**“Scarlet Experiment!”: *The New Oxford Shakespeare* and the Importance of Authorship**

**Jakub Boguszak, University of Southampton**

Abstract

This contribution takes stock of recent editorial endeavours to expand the Shakespearean canon and discusses how admitting plays of collaborative and/or uncertain authorship slowly but steadily erodes the idea of “completeness”. *The New Oxford Shakespeare* serves as an important test case: instead of promoting a holistic approach to Shakespeare’s oeuvre (as championed by T.S. Eliot, among others) editors of the new *Complete Works* encourage lateral reading and bolder speculation concerning various modes of collaborative and revisory authorship. As greater integration of texts once orbiting the Shakespearean canon at a “safe” distance is one of the more ambitious aims of this edition, it is perhaps unfortunate to find that some of these texts have not been included in their entirety—only the supposedly Shakespearean passages are to be found in *Complete Works*—and so cannot fully support the revisionist agenda. Instead, “the more Shakespeare, the better” seems to be a pertinent motto (apt also for the editorial policy universally preferring longer early texts over shorter ones). Searching for Shakespeare in the plays of his colleagues might, however, ultimately yield only limited rewards and an approach replacing a single author with a playing company as an organising principle of a *Complete Works* edition is proposed as a more promising way forward.

Keywords: early modern drama; collaboration; revision; editing; canon; complete works

When I was applying to study English at the Charles University in Prague some ten years ago, I believed that the number of plays Shakespeare wrote—thirty-eight, my notes would have reminded me—was an important “fact” to memorize in preparation for my interview. It turned out I had no need of that information on the day, but it was not until a couple of years later that I came across a passage in John Pitcher’s brand new *Arden 3* edition of *The Winters’s Tale* that gave me pause. His discussion of the text of the play begins with a simple claim: “Shakespeare wrote forty or so plays, about half of which appeared in print during his lifetime, [etc.]” (349) That cavalier phrase, “forty or so” was something of a jolt. Surely, a scholar should attempt a more precise projection of the Shakespearean canon? What are the two plays I have been missing? And what kinds of textual vagaries can those two words, “or so”, hint at?

Pitcher’s phrase is, of course, symptomatic of our growing ease with the idea that Shakespeare was happy to collaborate and revise on a fairly regular basis, and that, consequently, we are likely to find his fingerprints on texts hitherto kept at a safe distance from the canon. But the goal of general editors in the twenty-first century is not—not merely—to justify the admittance of *Sir Thomas More* and/or *Edward III* and/or *Arden of Faversham* and revise the scope of Shakespeare’s oeuvre accordingly. It is to make the very idea of a stable, Shakespeare-centric canon slightly suspect—this, at least, is what the new RSC volume of *Collaborative Plays* (2013) and *The New Oxford Shakespeare* (2016) might achieve. As the number of plays considered merely touched up by Shakespeare grows, as more and more of these plays find their way into established series and volumes of complete works, the once-clear boundaries of the canon become less distinct as well as less important. Were I asked during an admissions interview today how many plays Shakespeare wrote, my answer could easily be: “Anything between thirty-eight and forty-five, but it does not really matter anymore.”

This change of perspective has some interesting implications. To begin with, anyone who embraces the expansiveness of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* would now find it difficult to claim that it is still possible to read all of Shakespeare. Even if we decide to ignore the supposed lost plays, *Love’s Labour’s Won* and *Cardenio*, that sense of satisfaction and empowerment enabled by the assumption that one has explored the body of Shakespeare’s works in its entirety has to be sacrificed to the vision of Shakespeare presented in this edition. The Shakespeare who collaborated with so many other playwrights, who revised old plays and had his own plays revised in turn, is a Shakespeare whose readers can never be sure where his work ends and another’s begins and what the “entirety” of Shakespeare would therefore be like. For some, this matters little. For those, on the other hand, who share T.S. Eliot’s view that “the whole of Shakespeare is *one* poem […] united by one significant, consistent, and developing personality”, these new problems of attribution pose a serious challenge (132). If, as Eliot claims (a claim the general editors of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* are happy to endorse), “we must know all of Shakespeare’s work in order to know any of it”, the new edition of his works would have us risk an epistemological crisis (Eliot 120-121; Taylor and Bourus 6).

Whatever the exact scope of Shakespeare’s own input, the “whole” must now accommodate a good portion of non-Shakespearean material, and *The New Oxford Shakespeare* insists (although, as we shall see, not consistently) that we embrace it. The “*one* poem” that the complete works supposedly make up can no longer by united by one personality only. The sole-authored *King Lear* must be on equal terms with the collaborative *Timon of Athens*, the polished solo effort of the second historical tetralogy needs to be read alongside the free-for-all group project of the first, the difficult *Macbeth* made somewhat lighter by Middleton should be offset by the simple *Arden of Faversham* made somewhat more intriguing by Shakespeare. These are just a few ways in which the new edition can encourage its readers to explore what collaboration meant to Shakespeare at various points in his career, how well his voice can mesh with those of others, and how those who found themselves revising his plays attempted to build on what he provided. While the new RSC volume of *Collaborative Plays* still keeps such plays as *Edward III*, *Arden of Faversham*, and *The Spanish Tragedy* separate (both physically and conceptually) from the company’s *Complete Works*, Oxford, including them all in one volume, denies any fundamental difference between Shakespeare’s collaborations and solo plays.

