

On the assumption that from Shakespeare's poems and plays could be extracted a well-rounded conception of the author that was as authentic as one derived from personal letters, eyewitness accounts, and other such documents, every line was searched for hidden biography. To many critics, the sonnets were the chief key to the mystery, and an incalculable amount of time and labor was spent on elucidating their enigmatic statements, which, a century and a half after the industry began, still defy interpretation that is generally acceptable. To others, the living Shakespeare could be discovered in the plays instead. And he was discovered: as a Tory and a Radical, a Protestant and a Catholic (or else a freethinker), a widely traveled cosmopolitan and a stay-at-home, a heavily learned savant and a fresh-cheeked countryman, a soldier and a seaman, a shrewd businessman and a musician, a sportsman and a naturalist. Whatever one's preference, it could be documented from Shakespeare's works. However sharply the commentators' versions of Shakespeare the man conflicted with one another, taken altogether, they represent "the largest mass of conjectural biography under which any author has ever staggered on his way to immortality."(97)

— Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965)

Scientists know that no evidence is evidence, biographers learn that by bitter experience.(67)

— Paula R. Backscheider, "Evidence: Bare Patches and Profusions." In *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

The criteria for the acceptance of an attribution as proven have traditionally been based on legal models for the evaluation of evidence. . . . Certain basic standards of proof are common to both. In criminal law, guilt has to be proved beyond reasonable doubt; in civil cases the balance of probability determines the findings. In attribution studies the second would be sufficient to let a received attribution stand but . . . it would require the first to overturn an accepted attribution or to establish a new one from scratch.(209)

— Harold Love, *Attributing Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

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## SOME CRITERIA

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### **SKEPTICISM AND TESTING EVIDENCE**

The prudent archaeo-historicist must cultivate a habit of perpetual doubt and suspicion. Do we have first-hand reportage or hearsay? How close to the date of the event? Are we working from holograph, fair copy, or a printed version? What is the likelihood of doctoring? . . . Even where tampering or fabrication are not an issue, the scholar must be rigorous about taking the possibility of bias into account. . . . One often cannot be sure of the reliability of crucial evidence, but one can at least be above-board in indicating the degree of doubt that attaches to it.(124, 125)

At the outset of any genuine inquiry, the investigator must attempt to determine what evidence exists, how it can be tested or validated, and how far it should be trusted.(159)

Whether the investigator is relying on texts or anecdotes or generic categories or historical context or statistics of whatever sort, some sceptical testing is well advised. Something that looks fine to the casual eye (and has gone unchallenged for decades) can crumble disconcertingly when someone tests it. Neither primary evidence nor present-day hypothesis should be employed unless subjected to severe interrogation. To use a piece of evidence just because respected predecessors have used it can only be considered reckless and irresponsible. No investigator can be expected to conduct exhaustive tests on everything employed. A serious scholar, however, performs what the financial world calls ‘due diligence’, which means enough systematic spot-checking that blatant problems should come to light.(160)

To put the point bluntly, if you commit to a system of explanations you become a fanatic and cease to be an inquirer. Or as [R.S.] Crane observes, prior commitment to theory is ‘incompatible with inquiry.’(161)

— Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999)

### **FIRST-HAND TESTIMONY VS. HEARSAY**

The historian can and in fact must do what the judge, at any rate in England, is precluded from doing, make the best of evidence which is not strictly first hand.(49)

— H.B. George, *Historical Evidence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909)

Events reported by writers secondhand frequently become trusted documents for theater historians. ... Because of its presentation, a historian might trust such a source, and if confirmation was warranted external sources might be consulted to corroborate the account. Nonetheless, in many cases no independent verification exists, leaving the historian at the mercy of the author and his integrity. ... One can only hope for authors who are largely accurate in citing their sources and expressing their intentions. But ... in an era in which oral and written communication were well-developed arts the telling of “truth” and the telling of rumor could be largely the same.(31-32)

— S.P. Cerasano, “The Telling of Rumor: John Chamberlain’s Theatrical Reports” in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* (1997): 19-33

### **CONTEMPORANEOUS VS. POSTHUMOUS EVIDENCE**

What a man leaves behind him after he dies is a mess of paper: birth certificate, school grades, diary, letters, check stubs, laundry lists . . . This paper trail, extending from his entrance to his exit, is what the biographer tries to tread.(xiii)

— Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (1965. Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton, 1985)

The sources whence we directly derive our information, whatever the quality of that information may be, are usually divided into those which are, and those which are not contemporary. ... ‘Historical evidence, like every kind of evidence [quoting Cornwell Lewis] is founded on the testimony of credible witnesses. Unless those witnesses have personal and immediate perception of the facts which they report, unless they saw and heard what they undertake to relate as having happened, their evidence is not entitled to credit. As all original witnesses must be contemporary with the events which they attest, it is a

necessary condition for the credibility of a witness that he be a contemporary, though a contemporary is not necessarily a credible witness.’(48-49)

