Everything and Nothing:
The Many Lives of William Shakespeare

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Abstract

The essay is devoted to an analysis of the contributions gathered in this issue of *JEMS*. It begins with the scarcity (or total absence) of literary archives and autograph manuscripts for the English playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and among them Shakespeare). Such a diagnosis leads to stress the conditions ruling the composition and publication of plays: collaborative writing, reuse of the same stories and commonplaces, use of the author's name as a commodity, publication based on memorial reconstruction, prompt books, or corrupted copies, etc. The consequences of these practices (so different from the romantic textual ideology of the author's singularity, originality and propriety) are discussed in relation with the criticism of the traditional criteria of attribution studies and the operations necessary for writing the literary biography of an author without (literary) archives and (quite) any autograph remains (whence the discussion about Shakespeare's signatures, his holograph – or not – will, and his hand in the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*). Two perspectives could enrich these issues: on the one hand, a literary geography of Shakespeare's works mapping the publication and circulation of the performances, editions, and later translations of his plays; on the other hand, comparative approaches locating the specificity (or not) of English drama and Shakespeare's plays within the European context of Spanish *comedias* and Italian *commedia dell'arte*.

Keywords: Attribution Studies, Author's Hand, Biography, Collaborative Writing, Publication

'There was no one in him', but 'nobody was ever as many men as that man'. Thus Borges, inspired by Keats, designates, in his story *Everything and Nothing* the tension which is intrinsic in all Shakespearean biography. To be all human beings, both on the stages and on the pages, and to be nothing. This nothing is, in the first instance, the nothing of archives. Documents proving his purchase of estates, either in Stratford or in London, his activity as a moneylender and the suits brought against bad payers, or the allotment of his heritage in his will of March 1614 are not missing. What is missing are the traces of his aesthetic creation, those of his thoughts and feelings, the first drafts of his works, the letters, the personal diaries, or the memoirs which make genetic criticism and literary biography possible.

Such absence is not unusual. Before the eighteenth century, archival sources which permit us to retrace the paths or the hesitations of fictional writing and to inscribe them within the sorrows or the blisses of authors' lives are rare. Certainly, as Diana Price recalls, for some of Shakespeare's contemporaries, traces of their writing, either epistolary or literary, as well as numerous signatures, have survived. But, as she equally highlights, for none of them first drafts or jottings, the tokens of the writing toil (Greg's 'foul papers') have survived; nor, generally, the copies used by printers, or – with the only exception indicated by Paola Pugliatti – the scripts or 'plots', which summarised an intrigue later developed by the composition of the play. The manuscripts that have survived are 'fair copies', clean copies, generally written by professional scribes and, sometimes, by the playwrights themselves.

The autograph manuscripts left by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English playwrights cannot therefore be considered as the equivalent of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists' first drafts. Authors acted as scribes of their own works in order to present and give to their patrons or protectors copies of a text which could be also the object of a printed edition. Their manuscripts may, then, be located, paradoxically, among the copies compiled by professional scribes that constitute the majority of early modern literary manuscripts. This is the case, for instance, in five out of the six manuscripts of *A Game at Chess*, or in those of three other plays by Middleton: *The Lady's Tragedy*, *Hengist*, *King of Kent*, and *The Witch.* Five of these manuscripts have been copied by the same copyist, Ralph Crane, who was also employed by Shakespeare's company. In this sense, playwrights must be considered as copyists of themselves, and their manuscripts must be considered not as the traces of the writing process, which is the main object of genetic criticism, but as copies of the work meant either for the protectors or for the companies. They cannot be distinguished from the productions of scribes who, too, composed elegant copies for presentation and proposed to the readers the more or less numerous copies of what Harold Love calls 'scribal editions' (2007, 103).

The absence of properly literary archives becomes intolerable when the author is one of the geniuses consecrated throughout the centuries, one of the most rare 'ocean men', universal because solitary and unique, as Hugo said in his *William Shakespeare* (1864). Thence, as Andrew Hadfield strongly indicates, the insuperable tension between the post-Romantic view of the writer and the absence of documents that might allow us to follow the development of his genius. Thence, again, the divergence between the modern conception of 'literature' and the circumstances of composition of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetic or dramatic works.

