

‘mere prattle without practice’: Authorship in Performance

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Abstract

Over the last ten years there has been a struggle within Shakespeare studies between the vast majority of scholars who have remained committed to the orthodox view on Shakespeare’s authorship of the plays that bear his name and a much smaller group of scholars, working with profoundly different levels of rigour, who have sought to question this position. Recently there has been a degree of agreement that it is more productive to approach the issue in terms of acknowledging the collaborative nature of early modern play writing. It is noticeable, however, that for the literary critics and historians involved in this debate collaboration seems to end at the playhouse’s door. There is an assumption that the collaborators who produced early modern drama were all writers and not the other people involved in the production of Tudor and Stuart plays. This is profoundly problematic. In this article, Thomas Betteridge and Greg Thompson propose a non-textual approach to the authorship question through the use of performance as a research technique. The first part of the article will map out the current ground of Shakespeare authorship studies while the second part is an account of a performance as research workshop carried out by Betteridge and Thompson with students from Brunel University, London.

Keywords: Authorship, Performance, Reading, Shakespeare, Workshop

Why to the Hermit letters should be sent,
To post Skinke to the court incontinent:
Is there no tricke in this? Ha let me see?
Or doe they know already I am he?
(Anonymous, *Look About You*, 1.1.49-52)

1. *Introduction*

Authorship as a concept is designed to produce coherence and certainty. This is the argument of Michel Foucault’s ‘What is an Author?’ which concludes by suggesting that an author is



... a certain functional principle by which in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. (1986, 119)

Foucault's description of the authorial function as a point of closure or restriction and his coupling of it with the fantasy of individual genius seems almost parodic in its relevance to current discussions of early modern dramatic authorship. Indeed, there is clearly a sense in which the 'Shakespeare authorship' debate is oxymoronic. To debate the status of an author, as opposed to a writer, seems inherently problematic. If authorship implies certainty and coherence then to introduce uncertainty and dissonance is to attack the very basis of the concept of authorship. This is because authorship relates not to pragmatic questions about who wrote a particular piece of text or literary work but to much more fundamental questions concerning the relationship between language, being and meaning. There has always been a link between claims of authorship and legal discourses of ownership and it is no surprise that a significant number of the few occasions where Shakespeare appears in the historical record are related to court cases. To claim authorship, either for oneself or for another, is to participate in the discourses of the oath. Giorgio Agamben writes: '... the oath expresses the demand, decisive in every sense for the speaking animal, to put its nature at stake in language and to bind together in an ethical and political connection words, things and actions' (2010, 69). To be an author, or to embrace this role as, for example, Ben Jonson did, is to function as a point of coherence and meaning and to embrace the rewards and risks associated with authorship. The stakes are high for authors, writers risk less and make much more limited claims; they are simpler people who happen to earn a living by producing texts to be read, watched and consumed.

The violence that attends so much of the debate over Shakespeare's authorship, the entirely disproportionate responses by serious academics to legitimate scholarly questions, but equally the fantasies and conspiracy theories that no one but their proponents can take seriously, reflect a desire to protect Shakespeare as a point of coherence, stability and fixity; as an author, not a writer. The debate over Shakespeare's authorship consistently veers into hyperbole and polemic because at its heart is an endless, impossible to fulfil desire, much like Othello's to 'see' Desdemona's virtue, to grasp or fix the truth of who wrote Shakespeare's plays; to 'see' beyond doubt Shakespeare the author.¹

¹ This is of course a tautological statement but it is precisely the kind of statement that one ends up making when discussing these questions. Indeed, as we shall go on to suggest, the Shakespeare authorship debate functions precisely to generate these kinds of statements.

2. Part I: 'Give me ocular proof'

The sterility of much of the debate over the authorship of Shakespeare's plays is a product of precisely the tension that Foucault suggests is fundamental to the authorial function. This is equally true of the serious academic work on attribution and collaboration as it is to the far less important efforts of some scholars to deny that Shakespeare wrote the plays that now bear his name. The desire to replace one genius as a point of textual stability, 'Shakespeare', with another, 'Oxford', 'Bacon', or 'Queen Elizabeth' is not simply pointless because it is often based on clearly tendentious arguments, the most notorious being that Shakespeare was not learned enough to have written the plays that bear his name, it is far more fundamentally flawed due to the fantasies of inspired authorship that seem to shape it. It is, however, important to note, as we have already suggested, that even within the far more rigorous world of academic attribution studies there also appear to be a number of under-interrogated assumptions and unspoken desires. In particular, there is a sense in even the most rigorous attribution studies, developing the most up-to-date computer analysis, that what is being engaged in is a process of purgation or alchemy whose end result, which is in practice predicated throughout, is to produce real or unalloyed Shakespeare; to produce what the critic already knows is true.

