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**Shakespeare 2 • Serpieri Lectures 2**

Emma Smith

**Who Wrote *Pericles*?**

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EMMA SMITH

**Who Wrote *Pericles*?**



Questions about authorship and Shakespeare tend to split into two, mirrored projects. The first is ultimately sceptical and proceeds outside formal academic settings. It often focuses on readings of the accidentals in the printing of the First Folio or the shortcomings of its Droeshout portrait of the author, the monument to Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, and the lives, habits and preferences of a roll-call of early modern noblemen and, occasionally, women. It tends towards either the confident assertion of an alternative author – Bacon, Oxford, Marlowe, Lanyer – or an investment in what the leading anti-Stratfordian website cannily constructs as ‘reasonable doubt’ (authorship scepticism has long been particularly intriguing for lawyers). The second version of the authorship question cues a very different kind of technically complex inquiry. Modern authorship experts tend to major not in the biographical clues left by the Jacobean period, but in a distinctly twenty-first century idiom of numbers, graphs

\* I am honoured to have been invited to deliver the Serpieri Lecture in 2024, and would like to thank Silvia Bigliazzi, Cristiano Ragni, and their colleagues for their hospitality, feedback, and help with publication.

and sophisticated statistical testing, sometimes pursued via the ingenious use of anti-plagiarism software such as Turnitin, or other forms of stylometric analysis. Its results tend to be additional, rather than alternative, authors. It has produced a canon of plays by Shakespeare with a sequence of more-or-less accepted collaborators: Marlowe, Nashe, Peele, Middleton, Fletcher, Jonson, and, central to the question of *Pericles*, George Wilkins.

These two approaches to the question of authorship appear to be opposites: amateur/professional, biographical/statistical, conspiratorial/archival, subjective/objective, analogue/digital. But they actually have a good deal in common, not least the heated commitments of their participants. People really care about this stuff, as the rhetoric of disagreement attests. When Stephen Greenblatt wrote exasperatedly to *The New York Times* in response to one of the newspaper's many forays into the authorship controversy, he suggested that respectable scholars should not engage with those who challenge Shakespeare as the author of the plays with this comparison: "Should claims that the Holocaust did not occur also be made part of the standard curriculum?" (2005). Elizabeth Winkler titled her recent, sympathetic book on the controversies over Shakespeare's authorship *Shakespeare Was a Woman and other Heresies: How Doubting the Bard Became the Biggest Taboo in Literature*: the language of religious orthodoxy and transgression continues in her suggestion that "we have been kneeling at the wrong altar, paying homage to a false idol" (2023, 8). The language implies that the Shakespeare sceptic is a freethinker, untrammelled by accepted beliefs. Taking up the cudgels against Winkler's book, the journalist Oliver Kamm wrote at length for *Quillette*, an online "libertarian-

leaning” magazine, under the heading “against conspiracist trends, there is an obligation on defenders of a liberal society to uphold the integrity of its intellectual methods” (2024). The rhetoric here is deeply provocative: Shakespearean authorship becomes an ethical as well as a factual position.

And recent claims, squarely within the scholarly sphere, about a more extensively collaborative Shakespeare are equally high-stakes, as anyone can tell who has followed the controversies sought and prosecuted by the most recent scholarly edition of the works, the *New Oxford Shakespeare*, edited by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan and published in 2016. This edition has both expanded and restricted the Shakespearean canon making extensive use of new methods of computerised textual analysis. It includes 44 plays (there were 36 included in the 1623 First Folio), seventeen of which are judged to be collaborative. The eminent scholar and controversialist Brian Vickers, previously a key figure in establishing Shakespeare as the co-author of a more circumscribed list of five plays, decried this new wave of collaborative studies. A widely-circulated email to academic Shakespeareans denounced the *New Oxford Shakespeare* as a “crisis” and only partly in jest, declared that in response “I have decided to lead a world-wide investigation into the methods used to dilute the Shakespeare canon. I plan to set up a Committee for the Protection of Shakespeare’s Text”. Both defensive replies feel that something important, something Shakespearean, is under threat in similar ways from claims that Shakespeare wasn’t the author of the plays and from claims that he was but he wasn’t alone. It seems that it is the moral and professional job of the proper Shakespearean to defend the canon from such encroachments.

