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0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

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Introduction: Textual intercourse

'I'll tell you what I did yesterday! I got the sexton, who was digging Linton's grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again – it is hers yet – he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose – and covered it up . . . and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I'm laid there, and slide mine out too. I'll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he'll not know which is which!

'You were very wicked, Mr Heathcliff!' I exclaimed; 'were you not ashamed to disturb the dead?' Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*¹

It was once in my thoughts to have Printed Mr. *Fletcher's* workes by themselves, because single & alone he would make a *Just Volume*: But since never parted while they lived, I conceived it not equitable to sepearate their ashes.

Humphrey Moseley, "The Stationer to the Reader," *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beavmont and Iohn Fletcher Gentlemen* (1647)²

I begin with the desire to sleep with the dead. Not my own desire – though figuratively there will be more to say about this – but rather the desire that might be said to be inscribed in the words of Sir Aston Cokain, playwright and friend of playwrights, writing of his close friend Philip Massinger, in his 1658 poem "*An Epitaph on Mr. John Fletcher, and Mr. Philip Massinger, who lie buried both in one Grave in St. Mary Overie's Church in Southwark*":

In the same Grave *Fletcher* was buried here
Lies the Stage-Poet *Philip Massinger*:
Playes they did write together, were great friends,
And now one Grave includes them at their ends:
So whom on earth nothing did part, beneath
Here (in their Fames) they lie, in spight of death.³

Cokain's account, so far as we can check it, agrees with the other bits of text that survive: both Fletcher and Massinger are recorded in the church registry as having been buried in the parish graveyard – Massinger for a

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Textual intercourse

fee of £2, the exorbitancy of which may reflect *his* desire (for he was buried last) to be interred with Fletcher in the church itself.⁴

Nevertheless, as I will have occasion to remark a number of times in this study, the facticity of such an account – whether Fletcher and Massinger actually shared a grave – is not the point of this recounting. For such knowledge is, I take it, unretrievable at this distance, and even were we to know it, what would it then tell us about the relation of Massinger to Fletcher, or of Cokain to either, or (as is more to the point in this investigation) about the cultural meanings of collaborative playwrighting, dramatic authorship, and attendant sexualities in early modern England? What is striking about Cokain's poem is, first, the terms in which it discusses the living and writing arrangements of early modern dramatic collaborators (“great friends . . . whom on earth nothing did part” – terms that, as we will see, intersect with other discussions of early modern collaboration and male relations), and second, the alterity of this configuration to more modern eyes.

To unearth what such a configuration might have signified, we might begin by thinking about funeral rituals in early modern England, and David Cressy's suggestion that these rituals functioned to “aggregat[e] the deceased to his ancestors and [to] reintegrat[e] the survivors into the everyday world of the living” (p. 116).⁵ It was typical, Cressy notes, for people to request burial beside or near their relatives or spouses: “near to the place where my wife lieth” (p. 110), or “in the [church] where my mother, brother, and kindred lie” (p. 111). For this reason (and because burial ground was scarce), it was not unusual to have multiple inhabitants of the same grave – though the practice of burying perfect strangers together seems to have been common only in plague-time.⁶ In general, burial requests, along with church registries, suggest that burials reflected a certain version of early modern English social order; they were structured along lines of family and social class.

I want to interpret Fletcher and Massinger's burial together as a part of this *general* sense that the arrangement of the dead reflects the society of the living – Fletcher and Massinger *continue* to lie together, the poem emphasizes, “*in spite* of death.” However, as the readings that structure much of this book will demonstrate, this double interment of friends reflects another aspect of early modern English social order: the socially sanctioned bonds among men within the institutions of the theatre and (as we will see in chapter 2) the more widespread bonds in this culture among those who were, or desired to be, English gentlemen. (The full contextualization of the homoerotic meanings of Cokain's language will have to wait until that chapter's discussion of social class, collaboration, and the discourse of male friendship;⁷ even in passing, however, we can

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

note the brief sodomitical resonance of the rhyme “friends” and “ends.”) These arrangements may look quaint or odd, exaggerated or suspect, under the current dispensation. But we are looking at this material from the vantage point of a culture that has since invented and naturalized “companionate marriage”;⁸ we read with eyes that have also read *Wuthering Heights*, eyes trained to see post-mortem heterosexual union as the height of romantic attachment, even if, like Nelly Dean, we purport to find the details of coffins, corpses, and burials a bit shocking.