The order of literary discourse established in the eighteenth century is founded on the individualization of writing, the originality of the works and the idea of intellectual ownership. These notions achieve their association at

the end of the century, by the time of the writer's consecration, of the fetishistic exaltation of the autograph manuscript and of the obsession for the author's hand that became the guarantee of the work's authenticity. Shakespeare and his contemporaries composed plays and poems within a different discursive system. It stood on very different practices: collaborative writing, as was required by patrons, by the companies, by the theatre entrepreneurs, or pursued by the playwrights themselves; the re-use of stories already told, of shared commonplaces, of inherited formulas, or, also, the continual revisions or continuations of ever-open works. It is within this system of constraints and creative opportunities that Shakespeare composed his works. It is also within this system that, very early, the construction of Shakespeare's *persona* as poet and, later, playwright began. But this process goes together with the strong conscience of the collective dimension of all textual productions (not only theatrical) and of the distinction between the writer's activity and the uses of the author's name, as underlined by Donatella Pallotti. If the name is not marketable it does not appear, and the plays and poems remain anonymous; but, if it becomes famous, celebrated, respected, then it can be handled as a 'commodity', as a commercial argument, printed on the title page of works that the writer has not written, or that only contain a few texts by him.

Since 1598, Shakespeare's growing reputation, witnessed by the often-quoted *Palladis Tamia* by Francis Meres, encourages booksellers and printers to make a vendible name visible. There are several tokens of this. On the one hand, the name of Shakespeare appears on the title-pages of reprints of previously published plays which did not bear the author's name: thus, the Quarto editions of *Richard II* and *Richard III* in 1598, or that of *1 Henry IV* the following year. On the other hand, Shakespeare's name or initials appear on collections of poems where he is only one author among others (this is the case of *The Passionate Pilgrime*, published by Jaggard in 1599, which is said to be 'By W. Shakespeare', while the anthology only contains five poems by him); or on plays which are generously attributed to him (and which, in fact, will become part of the Shakespearean corpus since the second issue of the third Folio in 1664, before being excluded, with the exception of *Pericles*, by the eighteenth-century editors). The booksellers' assertion of Shakespeare's authorial authority is expressed in a paroxysmal, but unique form by the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto, whose first lines of the title are: '*M. William Shakspeare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters*'. The claim ('His' *King Lear*) is not to be attributed to the author's hubris, but it recalls a competition among stationers, since the issue, for Nathaniel Butter, was that of launching into the market his edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, at the expense of the one published in 1605 by John Wright, who had circulated the same story staged by another playwright.

The eagerness in mobilizing Shakespeare's name after 1598, however, should not forsake two strong realities concerning the publication of theatrical

texts. It is certain, in the first place, that this is not the case with all the printers or all the editions. Thus, the Quarto reprints of *Titus Andronicus* of 1600 and 1611, or those of *Romeo and Juliet* of 1599, 1609 and 1622, do not in any way mention their author's name. On the other hand, the playwright must, usually, share the title page with the bookseller publisher and the printer, but also with the theatrical company and, to a certain extent, the spectators, whether royal or not. This is the case with *Hamlet* Q1, which appeared in 1603, where the text's ascription to 'William Shakespeare' is accompanied by the indication of those who represented the play and where: '*As it hath beene diverse times acted by his Highnesse servants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford and else-where*'. This is the case, even more significant, of *King Lear*'s Quarto, 'HIS' *King Lear*, of which it is specified: '*As it was played before the Kings Majestie at Whitehall upon S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes. By his Majesties servants playing usually at the Globe on the Bancke-Side*', which, all in all, means to inscribe the play's performance within the twelve-days' festivities cycle, and to evidence the royal protection. Therefore, even within the publishing logic which exploits the reputation achieved by certain playwrights, the published texts are still presented as a record of multiple collaborations.