We are not experts in the field of Shakespeare authorship and this article offers itself as a tentative and uncertain contribution to the debate. Our approach is informed by practice as research methodology and, from this perspective, a degree of scepticism concerning the purpose of not only general questions of Shakespearean authorship but more specifically the use of statistics to determine which plays, and which parts of plays, were written by Shakespeare. Brian Vickers has recently suggested that 'Against the Romantic notion of individual inspiration, free of any financial considerations, we need to conceive of an artefact produced by a work-sharing process, in which certain elements of the composition are delegated to other hands under the supervision of the master craftsman' (2007, 312).

Our experience of working in the contemporary theatre, which one could legitimately suggest is irrelevant due to the massive historical and cultural changes that have taken place over the last five hundred years, leads us to strongly support Vickers' notion that early modern plays were written through a 'work-sharing process'. One of the most problematic aspects of much of the current work on Shakespearean authorship is that it is based on a quaintly donnish understanding of how plays are and probably were produced. We do not know to what extent the 'writing' of an Elizabethan play was the product of specific writers or if the actors and producers who had to make a play work on stage did not have an important role in its composition. We can draw up data-banks of a writer's lexicon, idiosyncratic uses of words and linguistic structures, but there is no way of knowing if what appears to be the presence of a particular

authorial hand in a text simply reflects the influence of an actor who happens to have shared our chosen writer's linguistic habits. Tiffany Stern's recent study, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (2009) demonstrates with precision the perspicacity of Vickers' 'work-sharing' suggestion in relation to the production of early modern theatrical texts. Stern points out that, for example, 'prologues and epilogues were regularly written by someone other than the playwright' (110). Stern also details the complex relationship between plot writers and play composers and points out that these were often different people. Early modern theatrical texts were produced through a process that required specialization and efficient use of resources. In this context it made sense for the labour of producing a play to be split up so that individual aspects of the production process were undertaken by those whose skills were best fitted for the specific task that needed to be completed; plotting, dialogue or prologue writer. In this context the obvious deficiencies in the existing data – we do not have a verbatim written account of a plot discussion or a rehearsal – render any statistical approach to early modern theatrical authorship irredeemably flawed.

This article is a contribution to the debate over Shakespearean authorship. The first part discusses the nature of current debates over this authorship. The second part is an attempt to introduce a different performance-based methodology to research into Shakespeare and authorship. This is a relatively limited article largely because we were restricted in terms of resources to conduct only one performance-based workshop. This article is, however, prompted by a desire to start to develop a new theatrical performance-based language for research into the authorship of early modern plays. We would hope in the future to be able to conduct far more extensive performance-based workshops and experiments on a range of early modern play texts and dramas.

In 3.3 of *Othello* the eponymous hero makes an impossible demand of Iago:

Othello. Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore.
 Be sure of it. Give me ocular proof,
 Or, by the worth of man's eternal soul,
 Thou hadst been better have been born a dog
 Than answer my waked wrath. (3.3.364-368)²

Iago knows that what Othello is demanding here is an impossibility. As he later tells Othello, 'Her [Desdemona's] honour is an essence that's not seen' (4.1.16). The truth that Othello tragically forgets is that there are some things that cannot be seen. Or at least are beyond instrumental standards of proof. It is impossible for Iago to satisfy Othello's desire for ocular proof of Desdemona's honour. This is partly because for Othello, like a number of Shakespeare's

² Shakespeare quotations are from Wells and Taylor (1986).

other male leads, King Lear and Leontes being the obvious examples, there is a disturbing misogynistic side to the desire to see Desdemona's honour – as if only a pornographic image of Desdemona's body fully open to the male gaze would satisfy him. But the truth is that even this would not be enough for Othello. His desire for ocular proof of Desdemona's honour reflects his fears, his inability to escape the real world where no one can fully know anything. Or rather, and more accurately, it is Othello's refusal of the logic of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech that existence requires an acceptance of the provisional and performative. As Stanley Cavell points out with reference to Hamlet's words, 'To exist is to take your existence upon you, to enact it, as if the basis of human existence is theatre, even melodrama. To refuse this burden is to condemn yourself to scepticism – to a denial of the existence, hence of the value, of the world' (2003, 187).

