

Brian Vickers. *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp xi, 558.

Shakespeare, Co-Author is unique among attribution studies, in that it isn't one, in the strictest sense. Instead, Brian Vickers devotes the majority of the book to a survey of the attribution scholarship that has been done on Shakespeare's co-authored plays since the early nineteenth century to the present. While Vickers claims in his preface that 'I have not attempted to write a history of Shakespeare authorship studies ... here I am only interested in the pertinent arguments that scholars have made, addressing the concrete evidence ... and using valid methodologies' (x), *Shakespeare, Co-Author* is essentially a reconstruction of the developments in authorship studies and a mapping out of the scholarly tradition. The endeavor is both worthwhile and necessary. The truth of the matter is that the history of attribution/authorship studies has been a fractured one, with attributionists often, as Vickers periodically notes, working in isolation, unaware of each others' contributions to the field. If one pays attention to the dates of Vickers' sources, one can observe that these studies often skip entire generations, as the tradition shifts in and out of vogue in academic circles – with the result that many of these studies quickly become obscure, difficult to track down, and cavalierly disregarded or rejected. Vickers collects these studies and revitalizes them, demonstrating their enduring relevance to the authorship debate and the (in some cases) remarkable continuity between their arguments.

But this is a partisan history. Vickers unabashedly approaches the issue from the perspective of the attributionists, and consequently his agenda in *Shakespeare, Co-Author* is not just to reconstruct the history of attribution studies, but to prove the attributionists right. He amasses this body of scholarship in order to demonstrate the efficacy of various tests of attribution and, concomitantly, to defend the divisions of authorship they have adduced in Shakespeare's co-authored plays. In championing the attributionists, Vickers opposes the Shakespeare 'conservators', those who attempt to preserve for Shakespeare sole domain over these disputed plays. I share Vickers' frustration with critics and editors who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that the great genius Shakespeare would deign to collaborate with his fellow playwrights. Such blind bardolatry is naïve; it presents a skewed picture of Shakespeare's practices and position in the theatre, and hence does a disservice to both Shakespeare scholarship and Renaissance theatre history. But as Vickers presents the issue, one either supports attribution or is labeled a fundamentalist – there is no middle

ground here. The positions are so polarized, in fact, that the discussion occasionally degenerates into inexplicable bouts of combativeness. Throughout the book Vickers maintains a clear distinction ‘between scholars using stylometry and literary critics, who often do not understand the methods used’ (210) – the implication here being that not only are literary critics not scholars (later on the same page Vickers refers to attribution as ‘*true scholarship*’ [my italics]), but that literary critics are too stupid to understand statistics. Even more strangely, Vickers occasionally resorts to threats; at the conclusion of his discussion of Thomas Middleton’s part in *Timon of Athens*, he blusters: ‘Shakespeareans who continue to deny this point risk forfeiting their scholarly credibility’ (290). This submit-or-be-destroyed approach is more befitting to a cartoon villain than a critic confident in his own material, and is all the more regrettable since the majority of Vickers’ material seems quite capable of standing on its own merit.

Shakespeare, Co-Author is divided into two sections. The first section is subdivided into two chapters, the first providing an introduction to the general issues of authorship and collaboration in the early modern theatre, the second giving an overview of the various methodologies and types of evidence used in attribution studies, from parallel passages to metrical, linguistic and stylometric tests. There is very little in the way of new information here, and anyone familiar with the Shakespearean authorship debates will have heard these arguments before. It is difficult to get a clear sense of Vickers’ target audience; in the opening chapters of the book he appears to assume an uninformed general reader, but the later chapters become quite technical and are addressed to a more specialized audience. The second section is the heart of the book, and devotes a chapter to each of the five collaborative partnerships under consideration: *Titus Andronicus* with George Peele, *Timon of Athens* with Thomas Middleton, *Pericles* with George Wilkins, and *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with John Fletcher. In fact, Vickers makes the claim for eight extant collaborations in the Shakespeare canon. Although he does grant *The Booke of Sir Thomas More* adequate attention in the first section, his observation that ‘scholarship has yet to produce convincing candidates for [Shakespeare’s] partners’ seems a weak rationale for omitting any discussion of *1 Henry VI* and *Edward III* (this is especially troubling in the case of *1 Henry VI*, given its canonical status) (145). The discussion in each of the chapters is arranged in roughly chronological order, beginning with the earliest claims for co-authorship and ending with the most recent studies. Reading the book cover to cover, the discussion becomes quite repetitive at points, as Vickers reuses the same studies over and over. This is not necessarily a criticism of the book;