Returning to Cressy’s formulation, we might notice how Fletcher and Massinger’s double burial “reintegrat[es] the survivors into the everyday world of the living.” This is, as we will see, an everyday world suffused with, structured by, collaborative textual practice, and Sir Aston Cokain (himself a survivor, playwright, gentleman, and friend) writes of Massinger and Fletcher’s collaboration and friendship, and produces, or re-produces, his own writing out of this collaborative arrangement. This cycle of generative copying, gentlemanly reproduction, and the distinctly non-privatized property of words and identities is reproduced by another, more familiar, aspiring gentleman and playwright, writing presumably to another gentleman in a volume of sonnets published in 1609: “Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.”⁹

Fletcher and Massinger are said to be buried together in a church on the Bankside, and there is another account – John Aubrey’s, to be read in detail in chapter 2 – in which Fletcher and another of his collaborators, Francis Beaumont, lay there together (alive), in a house “not far from the Play-house” that they shared, along with their clothes and bed, their writing, and a “wench.”¹⁰ As both Steven Mullaney and Scott McMillin have demonstrated, the cultural geography of the theatre in early modern England is important, and in G. E. Bentley’s studies of players and dramatists we have the beginnings of a sociology of this Bankside culture that may explain the living arrangements, writing arrangements, acting arrangements, and funeral arrangements of these men and the institutions they worked within.¹¹ Like so many of their colleagues, Fletcher and Massinger’s lives and deaths are recorded in a local parish;¹² as Bentley notes, the wills of the players often inscribe the bonds of this culture on the Bankside, as in the case, for example, of the acting-company sharer Augustine Phillips:

Item, I give and bequeath to my fellow William Shakespeare a thirty shilling piece in gold; to my fellow Henry Condell one other thirty shilling piece in gold . . . to my fellow Robert Armin, twenty shillings in gold . . .

Item, I give to Samuel Gilborne, my late apprentice, the sum of forty shillings, and my mouse-colored velvet hose, and a white taffeta doublet, a black taffeta suit, my purple cloak, sword and dagger, and my bass viol.¹³

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Textual intercourse

These are dying arrangements, reflecting living arrangements that often existed, as we shall see, not to the exclusion of, but alongside, marriage,¹⁴ these are also the living conditions that produced the highly collaborative texts we now call Renaissance drama. Like the arrangement of corpses, wills as a social practice seek to preserve affiliations beyond the grave – to reproduce social alliances through the distribution of objects, space, property. The languages in which these practices are described and inscribed now appear to us to be somewhat unusual (“Playes they did write together, were great friends, / And now one Grave includes them at their ends . . .”); it is nevertheless the argument of this book that, reading the languages of collaboration and authorship attentively, we will begin to see some signal differences of our culture from that of these dead men, in both their textual relations and their sexual ones.

This project, then, emerges from a pair of related perceptions about early modern England. First, in a way that has not been fully recognized or conceptualized by scholars trained to organize material within post-Enlightenment paradigms of individuality, authorship, and textual property, collaboration was a prevalent mode of textual production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only eventually displaced by the mode of singular authorship with which we are more familiar. This is especially true, as I will emphasize, of texts associated with early modern theatres,¹⁵ and chapter 1 attempts to expand and complicate our understanding of the ways in which those theatres produced collaborative texts. Though drama is this book’s predominant focus, it is important to stress that it is only one of many collaborative discursive sites and genres in a period in which textual property was typically not assigned to authors by law or custom; J. W. Saunders, Arthur Marotti, Wendy Wall, and others have persuasively demonstrated, for example, the collaborative construction of meaning in Renaissance poetic manuscripts.¹⁶ Second, whether collaborative or authorial, textual production – that is, the writing, performance, collection, publication, and circulation of plays, and the ways in which those processes were understood to function – occurred within the context of conflicting and contested “sex/gender systems.”¹⁷ This is not to say simply or only that theatres and publishing houses were predominantly male concerns,¹⁸ but also that these texts emerged within larger rhetorics of sex/gender that were both reflective and productive of their culture and its institutions. This project thus traces the correspondences between, on the one hand, models and rhetorics of sexual relations, intercourse, and reproduction and, on the other, notions of textual production and property. The first line of Fletcher and Shakespeare’s *The Two Noble Kinsmen* proposes one resonant formulation of this relation to which we will return in detail in

