of a great truth — a truth, gentlemen, we know it our duty to assert whenever the appropriate

occasion arises. And this indeed is the most appropriate occasion of the year. It is simply this: Joseph Crabtree was a poet!

Now for one whose maturity both as man and as poet became clearly evident before the 18th century was complete, for such a man the greatest repository of theological doctrine must surely have been *Paradise Lost*. It is not therefore entirely surprising that following the numbers given by Crabtree's marginal comment and turning up Book 3, line 173 of that great poem, we find a clear reference to 'all not being quite lost', a reference that also accords with our previous explanation of the expression 'free love'. Milton's poem gives us the following:

Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will,
Yet not of will in him, but grace in me
Freely vouchsaf't.

Now as God is speaking at this point in the poem and not Satan, Milton appears as something less than his poetic best. Yet this should not prevent us from trying to find out what he means. We should be undeterred by the fact that of Milton's past editors, Newton, followed by Todd, Bridges and Barber, calls this passage 'Calvinistic'. Another editor, Sumner, followed later by the unhappy Verity, could do nothing more by way of elucidating comment than point to a similar passage in *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Gentlemen, had they perused this parallel and read the whole of that significant prose work, they would doubtless have come to realise that it is theologically an Arminian document arguing that God elevates men to everlasting life on the condition of faith and repentance, and rejects only those who refuse to believe and repent. We therefore have evidence that this item of the Crabtree marginalia deserves a religious interpretation, and that at some time in his career the poet was attracted to Calvinism and later turned away from it, under the guidance no doubt of an earlier master's work in verse and prose. I now find myself compelled to deal with a difficult subject: Crabtree's flirtation (if indeed the word is at all appropriate considering the sternness of the mistress) with the Church of Scotland.

The work of my predecessor as Orator renders it unnecessary for me to elaborate on Crabtree's familiarity with that nation and its inhabitants. I have only to add that the single marginal comment 'Fifeshire' occurs in Crabtree's copy of Goldsmith, next to these lines in *Retaliation: A Poem*:

Detection her taper
Shall quench to a spark,
And Scotchman meet Scotchman
And cheat in the dark.

For details of Crabtree's spiritual crisis I can offer little more than what has been generously provided for me by the Revd. Terence Patrick McHaffie, sometime student at New College, a theological foundation in Edinburgh, and before that an acknowledged expert in collecting fugitive fragments of the oral tradition in Scotland and elsewhere. He it was who pointed out to me over two years ago a design incorporating the initials 'J.C.' cut with a diamond in the windowpane of a humble but well-frequented chamber in New College. Had I known then what I now know, I would have recognised it at once as an attempt to delineate the Crabtree rebus. Again, only in the interests of brevity, I offer a summary of what is still traditional knowledge in those parts about an unhappy student of somewhat advanced years who, under the alias 'James Cameron', sought to equip himself for ministry in the Scottish Church and unhappily failed. At this stage in my discourse I am compelled to rely on material that survives only in the oral culture of the Northern capital. But, gentlemen, should we not, in view of our subject, take the advice that was proffered to all men by Thomas à Kempis and use our utmost diligence to wean our souls from the love of the things that are seen and set our affections upon things that are not seen?

Cameron, or Crabtree as I must for clarity's and charity's sake continue to call him, is remembered as a student of a certain maturity who entered the College virtually unnoticed but endowed with all the usual necessary qualifications, namely: a sack of oatmeal, a determination to get on, and a black Sunday suit. His first few months were uneventful. He was a conscientious but uninspired scholar. When recommended to read Akenside's works for relaxation, he later remarked that he could remember nothing of that author except his treatise on the dysentery, 1764, adding that 'the Latin is very pure and concise'. His practice sermons were however long remembered. The first was devoted to the question 'What was the name of Potiphar's wife?'. This we must now associate with the marginal entry that I previously referred to concerning that lady and Joseph as narrated in *Genesis 39*. The *Old Testament* incident was clearly a favourite with our poet. His sermon impressed and also

disconcerted his mentors by relying on the *Qur'an*, albeit one of its more elegant chapters, for one suggested name, 'Zuleika'. He was compelled to search further Arabic works for the other suggestion, the name 'Rahel'. Here was evidence of that amazing breadth of extracurricular reading and the independence, not to say unorthodoxy, of its nature. To this the few unauthenticated volumes of his library still bear a silent witness. Of his second practice sermon much less is remembered, indeed nothing except that its text was *Ecclesiastes* 7.16: 'Be not righteous overmuch'.

He is also remembered as having written popular street ballads and to have mongered them about the Edinburgh streets in broadsheet form. But, said his tutor to the author, failing to note the obvious parallels between his pupil's behaviour and other poets such as Goldsmith and Ferguson: 'You will never get anywhere, my dear fellow, unless you publish — good black print between hard covers!' It was in vain that Crabtree showed him the beginnings of an *Ode to Vaccination*, already well advanced. Would, we might cry at this point, that Crabtree had cited his contemporary Disraeli, whose paper on *Genius and Erudition, the Victims of Immoderate Vanity* might have silenced this attack. The paper, I need hardly remind you all, is able to make all the appropriate points by restricting itself to the case of James Junius Toland, who in the course of a single lifetime wrote 155 books. We may add: who now reads Toland? All I could learn from the Revd. McHaffie about Crabtree's ballads is that one is believed to have begun 'Come gather round me, Parnellites!' — a clear reference, I take it, to those who took as their poetic master the worthy Thomas Parnell DD, Archdeacon of Clonmel, who was born in 1679 and who died at Chester in July 1717 on his way to Ireland and was buried in Trinity Church in that town without any monument to mark the place of his interment, the great Parnell, the friend of Pope, of Swift, of Gray — and of Mr Coutt.

Crabtree's curious habit of never lacing up his shoes the same way on two successive days gave occasion for comment among his friends, and I feel entitled to mention this traditional crumb at this point, for has it not been well said that there is something striking even in the levities of genius? We learn that when his poems, inevitably circulated in manuscript copy among his fellow students, were unfairly attacked by those whom he regarded as inadequate critics, it was his custom to exclaim 'O for impartial scrutiny!'. Which we must only interpret as a reference to Fielding's verse epistle to George Goddington, Esq., where we read:

O thou that death doth proudly scorn thy kind,
Search with impartial scrutiny thy mind,
Disdaining outward flatterers to win,
That thou not feel a flatterer within.

His most outstanding essay in his first term is believed to have concerned itself with the problems that the resurrection of the body will occasion on the last day in those parts of the world where cannibalism has been practised.

We may perhaps be tempted to relate this particular theological interest with several instances in the marginalia of what we should nowadays call 'doodles'. These depict elaborate systems of Chinese boxes one within the other. At least in both of these Crabtree remains we can recognise the insistent logic of the mind for whom the law of inverse squares was child's play.

In Edinburgh then, as a theological student, his career was at first industrious and calm, remarkable only for eccentricities of a trivial and in fact endearing nature. He spent his time in that tranquillity and learned ease which are so grateful to men of speculation. He would have leisure to acquaint himself for instance with the many differences between the laws of Scotland and those under which he had been born, discovering that under the former he might find himself married by the simple act of declaration before witnesses ...

[Alas, recording of the oration ends abruptly here (though there cannot have been much more to come). It appears that the person responsible for making the recording set the machine at double the correct speed for the occasion, with the result that the tape ran out before the conclusion. Had this person drunk more than was wise for him, when entrusted with such an important charge, during the preceding dinner? Whatever the explanation, we can now only conjecture what the Orator believed was the ultimate consequence for Crabtree of his studies in Edinburgh. *R. J. Quinault*]