Othello cannot tolerate the theatrical, enacted nature of human existence. He carves fixity and order to protect him from the terror of having to enact his own existence. Desdemona for Othello has to be fully fixed in the role of honourable, truthful wife, a wife free of the taint of performance of the requirement to enact. Any cracks in this artifice, which he has created, any doubt and Othello's whole world starts to spin out of control; perhaps Desdemona is not who he thought she was at all. And therefore Othello is not who he thought he was either.

Iago's seduction of Othello is so subtle but at the same time effective because it exploits Othello's existing weakness or unspoken desire for a sense of certainty beyond speech or language. Iago simply has to introduce uncertainty into Othello's world to produce a violent disproportionate reaction.

Iago. Ha, I like not that.

Othello. What does thou say?

Iago. Nothing, my lord, or if, I know not what.

Othello. Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

Iago. Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing your coming. (3.3.33-39)

Later Iago simply repeats Othello's words to further encourage his fears and provoke his suspicions. Othello kills Desdemona to stop what he believes erroneously is, to use again Foucault's words, her 'free circulation, free manipulation, free composition and recomposition'. Othello kills the thing he loves in order to make her more properly worthy of being the object of his love.

Brian Vickers has recently suggested that the aim of authorship studies, and in particular the careful discussion of attribution and collaboration is to get a better understanding of the real Shakespeare. Vickers writes: 'identifying his co-authors does not diminish Shakespeare's achievement: on the contrary, it

helps us to define that achievement more clearly, and to distinguish it from his collaborators'. Vickers goes on to paraphrase Matthew Arnold and to conclude his piece by suggesting: 'our task is to see him steadily and see him whole' (2007, 352). This, however, seems a problematic suggestion. In his article 'Incomplete Shakespeare: Or, Denying Coauthorship in *1 Henry VI*' (2007), Vickers builds on the arguments he first articulated in *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (2002) to argue that a number of Shakespeare's plays were co-authored. The evidence that Vickers provides, which is entirely persuasive, is based on incongruences and inconsistencies, linguistic and stylistic, that exist between passages in a number of the plays that have been traditionally attributed to Shakespeare. In effect, what Vickers proposes, and indeed what he enacts, in his 2007 article and, to a far greater degree, in *Shakespeare, Co-Author*, is a breaking down of 'Shakespeare' or at least the Shakespearean text into small abstract entities that at one level seem profoundly un- or even anti-Shakespearean. Slavoj Žižek comments, in relation to courtly love: 'external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible – what such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of attaining the object' (1994, 94).

As Othello gets more and more desperate for proof of Desdemona's infidelity, Iago simply produces more and more uncertainty. Ultimately what Othello wants to see, to know, is beyond Iago's gift. The complex graphs and tables that fill the works of scholars in the Shakespeare authorship debate conceal the inherent impossibility of what they are seeking to attain. As Vickers breaks Shakespeare down into smaller and smaller linguistic units, he seems further and further away from seeing him 'steadily and whole'; Shakespeare the author seems more and more inaccessible. Indeed it is perhaps only stretching the point slightly to see the patterns formed by Vickers' graphs and tables in his work as akin to the mystical markings that cover the handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona and which he elevates to the status of thing which can prove, and embody, Desdemona's virtue. Neither will ultimately give Vickers or Othello what they want. In fact both graphs and stains are in practice hindrances that conceal the impossibility of what they desire. It is difficult to imagine any real certainty in relation to Shakespeare's authorship which is not ultimately based on an act of aesthetic judgment. But aesthetic judgment is now wizened and has to keep out of sight. There is something rather dispiriting and even alienating in reading articles on Shakespeare full of statistics and graphs since they seem a world apart from the nature of his drama and its art.

3. Part II: 'I am not what I am'

We want to pause here and reflect back on what we have so far written. There

is something not quite right. What we have written fails. And it fails, we would argue, because it adopts a purely textual approach to the discussion of an issue that could be better investigated through performance. The following is a brief sketch of a method for investigating questions of Shakespearean authorship and attribution based on theatrical practice. Play texts are read but they are also performed and heard.