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

chapter 2: “New Playes, and Maydenheads,” they write, “are neare a kin.”¹⁹

Studies have been done in both textual and sexual areas, but they have until very recently tended to operate by mutual exclusion, with bibliographic/textualist work ignoring the production of texts within the discourses of a sex/gender system, and sex/gender studies often eliding the conditions and conventions of textual production.²⁰ As I hope the catachresis of my title suggests, this study situates itself, instead, at the intersection of the textual and the sexual; it insists upon relating the material conditions and cultural representations of sex/gender and of textual production. My chiasmic assumption throughout is that any reading of these materials must address the fact that texts are produced within a particular sex/gender context and that gender and sexuality are themselves in part produced in and by texts. At this conjunction, the project necessarily attempts a revision both of our assumptions about sexual/social relations among men²¹ in the Renaissance – and among men and women, as my references to Gayle Rubin’s and Eve Sedgwick’s formulations suggest – and of our approaches to textual production, circulation, and property. Indeed, as the accumulated readings of this evidence will show, it is difficult in this period to separate out what now appear to us to be the distinct rhetorics (even “disciplines”) of the sexual and the textual; much of the work of this book is an attempt to excavate and contextualize these languages and rhetorics in a historically attentive way.²²

Any discussion of these issues in the early modern period must necessarily acknowledge the centrality of Michel Foucault’s assertion that “homosexuality,” as a sexual identity or orientation central to the conception of individuality, was a cultural production of the nineteenth century in the West.²³ David M. Halperin has further stressed that “heterosexuality” (again, as the articulation of an identity) came into being *after* “homosexuality” and is, equally, a historically contingent development.²⁴ As Jonathan Goldberg’s *Sodomities* has recently argued in compelling detail, and as the work of this book will support, neither of these terms adequately accounts for the relations and representations we encounter in early modern texts.²⁵ Chapter 2 in particular will demonstrate that a reinvestigation of the discourses of male friendship, individuality (in the now-obsolete sense of “indivisibility”), and collaboration has much to tell us about the sexual terms we have traditionally used to investigate and taxonomize the past and will suggest the difficulty of imposing our own terms on the early modern culture we are in the process of exhuming.²⁶

There is a risk here, of course, of seeming to deny homosexuality in the

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Textual intercourse

past and seeming to erase the traces of a “gay history” that has only recently begun to speak this name.²⁷ It is true that this study will not “homosexualize” Renaissance collaboration or argue simply that the writers under consideration are “homosexual” in anything like the modern sense of that word, but it will insist upon the crucial (but different) sexual valences of texts written about and between men in this period. While eschewing a historical methodology that finds only versions or expressions of itself in the past,²⁸ this study nevertheless acknowledges its genesis within the modern discourse of homosexuality, which makes possible (or rather, *necessitates*, in an anti-homeroptic culture) this archaeological endeavor. Like any historical investigation, mine will not cease to be shaped by contemporary interests, and it will necessarily draw upon discourses that have a sexual charge legible to modernity, but, as Halperin has noted, we must “suspend our projects of identification (or disavowal, as the case may be) long enough to devise an interpretation of erotic experiences . . . that foregrounds the historical and cultural specificity of those experiences.”²⁹

Thus, the impossibility of sleeping with the dead. Or, to phrase this more chastely and less figuratively: the impossibility, even as it figures as an intractable curiosity or desire, of searching the annals of the past for erotic subjects motivated by our desires and living our practices, with the cultural and political meanings we associate with these desires and practices. This is perhaps an impossible project even for Cokain – as contemporaneous a historian of a collaborative erotics as he might seem to be – for, as the final chapters of this book will demonstrate, a more modern configuration of sexualities begins to emerge even in the years that separate Cokain’s poem from the lives of those he memorializes.

In a way that will be congruent with this book’s rethinking of collaboration, authorship, and associated notions of individuality/subjectivity, my discussions of sexuality thus focus not on individuals and their presumed sexual identities, but on the textual representations of sexual acts and systems. This is not an investigation that seeks to answer whether, say, Massinger, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare, or (more fictively) Palamon and Arcite were “gay.” Rather, it examines the relation between what we have tended to view as two distinct discourses: of sexuality and eroticism, and of writing and authorship. This book attempts to reintegrate those discourses by reading together the “rhetorics” of sexuality and the “apparatus” of printed play-texts. Not, I hope, at the expense of what we sometimes call actual, lived experience, but because I take rhetoric and apparatus – no matter how far removed a shared title page may seem to be from a shared bed or grave – to be

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

inseparable from the ways in which that experience may have been structured for those living it.