geared to modern reading habits, where readers are just as likely to read only a relevant chapter, the repetition does aid in the continuity of the discussion within chapters, and cuts down on the need to flip to other parts of the book.¹

The data that Vickers presents is not his own, but rather an overview of the methods and conclusions various attributionists have reached applying a number of statistical and comparative tests. Thus, readers expecting new evidence to be brought to bear on the authorship of Shakespeare's collaborative plays may be disappointed. Vickers does provide a few authorship tests of his own for his discussion of *Titus Andronicus*, but oddly, this is the only play to receive this treatment, the remaining chapters relying solely on tests previously conducted by others (although Vickers occasionally tinkers with, recalculates, or abridges the data as he sees fit). While the variety of evidence is impressive, there are a number of inconsistencies with Vickers' use of the evidence. The sheer volume of parallel passages applied to *Titus*, for instance, appears overwhelming until one recalls that some of them violate Muriel St. Clare Byrne's rules for applying parallel passages, cited approvingly by Vickers in the first half of the book (58). Discussing the issue of Lavinia's ravishing, Vickers notes a parallel between *Titus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*: 'He would have dropped his knife and fell asleep, / As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet' (2.4.48–51); 'his unhallow'd haste her words delays, / And moody Pluto winks while Orpheus plays' (*Lucr.*, 552–3). Noting that the situations are identical, Vickers argues that 'there are deeper associations of ideas, 'more convincing than mere verbal parallels' (159). But this parallel is already inherent in the myths to which they refer, and hardly constitutes evidence of a single author at work. My objection is not to Vickers' use of parallel passages (indeed, some of them are striking), but the fact that he does not attempt to evaluate the quality of the evidence he cites. In his discussion of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, another parallel is brought to bear with *The Merchant of Venice*: 'Am I not liable to those affections / Those joys, griefs, angers, fears, my friend shall suffer?' (2.2.189–90); 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions?' (*MV*, 3.1.59–60). Bizarrely, however, in this case the parallel is used not to identify authorship, but Fletcher's *imitation* of Shakespeare. Can the evidence really work both ways? Unfortunately, Vickers does not always question the methodologies of his sources when their arguments suit his thesis.²

Vickers provides a number of tables that concisely display the results of various stylistic and metrical tests (86 tables in total). While some of these tables are extremely helpful, others are not. The difficulty is not really with the tables themselves, but with Vickers' tendency to leave them under-explained. At some points Vickers does not provide enough information for his readers

to be able to interpret the tables for themselves. In his discussion of 'stylistic elements' in *Henry VIII*, for example, Vickers observes, 'as the table shows, Fletcher used fewer images than Shakespeare, and more irregularly, with a considerable fluctuation (from three to ten images per 100 lines)' (352). The table in question shows no such thing, however, listing a range of figures from 6–6.5 for Fletcher (Shakespeare's given range is 10–10.5). How do the figures in the table translate into Vickers' figures? In his own tests for 'polysyllabic words' in *Titus*, Vickers bases his argument solely on the average frequency for Peele (2.8) and Shakespeare (3.3). But if one takes a closer look at the figures for individual scenes, one observes that the highest and lowest frequencies (2.4 and 5.4, respectively) are both for scenes attributed to Peele, with Shakespeare's scenes falling within this range. Vickers takes no note of this, and so this data remains unaccounted for. Since, as Vickers himself asserts, 'figures do not always prove what their authors claim,' some of these studies left this reader questioning whether he was being presented with a complete picture (332). Perhaps more importantly, this under-interpretation of the data leaves it open to *mis*interpretation, a potentially fatal situation in authorship studies.

