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IN THE CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE:  
CANON, AUTHORSHIP, AND  
ATTRIBUTION IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

by  
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## *Abstract*

At various points between 1709 and 1821, Shakespeare's scholarly editors called into question the authenticity—either in whole or in part—of at least seventeen of the plays attributed to him in the First Folio. Enabled largely by Alexander Pope's attack, in his 1723–25 edition of Shakespeare, on the Folio's compilers, eighteenth-century textual critics constructed a canon based upon their own critical senses, rather than the 'authority of copies'. They also discussed the genuineness of works that had been excluded from the 1623 Folio—*Pericles*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Edward III*, the *Sonnets*, and the poems published in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. Although these debates had little effect on the *contents* of the variorum edition—by 1821, only *Pericles*, the *Sonnets*, and the narrative poems had been added to the canon—arguments and counter-arguments about the authenticity of Shakespeare's works continued to abound in the notes. These would, in turn, influence the opinions of new generations of critics throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In this thesis, I return to these earlier canonical judgements, not in order to resuscitate them, but to ask what they reveal about eighteenth-century conceptions of authorship, collaboration, and canonicity. Authorship in the period was not understood solely in terms of 'possessive individualism'. Neither were arguments over Shakespeare's style wholly contingent upon new discourses of literary property that had developed in the wake of copyright law. Instead, I argue, the discourse of personal style that editors applied to Shakespeare emerged out of a pre-existing classical-humanist scholarly tradition. Other commentators adopted the newly fashionable language of connoisseurship to determine where Shakespeare's authorial presence lay. Another group of scholars turned to contemporary stage manuscript practices to ascertain where, and why, the words of other speakers might have entered his plays.

If, however, Shakespeare's plays were only partly his, this implied that Shakespeare had written alongside other writers. In the last part of my thesis, I examine the efforts of eighteenth-century critics to understand the social contexts of early modern dramatic authorship. Pope represented the theatre as an engine of social corruption,

whose influence had debased Shakespeare's standards of art and language. Other eighteenth-century commentators, however, had a more positive understanding of the social aspects of authorship. Drawing on contemporary discourses of friendship and sociability, they imagined the Elizabethan stage as a friendship-based authorial credit network, where playwrights collaborated with their contemporaries in the expectation of a return on their own works. This language of sociable co-authorship in turn influenced the way in which Shakespearean collaboration was understood. Conceptions of Shakespearean authorship and canonicity in the period, I conclude, were—like authorship in the Shakespeare canon itself—not singular, but manifold and multivocal.

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### *Note on the Text*

Original spelling and punctuation in quoted material have been retained. Long *f*, however, has been silently modernized. In accordance with Chicago style, publishers' details have been omitted from references to books issued before the nineteenth century. All Act, scene, and line references to Shakespeare's plays are keyed to the Oxford edition of the *Complete Works*, 2nd ed. (2005).

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