Moreover, identifying Renaissance figures as gay – “outing” them – seems the mildest of possible claims one might make on the basis of the evidence we will read, because it locates gaiety only in specific individuals, working effectively to quarantine other dramatists and writers of the period from the perceived threat of homosexuality. In a largely heterosexist economy of literary value, Beaumont and Fletcher would become sexual suspects, but Shakespeare, Middleton, Webster, and Ford would seem to profit from their labeling. Instead, by making a *discursive* argument – by emphasizing that these were the *discourses* through which collaboration and authorship were understood – I want to claim a much larger effect for the languages we will encounter within Renaissance English culture. By denaturalizing authorship and common-sense notions of writing, we are beginning to recognize the prevalence of collaboration, as a practice, in the Renaissance theatre; by training ourselves to read the (sexual) discourses that both inscribed and reproduced that practice, we will begin to notice its prevalence elsewhere in the culture: in conduct books, essays, letters, commonplace books, plays (written in collaboration or alone). We might take as a figuration of this disseminative process Fletcher’s own wide-ranging textual practice; he wrote alone, with Beaumont, with Shakespeare, with Massinger, with, perhaps, Middleton and others. The point, then, is not to bring the Renaissance out of the closet, but to bring the closet out of the Renaissance – to account for the abiding differences in the ways this period represented sexuality and its connections with modes of textual production.³⁰

The book begins by “Seeing double” – by intervening in what has become the normative critical treatment of collaboration and authorship in Renaissance dramatic texts. The chapter urges both that we no longer regard collaboration as an aberrant form of textual production in a period and genre in which it in fact predominated, and that we forego anachronistic attempts to divine the singular author of each scene, phrase, and word. By looking carefully at play-texts as printed artifacts (in particular, early editions of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*), the chapter introduces a detailed material(ist) approach to collaboration and authorship that relies upon but also revises Foucault’s idealized renunciation of the author.

With this retheorization of collaboration, authorship, and textual property as its point of departure, the book proceeds to an analysis of the intersection of sexual and textual discourses in the production and publication of play-texts. Chapter 2, “Between gentlemen,” demonstrates

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Textual intercourse

the mutual implication of discourses of male friendship, eroticism, and textual collaboration in conduct books (*The English Gentleman*), essays (Bacon's and Montaigne/Florio's "Of Friendship"), and two plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Chapter 3, "Representing authority," outlines, in a number of play-texts from the early decades of the seventeenth century, the emergence of presiding authorial figures like Gower in *Pericles* – figures that appear on stage as "authors" of a theatrical event – and traces this emergence in relation to discourses of patriarchal absolutism in the *Workes* of James I and others. These developments are contemporaneous with the increasingly frequent publication of play-texts in impressive folio format, organized around authorial figures; chapter 4, "Reproducing works," begins by analyzing these dramatic collections (particularly the earliest Jonson and Shakespeare folios). The chapter concentrates upon the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio – a book that may, as Aston Cokain later argued, include collaborative work not only by Beaumont and Fletcher, but also by Massinger.³¹ Said in its commendatory poems to have been "Got by Two Fathers," the textual offspring of "two Masculines espous'd,"³² this volume engages both patriarchal-absolutist and homoerotic modes of textual reproduction, and it inscribes the contestation of authorship and collaboration at a decisive moment in English political history.

As these chapters demonstrate in their particular analyses, the concentration on relations between men and the construction of an authorship initially gendered male will include centrally a consideration of the position of women. In fact, an analysis of period attempts to control, appropriate, and/or erase women, as well as their real and imagined resistances, is closely related to the consideration of male textual reproduction. This project thus attempts to avoid reproducing in its own practice the marginalization of women often inscribed and enacted in the material it reads. With few exceptions, the genre at the center of this study *does* exclude writing by women,³³ but these rereadings of collaboration and authorship nevertheless suggest new perspectives on the situation of women attempting to locate themselves in a textual economy normatively transacted between men. Comprehensive answer(s) to this query are beyond the scope of the present project, but from the perspective outlined here the problem confronted by women writers in this period could be articulated as follows: in a discursive world where men often figure texts as compliant women ("New Playes, and Mayden-heads, are neare a kin"), how does a woman make the transition from being written to *writing*? Proceeding from chapter 4's analysis of dramatic folios and the contested emergence of patriarchal authorship in the seventeenth century, this book's final chapter considers the publication,

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in elaborate folios, of Margaret Cavendish's plays in the 1660s, and their positioning (critically unremarked) within/against the folio tradition of Jonson (1616, 1640), Shakespeare (1623, 1632, 1663–64, 1685), and Beaumont and Fletcher (1647, 1679).

