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052177117X - From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern England

Douglas A. Brooks

Excerpt

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## Prologue: “Thou grewst to govern the whole Stage alone”: dramas of authorship in early modern England

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Get thee to London, for if one man were dead, they will have much neede of such a one as thou art . . . and when thou feelest thy purse well lined, buy thee some place or Lordship in the Country, that growing weary of playing, thy mony may there bring thee to dignitie and reputation.

Attributed to William Shakespeare

The death of the author might be said to fulfill much the same function in our day as did the death of God for late nineteenth-century thought. Both deaths attest to a departure of belief in authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity.

Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*

The title of my introduction comes from a commendatory poem written for the 1647 folio collection of John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont’s plays. Fletcher collaborated with several playwrights during his career, and perhaps no more than six of the thirty-four plays in the volume were actually written in collaboration with Beaumont. Yet the writer of this verse presses on in his effort to transform the dozens of collaborations that produced the plays he celebrates – the collaborations between playwrights, between playwrights and playing companies, between playwrights and actors, between playing companies and scribes, between playing companies and censors, between playing companies and publishers, between publishers and printers, between printers and composers – into one grand authorial voice. Lamenting earlier in the poem that “th’ are imperfect births . . . Produc’d by causes not univocall,” the writer’s desire for univocality, for a choir of collaborators that sing in one voice, for a solitary governor/author who can serve as the plays’ sole source of authority has been remarkably durable.

In this book I hope to frustrate the desire for univocality that continues to generate much of the scholarship on early modern English drama by examining aspects of play production and publication in the period that correspond poorly with critical and editorial efforts to idealize the authorship of texts written for the London stage. Alternatively, my analysis of dramatic authorship suggests that play-texts were

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increasingly shaped not by individual authors, but rather by various networks of engagement that both enabled and inhibited the materialization of plays as they passed from the stage to the page. Furthermore, I argue that the circulation and publication of dramatic texts contributed to emergent notions of literary ambition in the period and to the construction of proto-modern notions of authorship.

The most formidable obstacle to such a project is the looming figure of Shakespeare who, as Richard Dutton astutely notes, “remains the dominant voice in the English-speaking world’s construction of its definitive author – a voice essentially of pre-print culture, of closet or privileged readership, of (to a degree) social snobbery.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Masten observes that, “[s]ince the eighteenth century, Shakespeare has been viewed as *the* individual Author and the author of individuality – 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.”<sup>2</sup> Translated into nearly one hundred languages and sold in nearly every country on earth, Shakespeare’s plays have come to represent the standard by which “great literature” is measured, and the name of Shakespeare has become a synonym for authorship itself. The image of the playwright armed with quill pen and parchment is practically an international symbol for authorship and literary production, readily comprehensible even to those who have never read a Shakespeare play. Indeed, as Michael D. Bristol observes, “[b]elieving in Shakespeare is not altogether different from believing in Santa Claus: such belief articulates a deep sense of affiliation with a tradition of expressive forms and institutional practices.”<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, the iconic status of Shakespeare as author has emerged in spite of the fact that the term “playwright” itself, inasmuch as it semantically suggests other professions such as shipwrights, wheelwrights, and cartwrights, allies the early modern dramatist with other craftsmen rather than with contemporary writers such as Spenser or Sidney.<sup>4</sup> The fact that a film largely concerned with Shakespeare’s authorship recently won the Academy Award for “Best Picture” of 1999 and turned the Bard into something of a movie star should only complicate matters.

This book struggles to emerge from the shadow of Shakespeare’s iconic authorship by celebrating printed dramatic texts as “imperfect births,” and by exposing the various collaborations that enabled the production of plays in early modern England – even the production of Shakespeare’s plays. To use the phrase “various collaborations,” in the same sentence (as I have done) with the proper name of the most

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individualized of author figures, Shakespeare, might seem paradoxical, though perhaps somewhat less so now that the movie *Shakespeare in Love* has portrayed our hero flagrantly collaborating with a woman on the text of at least one play; but in fact it is precisely this paradox which, in large part, constitutes the limits of this investigation. Put another way, this book as a whole argues that the construction of an “ordinary poet” working within the necessarily collaborative structures of the theatre into the icon of individualized authorial agency is, like all such paradoxes, the effect of a desire. In its workings, this desire collapses a complexly diachronic and contingent set of narratives into a synchronic truth that must, for the sake of maintaining its own viability, continue to place its past under erasure.

