Authorship studies

Self-described "Shakespearean" Tom Cook finds the authorship attribution arguments in Brian Vickers's latest book - inter alia that *Henry VI Part One* has more of Thomas Kyd's writing in it than of Shakespeare's - to be "tedious" and something that he and (presumptuously) "most of us" are "thoroughly sick of" (August 8). There is no canon of "Shakespeare" or "Kyd" works to read until someone figures out what Shakespeare and Kyd actually wrote, using the internal evidence of style. External evidence is incomplete and misleading. The 1623 Folio presents *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens* and *Henry VIII* as Shakespeare solo works, but scholarship of the kind Cook reviles has convinced virtually all Shakespeareans that these plays were co-written with George Peele, Thomas Middleton and John Fletcher respectively.

Authorship attribution is an imperfect science and that specialists dispute the remaining, tricky cases is a healthy sign. Cook, and Penny McCarthy (Letters, August 15), misrepresent the reliability of its methods. Reputable studies quantify this reliability by systematically applying it to the many cases where we know who is the true author and seeing how often it finds that person. When multiple studies by independent research teams using different methods converge on a new attribution - as recently in the detection of *Shakespeare*'s authorship of the Painter's scene in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* - even bored literary critics should pay attention. In such cases, the antagonism between research teams that Cook alludes to is an advantage, since it reduces confirmation bias: these people are not predisposed to agree, but they do, based on the evidence.

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Penny McCarthy's letter on the technical methods of authorship attribution, using matching phrases (August 15), is tangential to the issue I raised concerning the canon of Marlowe, which has been disputed using other methods. In reviewing my recent book on Kyd (August 8), Tom Cook brusquely dismissed such enquiries, which have supposedly "blighted Shakespeare studies ... for some time now, and most of us [sic] are ... thoroughly sick of them". Cook accuses me and other respected scholars of having been "*vociferous*, flinging muck in print" and elsewhere, futile behaviour since "Students of English simply aren't equipped to disprove ... a pseudo-scientific claim", a dismissal that he wisely doesn't attempt to justify. If a reasoned argument by respected attribution scholars such as MacDonald Jackson can be dismissed as "muck", I wonder what term best describes Cook's attack on him.

Cook writes as if the canon of English literature were set in stone, beyond dispute. This shows his ignorance of past and present authorship work. Recently Lukas Erne published an essay entitled "Disintegrating Marlowe", in which he argued that "Where we may wish to find either plain Marlowe or not Marlowe, we may instead have collaborative Marlowe, revised Marlowe, doubtful Marlowe, and mutilated Marlowe". Erne showed that "Marlowe did not single-handedly complete all his writings, several of them are not sole-authored, and his collaborative and partly fragmented writings may not amount to what we usually consider an opus". That was the expectation of nineteenth-century positivist bibliography. Marlowe's works, like those of many of his contemporaries, turn out to be "fully embedded in the exigencies of the messy, collaborative world of the early modern theater and book trade". This enlightened judgement shows the contribution that modern scholarship is making to our understanding of that much-studied age. Tom Cook needs to keep up.

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