“What strange Production is at last displaid,” John Berkenhead writes, describing the publication of Beaumont and Fletcher's collaborations,³⁴ and, in a more critical fashion, this book thus attempts to make strange (or rather, to demonstrate how the texts of this period themselves make strange) our own normative conceptions of textual production and property, and of essential sexuality and modes of eroticism; it calls into question the relation between what to us now appear to be self-evidently distinct categories.³⁵ If, on the one hand, post-structuralism has argued for the death of the author in theory, this book attempts to demonstrate the implications of the absence of the author (and the presence of more corporate forms of textual production) at a given point in history. If, on the other hand, we are beginning to realize the implications of the nineteenth-century construction of homo- and heterosexualities, this study attempts to sketch some of the possible configurations that preceded those particular discursively constituted options. How will we read, interpret, conceptualize, organize, and edit texts written before the birth of the author in its modern (self-possessed and sexually orientated) incarnation?

For reasons that are related to these questions, much of the material in this book is associated with the figure of Shakespeare, for it is here that there is the most to be realized through revisions of textuality and sexuality in the study of early modern drama. As we will see more particularly in chapter 2's analysis of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, there has traditionally been much at stake (critically, canonically, institutionally) in attributing to Shakespeare either homo- or heterosexuality in their modern forms.³⁶ While not failing to acknowledge the homophobia that has motivated attempts to protect Shakespeare from the stigma of homosexuality, this project attempts to disengage this homo/hetero binarism. In the critical climate that has prevailed for much of this century, the question “Was Shakespeare gay?” has had provocative, evocative power,³⁷ yet the more useful work (historically, politically) is, as I have already suggested, to demonstrate not that Shakespeare or any of his less canonical contemporaries was definitively “gay” or “straight,” but that he, like other playwrights in the period, wrote within a paradigm that insistently figured writing as mutual imitation, collaboration, and homoerotic exchange.

Shakespeare, furthermore, is a prime location for a reconsideration of collaboration and the emergence of authorship, for it is in that particular

Cambridge University Press

0521589207 - Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama

Jeffrey Masten

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Textual intercourse

canon that the Author, anachronistically applied, is most powerful and tenacious in the study of Renaissance texts and history. Since the eighteenth century, Shakespeare has been viewed as *the* individual Author and the author of individuality³⁸ – the very anti-type of collaboration. “His” texts have been read as chronologies of personal/generic development, as material for authorial psychoanalysis, as the organic efflux of the singular mind of genius, as maps of a peculiarly individuated language and imagery. Even the recent influential studies positing revision in certain Shakespearean texts are careful always to situate Shakespeare as the agent of revision, pre-empting the possibilities of diachronic collaboration.³⁹ The most rigorous new historicist revaluations of Shakespeare – for example, Stephen Greenblatt’s analysis of the “collective production of literary pleasure and interest” – have largely adhered to an individuated, non-collaborative Shakespeare.⁴⁰ We thus have much to learn from a (re)consideration of collaboration in the texts of the Shakespeare canon.⁴¹ Foucault has argued that “the author is . . . the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning”;⁴² by demonstrating a thematics of collaboration in some “Shakespearean” texts and by illustrating the emergence of the author as contemporaneous with (not prior to) those texts and their publication, the present study will attempt to detach their significations from the domain of the anachronistic author. To do so, of course, is to argue implicitly the inappropriateness of an authorially based canon in this period.⁴³ My examination of texts associated with this most canonical of authors thus results not from a desire to maintain the privilege and privileging of Shakespeare in literary studies, but rather from a sense that it is over his dead authorial body/corpus that we have the most to learn by reconceptualizing both collaboration and sexuality.⁴⁴ This book does not attempt, then, to provide a comprehensive reading of all Renaissance instances of dramatic collaboration, or of authorship, or of sexuality. Rather, it seeks to intervene in conventional critical practice by analyzing certain significant discursive sites.

Finally, a few words (but by no means the last) about the particularity of those sites – about texts and citations. One of the corollary arguments of this book is that we cannot separate our understanding of period notions of textual production and property from the documents and particular languages in which those texts first circulated; the idea of authorship – the necessity of knowing “who is speaking,” as I will suggest in the first chapter – is in part produced by the textual configurations that supply that information. For this reason, I attempt throughout this project to read texts not as they have been edited and author-ized for modern consumption, but in their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century