The essays here presented allow us to deepen the nature of these collaborations. In the first place, as is done by Andrew Hadfield, it is necessary to distinguish among the collaborations in the composition of plays shared by two or more authors, those imposed by the theatrical practice, as shown by Henslowe's *Diary* and those, unconscious and involuntary, implied by the rivalries existing between playwrights. In the second place, following Tiffany Stern (2012), it is necessary to detail the modalities of collaboration as regards writing. Eilidh Kane, in turn, distinguishes the 'consecutive collaboration' which transforms a 'plot' into a play, or which enlarges or corrects a text which already exists, and the collaborations in which two or more authors compose, at the same time, in a form of 'co-writing', the different parts (acts, scenes, passages) of the same play.

These distinctions are connected to many essential questions. Which are the works that were composed in collaboration and by whom? How can we distribute the different parts of a text among the playwrights who collaborated in writing it? How should we position Shakespeare's writing practices within the pervasive paradigm of collaborative writing? On the basis of meticulous analyses, Eilidh Kane confirms the collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton in *Timon of Athens* and Marina Tarlinskaja Shakespeare's share as co-author, in 1592, of *Arden of Faversham*, whose second author is perhaps Thomas Kyd, and as sole author of the 'Additions' to *The Spanish Tragedy* in the 1602 reissue. On the contrary, Darren Freebury-Jones tends to think that *2 Henry VI* is by Shakespeare alone, while Diana Price questions his presence in *The Book of Sir Thomas More* and challenges the generally accepted identification

according to which the 'Hand D' in the manuscript would be his. Gary Taylor, in turn, restates his certainty which leads him to acknowledge the hands of Shakespeare and Fletcher in *Double Falsehood* by Lewis Theobald and to conclude accordingly that both playwrights collaborated in the lost play *The History of Cardenio*, represented in 1613, of which Theobald kept some vestiges in his adaptation published in 1728.

Beyond the conclusions of these case studies, what is important is the critical discussion that is here developed about the criteria utilised by 'attribution studies'. The older criteria, even before resorting to the statistics allowed by electronic databases, are the differences in spelling, in the contractions, in exclamations, and the lexical associations, the 'word sequences', or the 'multi-word units' which are typical of this or that author. Three kinds of criticism are here addressed to these traditional procedures of textual attribution. The first refers to the very documents these procedures utilise. In the vast majority of cases, the authors' assumed preferences can only be read on the pages of printed editions. But between the author's hand and the reader's eye, the interventions which transform the text are numerous: those of copyists who compose the manuscript's fair copy for the censor or the printer, those of 'copy editors' who prepare the copy used in the printing workshop, those of typographers who compose the text according to their preferences and habits or to the constraints imposed by composition by formes[1], and not *seriatim*. As highlighted by Marcus Dahl, the exceptional case of the play *A Game at Chess* by Middleton, of which several manuscripts are extant, shows that the decisions of the scribes who copied the work prevent a doubt-free identification of the spellings, or of the contractions found in printed editions as if they were assured 'authorial markers'. It is possible to acknowledge that certain authorial preferences resist the text's transformations entailed by the process of publication itself. However, the instability or uncertainty of those conclusions which establish the attribution of texts on the basis of the authors' spelling or lexical preferences remains, and, as is underlined by Joseph Rudman, the difficulty of giving a scientific statute to stylistic statistics persists.

A second kind of criticism is related to the very writing practices themselves. These, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are located within an aesthetic norm that is not that of originality, but that of invention within imitation. Consequently, all playwrights used the same rhetorical forms and the same linguistic formulae. Christy Desmet underlines the fact that several rhetorical styles are available to authors – for instance, the

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[1] Many books were composed, not according to the order of the text, or *seriatim*, but by formes – that is, by setting types for all the pages that were to be assembled within the same wooden frame, or *forme*, in order to be printed on the same side of a sheet. An example of this practice, that allowed to print the pages for one side of a sheet before the pages for the other side were set but required a previous casting off the copy, is Shakespeare's 1623 *First Folio*. Cf. Gaskell 1972, 40-43.