It is therefore all the more bewildering to find that the editors of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* still occasionally feel compelled to filter out the contributions of other writers. Having attributed the additions to *The Spanish Tragedy* and the “Hand D” passages in *Sir Thomas More* to Shakespeare, the editors are happy to take them out of their immediate context and present them as the achievement of Shakespeare’s singular vision, “which is likely to be of most interest to readers of Shakespeare.” Presenting *1 Henry VI* in its entirety, Gary Taylor and Terri Bourus admit that the main consideration when deciding whether to print the whole play or merely the Shakespearean passages is the ease with which those passages can be extracted from the text (57). But what, one must wonder, is the point of promoting Shakespeare as a collaborator if the editor expects readers of Shakespeare to be interested in no-one else? The edition tries to have it both ways: it shakes and expands the canon, but it also works hard to reassure the readers that Shakespeare still stands out.

The editors promise to provide access to the full texts of both *Sir Thomas More* and *The Spanish Tragedy* in the upcoming *Complete Alternative Versions*, but they readily admit that they do not expect this to matter to most people: “[*Complete Works*] will almost certainly be read by more people than the *Complete Alternative Versions.*” (51) Even if this inclusion could effectively counteract the disregard for the material Shakespeare chose to rework, the logic behind the relegation is hard to grasp. How can a complete text be considered an alternative version of an excerpt? Surely, an alternative version of a play revised by Shakespeare is an older version which does not incorporate the Shakespearean additions. Elsewhere in the *Modern Critical Edition* the editors use boxes labelled “ADDITION” to indicate scenes or passages not appearing in earlier quarto editions, or identified as products of a later revision (e.g. *MM* 1.2.A1-A67; *Tit*. 3.2; *Mac.* 3.5.A1-A37). A play like *The Spanish Tragedy* could have benefited from the same treatment.

Nowhere has the decision to extract Shakespeare from a workable collaborative play-text produced a more baffling document than on the forty pages the Oxford *Complete Works* dedicates to the newly reconstructed “Fragments of *The History of* *Cardenio*”. Regardless of the likelihood that any Shakespeare might be still found in Theobald’s play—the editors discuss the problem at length in their *Authorship Companion*, but this is not likely to be the last word on the matter—the decision to highlight whatever seems closest to Shakespeare and discard the rest leaves the readers with a text that makes no sense on its own:

2.4

*[Enter Lucinda], above*

] example

[ ] bleeding in me [

] nature’s gifts [

O, there an angel spoke!

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the editors’ goal in this case was in fact simply to give their readers more Shakespeare than anyone else, not to make sense of Shakespeare as a collaborator and show how his own plays might have been adapted after his death. This thinking also seems to inform the editorial policy of prioritising the longest text where multiple early editions are available. “Seeking the greatest quantity of Shakespeare’s writing” takes precedence over considerations of its origins and transformations. (52) At a certain point, plays included (in fragments) in the *Complete Works* become more valuable as repositories of Shakespeare’s words than as artistic projects in their own right.

This search for Shakespeare’s words in collaborative plays hitherto thought of as dubia—a category for which *The New Oxford Shakespeare* (unlike, for instance, the new Cambridge edition of Ben Jonson) has no use—might ultimately only yield limited rewards, not least because it tends to misrepresent the range of practices we would recognise as collaboration. As Tiffany Stern reminds us, deciding who is to write which scenes is only one of the ways in which playwrights could divide their labour. They could also decide that one is to come up with a plot and the other is to write the speeches, or that one is to oversee the work of the other, or flesh out the other’s first draft; these are collaborative practices which stylometric analyses are unlikely to identify (115-121). Shakespeare probably contributed as a co-author and reviser to some seven or eight plays, but as a sharer in the company that produced not just his own work, but that of a good few others, he was likely to have had an influence which is now almost impossible to trace.

Even if we were sure that stylometric analysis is our best bet when searching for Shakespearean phrases and passages in the plays of others, the search itself seems to be a symptom of a craving which the plays were not designed to satisfy. A successful collaboration, such as the city comedy *Eastward Ho!* written by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston, makes it nigh impossible to distinguish the individual writers in the work. To assume that one can locate Shakespeare’s “bits” in plays of uncertain authorship is to assume that Shakespeare was not very good at collaborating with others. Such plays can be probed and dissected by scholars keen on uncovering the mystery of Shakespeare’s involvement rather like the lark of Emily Dickinson’s poem 905(Fr):

Split the Lark—and you’ll find the Music—

Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—

Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning

Saved for your Ear, when Lutes be old—

Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—

Gush after Gush, reserved for you—

Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!

Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true? (391)

Shakespeare wouldn’t have expected his audiences to “split the Lark” and look for his own distinctive music in the plays he wrote collaboratively. Likewise, he is unlikely to have revised old plays with the sole intention of making his audiences recognise the revamped versions as Shakespearean. If anything, he was keen on repackaging them as a distinct property of the company he worked for: James Marino shows that rewriting older plays was one of the more common ways for a company to assert its ownership of them (19-47). And it is perhaps this wider perspective of Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men, that would be most useful when making sense of Shakespeare’s expanding canon. In his *Shakespeare and the Idea of Apocrypha* Peter Kirwan points out that many of the plays that frequently stir controversy as potential additions to the canon can be better assessed in the context of the corpus of plays available to the company, including, but not limited to, Shakespeare’s own works.

Is it time, perhaps, for an edition of *The King’s Men’s Complete Works*? Such a project would not avoid problems of attribution—the number of plays we can only tentatively associate with the company would be a concern—but the need to distinguish the creative output of a single author would give way to the need to see how the authors writing for the King’s Men endeavoured (or struggled) to compete, collaborate, and learn from one another. Surely, within such context, the value and importance of collaborative plays of Shakespeare would have to be reassessed: not as they measure up against Shakespeare’s sole-authored plays, but as they meet the needs of the company which performed them, in their entirety. The question of how many plays the King’s Men performed would still be to some extent irrelevant, never more so than during an admissions interview, but the reorientation of focus could do a lot of good.

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