Given the critical developments of the past twenty-five years, this book, like the printed dramatic texts it examines, is the product of a particular set of collaborations in a specific professional context. Beginning with Roland Barthes’s 1968 manifesto, “The Death of the Author,” the concept of authorship, long associated with the unifying relationship between an author and a body of works, has suffered some fundamental setbacks and reversals. Advocating a modernist criticism based on semiotics, Barthes challenged contemporary modes of interpretation in which,

The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the Author “confiding” in us.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, Michel Foucault raised the critical stakes significantly when he declared that, “[t]he coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences.”<sup>6</sup> Arguing that a text’s mode of being was characterized by what he called an “author function,” Foucault asserted that a discourse containing this “author function” had four main characteristics:

(1) the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals.<sup>7</sup>

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact that these essays by Barthes and Foucault, as well as the critical controversy they sparked, have had on a range of disciplines during the three decades since they

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were first published. In the case of early modern literature, Foucault's influence on the work of Stephen Greenblatt and the critical school that was briefly labeled "New Historicism" has been extensively chronicled.<sup>8</sup> In the essay that might be considered a manifesto for New Historicism, "Towards the Poetics of Culture," Greenblatt observes:

the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own . . . many others undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.<sup>9</sup>

Although critics have tended to view the primary influence of Foucault on New Historicist critics as their concern with power relations,<sup>10</sup> Foucault's essay on authorship was central to the project of cultural poetics. Despite this centrality, as Masten rightly observes, "[t]he 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."<sup>11</sup> Foucault's influence is even more apparent in recent studies of early modern authorship,<sup>12</sup> especially studies of Shakespeare's authorship.<sup>13</sup>

Given the periodization that generally defines and confines academic fields of literary study, scholars of early modern literature were bound to see the emergence of the "author function" as taking place on their watch. In the specific context of Shakespeare criticism, the Foucauldian legacy of the void and/or dispersed character of authorship has allegedly brought about what Leah Marcus calls "the demise of the transcendent bard."<sup>14</sup> The result, according to Bristol, is that "the specific artifacts known as Shakespeare's works are described not as the creation of individual authors, but rather as a local manifestation of larger discursive formations."<sup>15</sup> In Ian Donaldson's elegant summation of recent scholarly developments, "Shakespeare is no longer viewed as a timeless and transhistorical genius, but as a textual phenomenon that is constantly reconstructed, constantly reinvented, constantly reinterpreted by every age according to its needs, priorities, and preconceptions."<sup>16</sup>

Despite this intensive critical effort to deconstruct the author, Shakespeare remains the privileged model of playwriting in the period, an inheritance that continues to haunt our understanding of dramatic authorship. Renewed interest in the material book and textuality – nostalgically motivated in part by the advent of cyber-cultures – should eventually contribute a great deal to Shakespeare's displacement. Nevertheless, this effort will certainly be complicated by the fact that, as David L. Gants laments, "[t]he study of William Shakespeare and the

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transmission of his texts has dominated the field of endeavor known as Anglo-American bibliography ever since it began to emerge as a distinct discipline during the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, much of what has been called the “New Textualism” has only reinforced Shakespeare’s centrality.<sup>18</sup> Since the approach to dramatic authorship I take in this book has been informed by recent scholarship in textual studies, I want to survey briefly some of the important developments.