style of brevity and rapidity which is used in *Hamlet* Q1. Different authors may thus employ the same style and, thus, may wipe out their peculiarities in works written in collaboration, whereas the same author, in relation to the play's genre, or to its main destination, for the stage or for the print, may vary their writing accordingly. Lene Buhl Petersen, in turn, insists on the orality of the transmission of the plays, on the stage and by the actors, that should lead us to identify, as happens in the case of folkloric tales, those lexical associations that are 'ready-made units' common to a whole linguistic community, from rare and original combinations that may indicate personal invention.

A third kind of criticism addressed to 'attribution studies' laments the fact that they restore the idea of the authors' individualization in works which erase it and which are the outcome, as Jeffrey Masten (1997) maintains, of a collaboration between playwrights who were affectively linked, in their writing and also in their life, and who must not be separated. The re-examination of the case of Shakespeare, as performed by Katherine Scheil, allows us to deepen this observation by reflecting on the places in which the writing was done. In London, Shakespeare took part in all forms of collaboration imposed by the theatre: with other playwrights, with other shareholders of his company, with the players, with the mighty and with audiences. But, while it is true that he wrote in collaboration perhaps more frequently than we suppose, he composed however by himself most of his plays (perhaps twenty-eight out of thirty-seven), in particular those written between 1604 and 1612, when none of his plays seems to have been written in collaboration. Hence the hypothesis that his large house of New Place in Stratford, bought in 1597, was certainly the site of a writing activity removed from the constraints (or the pleasures) of London. The divide between the collaborative networks of the capital and the family environment and literary milieu of Stratford implied frequent travels between these two places. Katherine Scheil suggests that the collaborations prior to 1604, or those that belong to the last years of Shakespeare's life do not necessarily imply an immediate proximity among the different authors of the same play. According to Rosalind Barber, this presence in Stratford, that was more important than has been thought, did not however imply the use, in his works, of a lexical repertoire characteristic of Warwickshire.

Conscious of the limits and uncertainties of the traditional criteria employed to attribute scenes or passages, several authors suggest new ones. Thus, for Eilidh Kane, the bent of each author for certain 'patterns of figurative language', certain images or metaphors may either confirm or invalidate some attributions made on the basis of 'authorial markers'. Thus, according to Marina Tarlinskaja, the 'versification analysis' identifies every playwright's own way to place the accents, to mark the syntactic breaks, or to end the lines in their construction of the iambic pentameter. Thus, and in a way which is more daring and risky, the suggestion by Thomas Betteridge and Gregory Thompson of an attribution methodology inspired by the rehearsal technique

of theatrical troupes, which is based on hearing the acknowledgement of the 'sound of Shakespeare'. Such original attempts bear witness of the fact that, although challenged, attribution studies remain intense, undoubtedly because it is not easy, even not possible, to get rid of the romantic conception of literature, that constructed the author as the unique, energetic and sacred creator. Shakespeare's biographies are a further testimony of this.

These, of whatever kind they are, cannot be separated from the mutation that imposed a new way of considering the relationship between the authors' lives and their works. Since the eighteenth century, literary works are no longer conceived as based on the reutilization of plots already written, the quotation of commonplaces, shared because sublime, or the necessary or wished-for collaborations. They are by now conceived as original creations expressing the most intimate, the most personal feelings of the writer, linked to his or her most personal experiences. The first consequence of this mutation was the desire to publish the works of the same author by following their chronological composition, in order to grasp the development of his or her genius; the second was the writing of literary biographies.

As regards Shakespeare, and as has been shown by Margreta de Grazia (1991 and 2014), Edmond Malone was the first to associate the two projects. He based his *Life of William Shakespeare* on authentic documents, breaking with the compilations of anecdotes inaugurated by Nicholas Rowe in his 1709 edition. He proposed the first putative chronology of Shakespeare's works, published in his 1790 edition. Consequently, the plays must be published in the order in which Shakespeare composed them rather than according to the division between 'Comedies, Histories and Tragedies', lastingly inherited from the 1623 Folio. Boswell followed Malone's wish in his 1821 edition of Malone's 1790 edition, but he made an exception for the 'Histories', that are still arranged according to the chronology of the kings, as if sovereigns were forever more important than their poet.