— H.B. George, *Historical Evidence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909)

A primary source is a document, image, or artifact that provides evidence about the past. It is an original document created contemporaneously with the event under discussion.(58)

— Robert C. Williams, *The Historian’s Toolbox: A Student’s Guide to the Theory and Craft of History* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003)

## RELIABILITY

Eyewitness reports from ostensibly neutral observers will not necessarily agree.(123)

— Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999)

In the midst of complex jealousies and desires for self-justification, the external juxtaposition of the whitewash brush and the tar bucket, we can never be sure either of all the relevant facts or of the true motives of people long dead.(49)

— Richard D. Altick & John J. Fenstermaker, *The Art of Literary Research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993)

This pamphlet gathering five heterogeneous *Letters* contains several references to unpublished poems and the interests of a literary coterie, to current events and affairs of state, and to well-placed people in public life. The *Letters* testify to the credentials of the “new Poete” [Spenser]. ... As soon as we recognize, however, that the *Letters* are public rather than private documents, we have placed their evidentiary value in doubt. The efforts to fashion a poetic persona that had motivated the [*Shepherde’s*] *Calendar’s* elaborate program are also evident in the *Letters*. Why should we expect these texts to provide trustworthy information about the private person.(81)

The *Letters* are of interest primarily for what they tell us about the two writers’ friendship and Harvey’s importance in Spenser’s formation as a poet and a public servant.(93).

— Jon A. Quitslund, “Questionable Evidence in the Letters of 1580 between Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser,” in *Spenser’s Life and the Subject of Biography*, ed. Judith H. Anderson, Donald Cheney, David A. Richardson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996)

## PERSONAL VS. IMPERSONAL EVIDENCE

Allusions to Shakespeare in [Henry] Chettle’s *England Mourning Garment* are of a purely literary character and necessitate no personal knowledge.(11)

— Harold Jenkins, *The Life and Work of Henry Chettle* (London, 1934)

[Thomas] Kyd’s translation ... is dedicated ‘To ... the Countesse of Sussex.’ ... Among the conventional praises of her Ladyship’s wit, beauty, and virtue, Kyd takes to refer to her ‘honourable favours past,’ which he will not itemize because he considers it ‘Pharasaical’ to do so. ... All these phrases, especially the ‘service’ and ‘honourable favours past,’ indicate that Kyd was personally acquainted with the Countess, and that he had been in a position to receive her favours earlier – presumably before his imprisonment. Boas comments that ‘Kyd may be merely alluding to some tokens of good will which she extended to him as to other

men of letters, including Greene, who dedicated to her his *Philomela*. But the fact is that the 'other men of letters' who dedicated books to the Countess at this period did *not* know her personally, by their own testimony, and Kyd, by his, did. Greene presented her *Philomela* in 1592 because he was 'humbly devoted to the Right honourable Lord Fitzwalters your husband', but the Countess herself he knew by repute only. Likewise the publisher William Bailey, who dedicated a book of lute music to her in 1596, writes of 'your Honourable Ladyship, whom I have heard so well reported of.'(32-34)

— Arthur Freeman, *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967)

Gervase Markham dedicated *The Most Honorable Tragedie of Sir Richard Grinvile* (1595) to Lord Mountjoy, and added three sonnets, the second of which is to [the earl of] Southampton, but there is no indication in it that Markham enjoyed any degree of intimacy; while he acknowledges Mountjoy's favor, he only makes a bid for Southampton's.(2:200)

— D. Nichol Smith, "Authors and Patrons," in *Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life and Manners of his Age* (2 vols. 1916. Reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1962)

[George] Chapman may drop the names of the earls of Derby and Northumberland in his first letter to Matthew Royden, but these are strategic claims of association, hardly signs that he knew these powerful men.(6)

— John Huntington, *Ambition, Rank, and Poetry in 1590s England* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001)

It has been suggested that in using the epithet 'friendly', Scoloker is claiming acquaintance with Shakespeare. However, the epithet may, rather, be a literary judgment, approximating what we might now call 'accessible,' 'readable,' or even 'user-friendly'.(179)

— Katharine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare* (The Arden Shakespeare, 2001)

There is ample testimony in commendatory poems and dedications of the number of our playwright's friends and of the regard in which they held him. Joseph Taylor the actor, who played Paris in *The Roman Actor*, addresses [Philip] Massinger as 'his long-known and loved Friend', and says that he (Taylor) writes his poem both to praise a good tragedy and "to profess our love's antiquity". . . . To the ubiquitous George Donne he is his 'much esteem'd friend'; and to Thomas May he is 'his deserving friend'. There is no indication of friendship or of more than a slight acquaintanceship in John Ford's commendatory poems for *The Roman Actor* and *The Great Duke of Florence*. Shirley, too, . . . does not seem to have been very close to Massinger, and addresses him stiffly as 'my honoured friend' in the verses before *The Renegado*. In return, in his commendation of *The Grateful Servant*, Massinger calls Shirley his 'judicious and learned friend the Author'. . . . As might be expected, the majority of Massinger's friends were either writers by profession or men-of-letters by inclination.(45)