In 1981 Stephen Orgel published an essay, the title of which alluded to Foucault’s essay on authorship by asking, “What is a Text?”<sup>19</sup> Orgel’s reply, uttered in the New Textualism’s infancy and sustained by a commitment to displacing the author, was rather succinct: “We know nothing about Shakespeare’s original text.”<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, Orgel would assert that, “every word we possess by Shakespeare has been through some editorial process.”<sup>21</sup> Echoing Orgel’s position in a more recent study, Marcus cautions that, “[n]o single version of a literary work, whether Renaissance or modern, can offer us the fond dream of unmediated access to an author.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Randall McLeod laments that, “[t]he edited world is not going to disappear just because it is revealed to be wrong,”<sup>23</sup> and Paul Werstine reminds us that, “twentieth-century editing has proved resistant to the innovations of textual theory.”<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, college bookstore shelves are crammed with new editions of Shakespeare’s plays, including Arden (third series), Oxford, New Cambridge, Signet, Bantam, Folger, Norton, and Riverside.<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously emboldened by the death of the author, and promoting itself as an “after-theory” phenomenon,<sup>26</sup> the New Textualism is in fact a reaction against a previous, though equally dispersed and amorphous, school of textual criticism generally identified as the New Bibliography. This reactionary aspect of the New Textualism is often touted as one of its strengths, if not its central mission.<sup>27</sup> Referring to the New Bibliography’s origins, Werstine observes that, “[t]he early twentieth century had a taste for lurid romance,”<sup>28</sup> a taste that was initially exposed to the public in 1909 when one of its founding members, A. W. Pollard, published its first major work, *Shakespeare Folios and Quartos: A Study in the Bibliography of Shakespeare’s Plays 1594–1685*.<sup>29</sup> The author was still alive, metaphysically at least, “logocentric” was not yet a derogatory term, the German word for “deconstruction” would be coined seventeen years later by Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>30</sup> and a small group of bibliographers, casting about for a moral tale to explain away the confusing evidence they had collected, stumbled upon what Peter W. M. Blayney aptly depicts as “a stirring melodrama in which Good players,

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with occasional help from Good stationers, struggled against a few Bad stationers and usually won.”<sup>31</sup> Pollard examined seventeen of the extant Shakespeare quartos and decided that some were “good” and some were “bad.” Subsequently, he suggested that the “good” quartos were printed from Shakespeare’s own manuscripts or “foul papers,” as they came to be labeled, and he and a few earnest disciples – John Dover Wilson, W. W. Greg, and R. B. McKerrow – developed a range of narratives to account for the “bad” quartos.<sup>32</sup> Some were based on playhouse copies, some were based on copies that had been shortened and revised by playing companies for performance in the provinces, others were produced from texts that were memorially reconstructed by rogue actors who sold them for a little pocket money to printing houses.<sup>33</sup> Underwriting these narratives, according to Blayney, were the following “unfounded myths”:

that acting companies usually considered publication to be against their best interests; that some publishers were so desperate to satisfy their eager customers that they would acquire plays by any dishonest means; that if a stationer failed to register a play he was probably trying to conceal its origins; that if he registered it but failed to publish, he was probably acting on behalf of the players to forestall piracy by someone else.<sup>34</sup>

Nearly all of Pollard’s terms and narratives were destined to be transformed from optimistic speculation about the texts of a single author into a general theory of dramatic texts and their authorship in the work of Greg.<sup>35</sup> In *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare: A Survey of the Foundations of the Text* (1942) Greg was still willing to concede that an “inquiry into the nature of the manuscripts that were used as copy for the early editions of Shakespeare’s plays” necessitated “entering upon a region of inference and conjecture” based on “a considerable body of evidence at our disposal” consisting of “possibly half a hundred playbooks from which we may hope, in one or another, to learn something to our purpose.”<sup>36</sup> By the time “The Rationale of Copy-Text” (1949) appeared, the future of editing drama had brightened considerably. Recalling at the outset an earlier time when “the genealogical classification of manuscripts as a principle of textual criticism . . . appeared to provide at least some scientific basis for the conception of the most authoritative text,”<sup>37</sup> Greg concluded this seminal essay by arguing – in the specific case of *Richard III* and *King Lear* – that the folio texts of these plays be used as copy-text for scholarly editions because they “are in some parts connected by transcriptional continuity with the author’s manuscript, whereas the quartos contain, as it is generally assumed, only reported texts, whose accidental characteristics can be of no authority whatever.”<sup>38</sup> In less than a decade, “bad” had gotten worse, while

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“inference and conjecture” had been utterly displaced by editorial certitude about the “transcriptional continuity” between Shakespeare’s manuscripts and the 1623 Folio. After more than “half a hundred” years of intensive bibliographical research, Greg was finally in a position to endorse the Folio’s title page’s claim that it fronted Shakespeare’s plays “Published according to the True Originall Copies.” Some twenty-five years later E. A. J. Honigmann would assert that, “[o]ne reason for the astonishing successes of the New Bibliography has been its emphasis on checking inferences about printed books by comparison with collateral manuscripts of the same period.”<sup>39</sup>

Greg’s “Rationale of Copy-Text,” which Fredson Bowers subsequently called “the most influential textual document of this century,”<sup>40</sup> became something of a sacred text in the editorial community, primarily because it made the task of editing so much easier. After Greg’s “Rationale,” according to Werstine,

it came to be assumed that editors already knew all they needed to about everything except the details . . . In other words, editors thought that, for many of Shakespeare’s plays, only the book’s manufacture stood between the authorial manuscript and the present day editor and reader.<sup>41</sup>