Winkler's first foray into published Shakespeare scepticism was an article in the *Atlantic* suggesting Emilia Bassano as the author of the plays. Within hours, she "was besieged by a (mostly male) army of Twitter trolls" and a response demonising her as "*deranged, neurotic, a conspiracy theorist, a fantasist*" (Winkler 2023, 15; 17). Both conversations, about Shakespeare as a pseudonym, and Shakespeare as a collaborator, can be vicious. Why authorship questions have become so toxic is outside the scope of my argument here, but it is, perhaps, worth observing that within the discipline of modern Shakespeare studies that I experience as reasonably equal by gender and sexuality, it is such a prominent outpost of male privilege. Perhaps, as we've all suspected, authorship studies are the scholarly displacement of specifically gendered anxieties about rightful paternity: it is, as Lancelot Gobbo observes in *The Merchant of Venice*, "a wise father that knows his own child" (2.2.73),<sup>1</sup> significantly reversing the proverbial phrase that conventionally placed the burden of knowledge on the child rather than the father. In his classic account of the invention of copyright, Mark Rose points out that "plagiarism" derives from the Latin for kidnapper or child-abductor, and expands an account of authorship-as-paternity (1993, 39-40). One extended contemporary example making this analogy is the publisher's preface to the 1613 quarto of Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* which begins: "this unfortunate child, who in eight daies (as lately I have learned) was begot and borne soone after, was by his parents (perhaps because hee was so unlike his brethren) exposed to the wide world" (1613, A2). "Like children", the

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to Shakespeare 2005 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

“Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare’s Plays” in the Oxford *Textual Companion* begins, “works of art acquire a meaning independent of those who conceived them”, and the metaphor keeps on giving: “a ‘Complete Works’ is the literary equivalent of a family reunion”, where “it will help to know the order of birth of the offspring” – and, presumably, although unspoken, which child-texts are legitimate and which illegitimate (Wells et al. 1988, 69).

In this essay, extended and redrafted from my Serpieri Lecture in Verona in 2024, I want to think about the legacy of the old Shakespeare authorship question and its effects on our modern version, and I want to develop these themes in thinking about *Pericles*, a play much concerned with the relationships between fathers and children, and one also long agreed to be collaborative. While my claim is not to challenge the authorship orthodoxy by arguing that *Pericles* is solely by Shakespeare, I do want to investigate the consensus from a different angle. I’d like to suggest that the long history of apparently objective or even scientific authorship analysis of *Pericles* is actually partial, qualitative, interpretative, and literary. Moreover, it is self-reflective, in that it operates in the service of a specific reading of the play that the play itself encourages. I hope my analysis will make clear that I think this reading is all the better for its failures of objectivity. My larger aim is to nudge authorship studies away from its current prerogative as a specialised technical field requiring particular expertise not usually acquired as part of literary training, and into a more explicitly literary critical conversation. My claim to speak about Shakespeare, authorship and *Pericles* is as a literary critic not a statistician, and while digital humanities has much to offer our field, it can also overlay and even disavow our own training in the

distinctive, the granular, and the aesthetic with the siren call of big data. Sometime the 'distant reading' championed by Franco Moretti and the digital humanists inspired by his methods of understanding via large data sets can feel like a disciplinary Stockholm syndrome: we have come to love our institutional captors and their metrics and their citation indices and their research teams with principal investigators and their implicit insistence on STEM subjects and the reproducibility of research results. But one thing our discipline knows and cherishes is the allure of narrative, and of storytelling. Story is more important than, more knowable than, truth. I want to suggest that the answer to the question about who wrote Shakespeare's *Pericles* partakes of this fundamental narrative impulse in some surprising ways.



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