For the actor, theatre texts, for the most part, begin with the eyes. The actor prepares for audition with a text in a printed book, or occasionally even now, an extract on a sheet of paper but, more likely, a text seen on a smart phone or tablet. Extra-textual signifiers: the punctuation; the capital letters; the line ending; perhaps an editor's notes; even the name of the author; all serve to help the reader find meaning and a journey through the text. The first few days of rehearsal are most often spent around a table with a book, smart phone or tablet in hand. Even today with the advent of electronic script and instant theatre techniques most rehearsals still require the actor to be connected to a printed text before giving flight in later stages of rehearsal.

Audiences for the most part do not bring copies of the text to performances. They receive the text not through their eyes but through their ears. Of course some performances are of well-loved plays that have been seen before and the advent of foreign language productions and surtitles provide exceptions, but for the most part audiences hear a text as it is spoken, a text that they may never have seen on the page. It is often remarked that it takes an audience a few minutes to tune into a performance of an early modern text and as those texts are most often, nearly always, Shakespeare we say it takes a few minutes to tune into Shakespeare, the unmistakable sound of the Bard. The question we sought to test through the rehearsal process was whether the genius of Shakespeare can be discerned by the ear. In even the early works, those written before 1599, can the distinctive Shakespearean voice be known most certain?

To establish a methodology we went back to an exercise that Gregory Thompson first encountered in a workshop for young directors at the National Theatre Studio given by Peter Gill in 1998. Peter Gill is a Welsh theatre director, playwright and actor. He directed his first production at the Royal Court Theatre in 1965, was Artistic Director of the Riverside Studios and was an Associate Director of the National Theatre from 1980 to 1997. Gill founded the National Theatre Studio in 1984. His work has a precise beauty and depth born out of a deep examination of the text and the world of the play. Gill is fastidious in his attitude to text: there may be many ways to play a text, a speech, or a word but it only means one thing.

At that rehearsal in 1998 Gill gave out sheets of A4 and instructed the company to keep them face down. Then one person was asked to turn over and read and the rest were asked to listen and if they heard a better way to say the lines to stop the speaker by saying: 'No'. The person who stopped the speaker was then invited to turn over their paper and read the text as they understood

it. On the paper was a string of words typed out all in capitals.

UP FROM MY CABIN MY SEA-GOWN SCARFED ABOUT ME IN THE
DARK GROPE I TO FIND OUT THEM HAD MY DESIRE FINGERED
THEIR PACKET AND IN FINE WITHDREW TO MINE OWN ROOM
AGAIN MAKING SO BOLD MY FEARS FORGETTING MANNERS TO
UNSEAL THEIR GRAND COMMISSION WHERE I FOUND HORATIO O
ROYAL KNAVERY AN EXACT COMMAND LARDED WITH MANY SORTS
OF REASONS IMPORTING DENMARK'S HEALTH AND ENGLAND'S
TOO WITH HO SUCH BUGS AND GOBLINS IN MY LIFE THAT ON THE
SUPERVISE NO LEISURE BATED NO NOT TO STAY THE GRINDING OF
THE AXE MY HEAD SHOULD BE STRUCK OFF

It took several attempts before the text began to flow and a certain competitiveness developed among the actors and directors in the circle. What this process produced was an engagement with the text that was collective and performative. The group worked together to build up a version of the speech that made sense without relying on extra-textual clues and signposts. Of course, some of the actors and directors, like many of the academics who are reading this, perhaps even yourself now, recognize the words Hamlet uses to tell Horatio what he did when bound for England (5.2.12-25). Shakespeare is accorded special status in the theatre. Even in productions that shine less bright there is a faith that the audience will hear 'his powerful sound within an organ weak'. We decided to test this assumption and question what it is that the audience hears.

We adapted the Gill technique to explore a methodology for an investigation into the sound of Shakespeare in comparison to other early modern writers. Our method was tested at Brunel University London, in February 2015 with eight theatre students.³ We sat in a circle with eight texts: four from a Shakespeare play, *King John*, and four from an anonymous Elizabethan play, *Look About You*. Both plays feature characters from the same period of English history. To select a text at random, to start with the participants were asked to choose a number from 1 to 8. The papers with the chosen text were handed around, one for each participant and kept face down, like an exam. The paper contained only one speech.