— T.A. Dunn, *Philip Massinger: The Man and the Playwright* (University College of Ghana by Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1957)

Spenser continued his praise of [Thomas] Watson in *The Ruines of Time*. . . . That it was prompted by personal friendship, or even acquaintance, is unlikely. It is doubtful whether the

two men could have met before Spenser went to Ireland in 1580, and when he returned to England in 1589 Watson was in Newgate prison as the result of an affray, and remained there until after the publication of the *Faerie Queen*. ... Spenser's praise of Watson, I think, was probably motivated simply by his admiration for him as an artist.(486, 487)

— William Ringler, "Spenser and Thomas Watson" in *Modern Language Notes* (November 1954): 484-87

#### LITERARY VS. NON-LITERARY EVIDENCE

Autographs are more plentiful for Spenser than for most other Elizabethan literary figures. They comprise over a hundred items, being roughly equivalent in quantity to 120 folio pages of continuous writing, and include eleven authentic signatures. However, no autograph survives from the Spenser canon, the only literary document of any kind being a single-leaf transcript of a Latin letter on poetry from Erhardus Stibarus to Erasmus Neustetter and two Latin poems from Lotichius' *Poemata*.(345)

— Anthony G. Petti, "Spenser's Handwriting," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Ed. A. C. Hamilton, University of Toronto Press, 1990)

Efforts to identify the author of the *Arte* have proved inconclusive. ... [Richard Puttenham's] ... biographical evidence, so far as it goes, presents no serious difficulties, but ... the absence of any indication of literary activities or intellectual interests renders his case both doubtful and problematic. He is a runner in the *Arte* sweepstakes, but his chances can only appeal to a gambler who will take a risk on a dark horse at very long odds.(xii, xvii-xviii)

On George [Puttenham]'s behalf a much stronger claim can be made. Two lines of approach to the question of his authorship are open: the biographical and the literary. ... That he had both an adequate knowledge of Latin and an interest in its literature is shown by some fragments of translation from Suetonius. Further indication of intellectual interests is contained in a letter of 1578 ... [and] conclusive proof both of his ability as a writer and of its recognition is provided by his *Justificacion*.(xviii, xxii)

— Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker, ed., *The Arte of English Poesie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936)

Donaldson draws "from his inexhaustible knowledge of Jonson's life records, literary and otherwise." (428)

— David Riggs's review of Ian Donaldson's *Ben Jonson: A Life* in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63:3 (fall 2012): 428-31.

#### INTERNAL (FROM THE LITERARY TEXT) VS. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Attribution studies should not be performed in isolation: one item of external evidence can overturn all such internal evidence.(249)

— M.W.A. Smith, "Attribution by Statistics: A Critique of Four Recent Studies" in *Revue Informatique et statistique dans les sciences humaines* 26 (1990): 233-51

Let him amass all the evidence he can find. Let him set down, in orderly fashion, all the arguments in favor of his interpretation, and then, with equal or greater scrupulousness, all

those against. Let him study the evidence, giving full value to every argument; for it may very well happen that a single bit of *contra* evidence will make the piling up of *pro* arguments like the adding together of zeros: whether there are twelve or twenty, the total is still zero.(228-29)

— Chauncey Sanders, *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952)

External evidence may and often does provide incontestable proof; internal evidence can only support hypotheses or corroborate external evidence.(150)

— Samuel Schoenbaum, *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* (London, 1966)

The uncritical acceptance of an attribution on a title page or in a bookseller's catalogue is quite as unscholarly as an attempt to prove authorship through the unsophisticated citing of similarities between disputed and undisputed plays.(21)

— MacDonald P. Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare: 'Pericles' As Test Case* (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2003)

An edition of *Sir John Oldcastle* in 1600 likewise bears the words, 'Written by William Shakespeare,' and this boast, absurd on the face of it, is proved mendacious beyond the shadow of a doubt, by the record in Henslowe's Diary of the actual authors: Munday, Drayton, Wilson, and Hathway.(viii)

— C.F. Tucker Brooke, *The Shakespeare Apocrypha* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918)

Auxiliary "do" evidence puts this play [*The Puritan*] well beyond the possibility of Shakespearean authorship. ... Auxiliary "do" evidence rules Shakespeare out as the author of the whole text of [*A Yorkshire Tragedy*]. As with *The Puritan*, Middleton is confirmed as a possible candidate for authorship.(153)

— Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)