The result of this editorial self-confidence was that Shakespeare’s authorship became the body of evidence against which all dramatic texts were compared, and authorship became central to the interpretation of dramatic texts. As Werstine observes,

And so, except for the printing house(s) that manufactured the particular book(s), the whole of early modern culture got consumed by an increasingly engorged author-function, which ate up the army of scribes, the theatrical industry (with its players, bookkeepers, costume-buyers, theatre owners, and thousands of patrons), and the government with its censors.<sup>42</sup>

Such was the New Bibliographic author-monster that had to be slain. With translated rumors of the death of the author drifting in from France, the time was certainly right.

The earliest blows were struck in the form of Michael Warren’s “Quarto and Folio *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar,” Steven Urkowitz’s *Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear*, and Warren and Taylor’s collection of essays, *The Division of the Kingdoms*; but never were wounds more nurturing. Seeking to rehabilitate the 1608 text of *Lear* from eternal damnation in the New Bibliographic hell of “bad” quartodrom, Warren, Urkowitz, Taylor *et al.* argued for its validity as one of two versions of the play that Shakespeare wrote.<sup>43</sup> Thus, except for a few dozen textual errors that couldn’t possibly be purposeful, both *Lear*’s were happily restored to their author, and memorial reconstruc-

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tion gave way to “versioning” as the critical explanation for their remarkable differences. Honigman had already proposed a similar interpretative solution when he argued that variants between multiple extant copies of a given play could be explained in terms of the “vagaries of authors in copying out their own work,”<sup>44</sup> but even Honigmann had to admit that applying his “argument about Shakespeare’s ‘second thoughts’ to *King Lear* will seem foolhardy to anyone acquainted with the extraordinary complications of the two texts.”<sup>45</sup>

Not long after these once-divided textual kingdoms were reunited under the peaceful reign of the author, the versioned *King Lear* became the centerpiece of Wells and Taylor’s *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. With regard to this progression, de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass observe, “[f]or over two hundred years, *King Lear* was one text; in 1986, with the Oxford Shakespeare, it became two . . . As a result of this multiplication, Shakespeare studies will never be the same.”<sup>46</sup> Ostensibly, the Oxford edition responded to the death of the author by attempting to restore Shakespeare’s plays to the highly collaborative environment of the theatre in which they were initially written – a rather unlikely environment for staging Foucault’s “privileged moment of *individualization*.”<sup>47</sup> When Wells first introduced the Oxford edition to an audience at the Sheldonian Theatre on 28 October 1986, he declared that its editors had chosen “when possible, to print the more theatrical version of each play” because “[t]he theatre of Shakespeare’s time was his most valuable collaborator.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he emphasized “our treatment of stage directions,” arguing that “[e]ditorial theorists, preoccupied by the words to be spoken, have almost totally ignored the subject of stage directions, even though they are central to a presentation of Shakespeare’s, or any dramatist’s, art.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Taylor asserted that the Oxford Shakespeare “attends, systematically and characteristically, to all the signals conveyed by spelling, punctuation, stage directions, lineation, typography, act and scene division, line numbering.”<sup>50</sup>

But if Shakespeare had finally been subjected to the death sentence first handed down by Barthes and Foucault, then editorially executed by Wells and Taylor, some scholars have been less than convinced. Referring indirectly to some of the critical developments that generated the Oxford edition, Masten, for example, astutely notes that, “[e]ven the recent influential studies positing revision in certain Shakespearean texts are careful always to situate Shakespeare as the agency of revision, preempting the possibilities of diachronic collaboration.”<sup>51</sup> For de Grazia and Stallybrass, who warn that “we are in danger of remaining hypnotically fascinated by the isolated author,” the “notion of ‘Shakespeare the reviser’ . . . readily lends itself to a Man-and-Works criticism, for each