There was a preamble to our exercise: 'This is an exercise about what you hear. It's not about the quality of your reading or the reading of anyone else in the group. Similarly it's not about the quality of your acting: this is more like a rehearsal exercise for discovery than performance practice. The exercise is about your listening and understanding and the listening and understanding

³ The students involved were Julia Canavan, Zoe Wood, Seb James, Jenny Campbell-Williams, Normae Nundall, Freya Wilson, Sam Parker and Matt Patterson.

of the group: we will build it up together. It would be remarkable if one person were able to sail through without hearing the contributions of others. In a moment one person will turn over the paper and without hesitation begin to read aloud. They will resist the urge to scan the text and just begin reading aloud from the top. They will continue to read until someone says, 'Thank you'. And then the speaker will turn the paper over immediately. Please resist the temptation to rescan the text with your eyes. This is an exercise for the ears. You have to turn the paper over straight away because the eyes are very quick. I would like you to say, 'Thank you' as soon as you no longer follow the text or understand what is being said or if you can hear a better way through the text or even if you become aware that your mind has wandered. Just say, 'Thank you'. This is not an exercise in politeness but in your listening so, please, rather than allowing them to keep going, respond to incomprehension by stopping the speaker with thanks'.

Spring 2015. A rehearsal studio on the edge of London. Eight students, two professors, a theatre director, and eight early modern speeches. The texts are face down. One participant turns the paper over and begins to read straight away. The exercise, however, is not about the speaker but about what is heard. Does it make sense? Can you hear a different way through? If the text makes no sense to a listener they say 'Thank you' and the speaker stops and turns the paper back over. It is important that the eyes are not engaged except in the act of reading. Each repetition begins from the top of the paper. Sometimes the text is stopped after a few words. Sometimes it runs along. Often hesitant. Sometimes sure. As the ears of the participants tune into early modern English and familiarity builds, a pattern emerges, a story through the passage discovered and the text becomes clear.

Some word strings are easier than others, found in the first, second or third repetition. Some become a point of contention when there seems to be two opposing ways to meaning. The quality of listening in the room changes as the exercise progresses. We are all engaged in the same process of discovery. Sometimes it helps, as meaning emerges, to read with an attitude, to act as it were. For the most part the words are delivered simply and clearly with a desire to uncover the meaning of the text.

Of course it is hard to fully communicate our processes in writing as the exercise is experiential. It aims to bypass the usual way we understand texts by reading them and talking about them and to put us as scholars into the position of the audience: receiving the text through our ears. The exercise repeats the experience of the audience: hearing the text with attention rapt. No time is spent breaking the text down or talking about the text.

Here are the eight texts we used in the first experiment to establish a methodology. Try reading them aloud. Resist the temptation to work it out and simply listen to the stream of words. If it makes no sense, stop and cover

the text. Then begin again from the top. Allow your listening to find the story of the text.

1. is it not wrong think you when all the world troubled with rumour of a captive queen imprisoned by her husband in a realm where her own son doth wear a diadem is like an head of people mutinous still murmuring at the shame done her and us is it not more wrong when her mother zeal sounded through Europe Afric Asia tells in the hollow of news-thirsting ears queen Elinor lives in a dungeon for pity and affection to her son but when the true cause Clifford's daughter's death shall be exposed to stranger nations what volumes will be writ what libels spread and in each line our state dishonoured

2. his highness doth tells you it is a shame for such wild youth to smother any impiety with shew to chastise loose adultery say Rosamond was Henry's Concubine had never King a Concubine but he did Rosamond begin the fires in France made she the northern borders reek with flames unpeopled she the towns of Picardy left she the wives of England husbandless oh no she sinn'd I grant so do we all she fell herself, desiring none should fall but Elinor whom you so much commend hath been the bellows of seditious fire either through jealous rage or mad desire is't not a shame to think that she hath arm'd four sons right hands against their father's head and not the children of a low-priz'd wretch but one whom God on earth hath deified see where he sits with sorrow in his eyes three of his sons and hers tutor'd by her smiles whilst he weeps and with a proud disdain embrace blithe mirth while his sad heart complain