Throughout the book, Vickers makes reference to what he calls 'accommodation theory', noting that 'collaboration does affect the styles of both writers, and "accommodation theory" predicts that each will suppress some aspects of his normal usage while adapting to the other' (278). Vickers is entirely right to observe this phenomenon; in fact, I think that both attributionists and literary scholars need to be more heedful of the ways collaborators accommodate each other. But Vickers only makes use of 'accommodation theory' to account for data that doesn't conform unequivocally to his hypotheses, and nowhere does he acknowledge that it might mitigate the efficacy of his tests by challenging the very assumptions upon which they are based. Indeed, Vickers is so single-minded in his championing of authorship studies that he fails to recognize its limitations. Attribution studies can effectively divide plays into authorial shares, but they cannot put them back together again; that is, such studies do not take into consideration how co-authors integrate their work in order to produce a viable piece of theatre. This ideological blind spot profoundly taints Vickers' last chapter, entitled 'Plot and Character in Co-Authoring Plays: Problems of Co-ordination'. The title says it all; the chapter is focused entirely on the 'problems' of these plays, not on their successes, or the strengths that each playwright might bring to the collaboration. The purpose of the chapter, if I understand it correctly, is to return attribution to the realm of literary scholarship by demonstrating its relevance to interpretation. It is a noble pursuit, but this chapter is the weakest in the book. Here,

repetition becomes a problem, as Vickers recycles evidence and arguments from previous chapters to the point that this discussion appears redundant; again, there is little new information being presented here. Vickers claims that 'elevating Shakespeare so that one may downgrade his co-authors is an old vice that should have been stamped out long ago' (445). I agree, but Vickers only pays lip-service to this sentiment; the chapter consistently disparages Shakespeare's collaborators, a contradiction symptomatic of the explicit denigration of Shakespeare's co-authors in Vickers' sources, upon which he relies too heavily. Rarely is there an acknowledgment that a co-author's *different* style might contribute something valuable to the play, and a number of the arguments presented here can be countered by such a consideration. Vickers' lengthy second appendix would have made a more interesting chapter, as it tackles some of the more theoretical issues of authorship and offers a useful (if partisan) critique of Jeffrey Masten's *Textual Intercourse* (1997).

Despite some of the problems I've raised here, the bulk of Vickers' evidence is compelling, once one gets past the irritating polemics. *Shakespeare, Co-Author* is no one's idea of light reading, and one needs to read this book carefully and critically, but the exercise can be worthwhile. This book should be a valuable resource for future editors of Shakespeare's collaborative plays, providing access to a more comprehensive view of the authorship issues of these plays and the work that has been done on them. As for the Shakespeare 'conservators' who continue to deny Shakespeare's co-authorship, I can only shrug and refer them to Vickers' book.

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Notes

- 1 Readers who prefer to select their reading material from the index should be warned that it is not consistently referenced. For example, *The Witch of Edmonton* is listed under each of its three playwrights, but each entry provides different page numbers; the same is true of *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*. By contrast, *Eastward Ho!* is not listed at all, and one has to cross-reference the pages for Jonson, Chapman, and Marston in order to find it.
- 2 A case in point is Vickers' discussion of Cyrus Hoy's contributions to attribution scholarship. In the first section of the book, Vickers provides a glowing account of Hoy's methodologies; while Hoy's contributions and influence in the field are surely considerable, Vickers never draws attention to more recent studies than have found serious problems or discrepancies in Hoy's methodology.