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multiple text constitutes a canon in miniature in which the author's personal and artistic development can be charted from revision to revision."<sup>52</sup> For Jonathan Goldberg, the versioned *Lear* means that "Shakespeare reigns supreme, author now of two sovereign texts."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Werstine looks back at the *King Lear* controversy from which the Oxford edition was born and sees only a resurrection in the form of an "author function [that] swallowed up virtually all of the culture in which [the play] was inscribed/performed/printed" – an author function that was force-fed by editors who believe "that printed texts can be read virtually as if they were authorial manuscripts."<sup>54</sup> Corroborating Werstine's skepticism about the current status of authorship in textual studies, Dutton's recent analysis of the manuscript circulation of plays raises serious questions about what Dutton – referring to the *Complete Oxford Shakespeare* – characterizes as "the primacy increasingly often accorded performance as the only true, or at least most authentic, manifestation of the Shakespeare text."<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, Dutton's argument, which will be examined at some length in Chapter 1, suggests that there may have been readers of dramatic texts in early modern England who not only distinguished between plays as they were initially written by a given playwright and as they were subsequently adapted for performance but also valued more highly the former.

"Through a twisted dialectic," Barthes writes, "the Text, destroyer of all subject, contains a subject to love."<sup>56</sup> Rather than displacing Shakespeare as the model for the study of dramatic authorship, the New Textualism has more or less guaranteed that he will continue to govern the whole stage alone. This development is all the more regrettable because Shakespeare's status among contemporary playwrights was somewhat anomalous. First, as Peter Thomson notes, Shakespeare "was uniquely successful, but part of that success was the outcome of his ability to accommodate his creativity within the confines of London's emergent professional theatre."<sup>57</sup> Second, unlike Ben Jonson or John Webster – to name only two contemporary playwrights who, as we shall see, may have viewed the printing house as a positive alternative to the playhouse – Shakespeare seems to have been reluctant to see his plays published, and rather untypically indifferent about the quality of those plays that did find their way into print during his lifetime. As Samuel Johnson long ago noted, "[n]o other author gave up his works to fortune and time with so little care; no books could be left in hands as likely to injure them as plays frequently acted, yet continued in manuscript."<sup>58</sup> Dutton has recently shed much needed light on this puzzling, often misinterpreted aspect of Shakespeare's career,<sup>59</sup> and I will return to his important findings in Chapter 1. Third, the authority of those Shake-

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speare plays that did get published during his lifetime had little to do with his authorship in the first place. As Orgel importantly observes, “[t]he authority of the published text was, for the most part, that of the publisher: he owned it; the author’s rights in the work ended with his sale of the manuscript. The publisher was fully entitled to alter the manuscript if he saw fit – the manuscript was his.”<sup>60</sup> Shakespeare, of course, probably never sold any manuscripts of his plays, so his authority over his texts was limited to the collaborative environment of his playing company where, as Dutton rightly notes, “he was a company man, too identified with an ethos in which any removal of company property warranted expulsion from its ranks, too bound to a small group by ties that went beyond a mere contractual framework . . .”<sup>61</sup>

In early modern London, the death of the author was in some sense merely a workaday hazard of publication; the city’s printing houses and bookstalls were crammed with orphaned texts. Jonson, as Scott McMillin notes, was the “dramatist who cared about literary status, and who made a campaign out of turning plays into respectable literature.”<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, he did more than any of his contemporary playwrights to usurp the publisher’s authority by involving himself in the publication process; and although recent commentators have tended to interpret this involvement as an early attempt to attain something akin to authorial property rights, Mark Rose correctly observes that, “[b]y no means can [Jonson] be mistaken for the modern figure of the author as a private individual whose worth is calculable in terms of the property he or she created.”<sup>63</sup> Jonson himself makes a similar appraisal of his authorial predicament when he acknowledges to Alphonso Ferrabosco that, “When we doe give, ALPHONSO, to the light, / A Worke of ours, we part with our owne right.”<sup>64</sup>

Appropriately, title pages of published texts, including plays, almost always included the names of a given text’s publisher and/or printer,<sup>65</sup> and frequently indicated where the text had been printed and could be purchased. Moreover, because plays were generally the property of a given playing company prior to publication, title pages of plays frequently included some form of company attribution. During the roughly sixty-six-year period of the professional theatre (1576–1642), company attribution on extant printed title pages remained more or less constant at about sixty percent.<sup>66</sup> Author attribution, on the other hand, was hardly a priority on title pages, especially during the first few decades of the professional theatre when less than twenty percent of the extant published plays featured the name of an author.<sup>67</sup>

In the particular case of Shakespeare, the primacy of the publisher over the author is perhaps the only thing about his authorship that is typical. The specifics of Shakespeare’s involvement with printers and