3. will this content you I that have sat still amaz'd to see my sons devoid of shame to hear my subjects with rebellious tongues wound the kind bosom of their sovereign can no more bear but from a bleeding heart deliver all my love for all your hate will this content thee cruel Elinor your savage mother my uncivil queen the tigress that hath drunk the purple blood of three times twenty thousand valiant men washing her red chaps in the weeping tears of widows virgins nurses sucking babes and lastly sorted with her damn'd consorts enter'd a labyrinth to murder love will this content you she shall be releas'd that she may next seize me she most envies

4. be pleased king puppet have I stood for thee even in the mouth of death open'd my arms to circle in sedition's ugly shape shook hands with duty bad adieu to virtue profan'd all majesty in heaven and earth writ in black characters on my white brow the name of rebel John against his father for thee for thee thou o'tomy of honour thou worm of Majesty thou froth thou bubble and must I now be pleas'd in peace to stand while statutes make thee owner of my land

5. Philip of France in right and true behalf of thy deceased brother Geoffrey's son Arthur Plantagenet lays most lawful claim to this fair island and the territories to Ireland Poitou Anjou Touraine Maine desiring thee to lay aside the sword which sways usurpingly these several titles and put the same into young Arthur's hand thy nephew and right royal sovereign

6. what now my son have I not ever said how that ambitious Constance would not

cease till she had kindled France and all the world upon the right and party of her son this might have been prevented and made whole with very easy arguments of love which now the manage of two kingdoms must with fearful-bloody issue arbitrate

7. sirrah your brother is legitimate your father's wife did after wedlock bear him and if she did play false the fault was hers which fault lies on the hazards of all husbands that marry wives tell me how if my brother who as you say took pains to get this son had of your father claimed this son for his in sooth good friend your father might have kept this calf bred from his cow from all the world in sooth he might then if he were my brother's my brother might not claim him nor your father being none of his refuse him this concludes my mother's son did get your father's heir your father's heir must have your father's land

8. madam an if my brother had my shape and I had his sir Robert's his like him and if my legs were two such riding-rods my arms such eel-skins stuffed my face so thin that in mine ear I durst not stick a rose lest men should say look where three-farthings goes and to his shape were heir to all this land would I might never stir from off this place I would give it every foot to have this face it would not be Sir Nob in any case

Many readers of this article will recognize these texts but for those who did not – could you tell which is Shakespeare? And which is not? Which texts carry the unmistakable sound of the bard? Which of these texts are most certain Shakespeare? We urge you to go back and read aloud the unpunctuated texts until you hear the story in each of them. Would it help to have the punctuation?

1. is it not wrong, think you, when all the world troubled with rumour of a captive queen, imprisoned by her husband in a realm, where her own son doth wear a diadem? Is like an head of people mutinous, still murmuring at the shame done her and us? Is't not more wrong, when her mother zeal, sounded through Europe, Afric, Asia, tells in the hollow of news-thirsting ears, Queen Elinor lives in a dungeon, for pity and affection to her son? But when the true cause, Clifford's daughter's death, shall be exposed to stranger nations, what volumes will be writ, what libels spread, and in each line our state dishonoured!

Would it help to have the line-endings?

1. is it not wrong think you when all the world
troubled with rumour of a captive queen
imprisoned by her husband in a realm
where her own son doth wear a diadem
is like an head of people mutinous
still murmuring at the shame done her and us
is't not more wrong when her mother zeal
sounded through Europe Afric Asia
tells in the hollow of news-thirsting ears
queen Elinor lives in a dungeon
for pity and affection to her son

but when the true cause, Clifford's daughter's death
 shall be exposed to stranger nations
 what volumes will be writ what libels spread
 and in each line our state dishonoured
 Or both – line endings and punctuation.

1. Is it not wrong, think you, when all the world
 Troubled with rumour of a captive queen,
 Imprisoned by her husband in a realm,
 Where her own son doth wear a diadem?
 Is like an head of people mutinous,
 Still murmuring at the shame done her and us?
 Is it not more wrong, when her mother zeal,
 Sounded through Europe, Afric, Asia,
 Tells in the hollow of news-thirsting ears,
 Queen Elinor lives in a dungeon,
 For pity and affection to her son?
 But when the true cause Clifford's daughter's death,
 Shall be exposed to stranger nations,
 What volumes will be writ, what libels spread,
 And in each line our state dishonoured!

Would it be a clue to authorship to know the names of the characters?

1. LEICESTER.
2. LANCASTER.
3. OLD KING.
4. JOHN.
5. CHATILLION.
6. ELEANOR.
7. KING JOHN.
8. BASTARD

Once we had read all the passages through we asked the participants to judge whether a passage was Shakespeare or not and why. Please go back to the unpunctuated texts above and rate them: Shakespeare, Not Shakespeare.

You may have recognized the last four texts: they're all from *King John* (1.1). However the first four texts are all from *Look About You* (1.2), an anonymous play printed in 1600 and possibly written sometime earlier in the 1590s when there was something of a vogue for disguise plays. More often than not our participants – both students and professors – judged passages from *Look About You* to be Shakespeare while rejecting those from *King John* as Not Shakespeare. The reasons given included the sound, the rhythm, the vocabulary, the imagery, the names of the characters. Interestingly, one participant said if it sounded good it was Shakespeare, if not it wasn't.

So perhaps all we showed by trying to adapt rehearsal techniques to investigate Shakespeare's authorship reveals nothing more than the ideas we hold about what Shakespeare is. There is an argument that as Shakespeare is, for most people, the only early modern playwright, so that he has come to own everything in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre: that which is common to the time and that which is his. It might be said that our workshop produced nothing more than the tentative and uncertain conclusions of existing attribution methods. Our limited workshop was less useful in academic terms than the statistical analysis undertaken by such scholars as Brian Vickers or Jonathan Hope. We would argue, however, that we demonstrated that there is scope for applying practice as research techniques to the study of early modern drama: that it reveals both how a text is heard and some of the assumptions we have about Shakespeare. And that using performance within the context of discussions of Shakespearean authorship is useful, if only in order to complicate assumptions about the primacy of the written word. We would also suggest that turning to performance research methodologies will, at the least, turn Shakespeare authorship studies back towards the plays themselves and how they sound on stage.

4. Conclusion

We think the de-capitalized, unpunctuated, line-ending stripped exercise has the potential to investigate authorship and our ideas around it by revealing what an audience hears and what that says about our assumptions of Shakespeare and early modern texts. We would like to run a series of workshops with theatre professionals, academics, theatregoers and drama students to establish a methodology for analysing the responses to the exercise. Whether it reveals an authorship test of any validity or a series of assumptions about Shakespeare is to be discovered.

Traditional Shakespeare authorship studies are predicated on a denied or hidden 'temporal loop'. Like all narratives, they silently presuppose as already given what they purport to produce.⁴ Iago's 'evidence' of Desdemona's guilt produces simply what Othello already thinks he knows. Shakespeare as an author exists as the object, a centre of coherence, consistency and value, which authorship studies simultaneously critique and presuppose. Vickers, in a recent review article, discusses with his usual lucidity two recent works that address the attribution of a number of early modern plays. Reflecting upon the similarities between two passages, from *The Spanish Tragedy* and *2 Henry VI*, Vickers comments that 'The closeness of the parallel, in both words and thought, and the

⁴ This is a paraphrase of Žižek's comment that 'The price one pays for narrative resolution is the *petitio principii* of the temporal loop – the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it purports to reproduce ...' (1997, 11).

similarity in the dramatic context – a man in authority rebuking a wrongdoer – rules out any other explanation, such as plagiarism or imitation: both passages come from Shakespeare’s verbal memory (2011, 109).

Vickers’ argument is entirely sound but it does presuppose a person called Shakespeare whose verbal memory can be accessed through textual comparison. John Burrows has recently responded to Vickers’ critique of his work, and that of other scholars, by suggesting that Vickers’ critique amounts ‘to an exercise in self-exposure’ (2012, 355). This is undoubtedly the case, but we are not sure that this is an entirely legitimate complaint. Vickers has consistently argued that ultimately questions of authorship come down to academic and scholarly judgment. Unlike Othello, Vickers knows, as is reflected in, for example, his reference to Shakespeare’s verbal memory, that authorship cannot be proved by statistics and graphs – in the final analysis it is necessary to awaken one’s faith.⁵

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⁵ As William Leahy points out, the evidence that exists for Shakespeare (and some of the other alternatives) as the author is enough to build a belief upon but it is not enough to build knowledge upon. As far as Shakespeare is concerned, there is simply too much uncertainty (2010, 119).