But the double task addressed by Malone was not easy, given the absence of autograph documents left by Shakespeare (with the exception of a few signatures and, maybe, of his will). It required that one drew upon the only procedure available in order to write authors' biographies in the absence of authorial manuscripts: to locate the works within the life requires finding the life in the works themselves. In place of archival documents, it was thought that the plays and sonnets should be considered as sources of information on the author's life. After Malone, none of Shakespeare's biographers could evade this vicious circle, connected to the retrospective use of a literary paradigm constituted only during the eighteenth century, that imposes categories that are anachronistic for works composed within a textual production and circulation system that was profoundly different.

As shown by William Leahy, the contrast between the richness of the work, that is 'everything', and the blank of the life, of which almost nothing

is known, the 'nothing' that has been pointed out by Keats and Borges has many consequences that cannot be ignored by Shakespeare's biographers. The idea of recovering the life within the work forces the biographer to carry out an exercise of historical imagination which multiplies hypotheses and conjectures and establishes possible relationships, but that are not witnessed by any document. In this effort to reconstruct a past reality that cannot be caught, biography becomes the self-portrait of the biographer, who projects onto Shakespeare's imaginary life his or her own obsessions or nostalgias. It is this 'narcissistic identification' that renders acceptable an impossible challenge: that of writing the life of a writer with no archives as if the archives existed, and that founds the interpretation of the writer's works on some personal experiences of which no sure traces are extant outside the works themselves. Thus, as Leahy writes, 'this nothing (the man) does not exist except as a fictional product of the everything (the works)'. This observation is equally well-grounded both for scholarly biographies and for fictional works: they both build up a Shakespeare 'of the mind', who is either the singular hero of an extraordinary story, that of a glove maker's son, with no heritage and qualification who became the leading playwright of his time before ending his life as a rich country gentleman, or – as in the plays and movies analysed by Robert Sawyer – a man caught in multiple nets of constraints, social dependencies and necessary collaborations as many other men.

The tension between the specificity of individualization and shared practices equally characterises the different forms of writing, starting from the signature. Diana Price underlines the difficulty of holding the signature as the expression of a person's identity at a time when it could be delegated to somebody else, both in parish registers and in notarial documents, and when the same individual could sign with different signatures – which is the case with Shakespeare's six signatures, applied on four documents (three being applied on the will), between 1612 and 1616. Hence, for Price, the impossibility of establishing that the 'Hand D' in the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* is Shakespeare's.

Another example of the relationship between personal writing and shared practices is given by the readers of Shakespeare's poems in John Benson's 1640 edition. Inside or outside the book, they appropriate the poems by annotating them in the margins, by changing their titles, by suppressing certain of their lines, or else by copying some of them into manuscript miscellanies. But, as Jean-Christophe Mayer shows, these writing practices that present the traces of personal readings are inscribed within certain collective models that are dictated either by moral or religious requirements, or by the intellectual technique that asks readers to extract from each book they read certain universal truths or commonplaces. Manuscript writing and printed editions thus share the same practices that produce collections of maxims, anthologies of excerpts, or compilations that gather works of different authors. Donatella

Pallotti recalls that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the verb 'to compile' may mean to compose an original work – this was the case of Jaggard, when he published *The Passionate Pilgrime*, and of the readers who gathered in their miscellanies certain hand-copied works.

The superb dossier gathered in this volume also suggests two more original and promising research perspectives. The first is that of Shakespearean geography; a geography that would not simply be, *à la manière de* Franco Moretti (1998), a geography of the circulation of Shakespeare's works, based on a chronology and a cartography of the Shakespeare editions, translations, performances or adaptations; or else a geography internal to the plays, that considers the places where the plots are developed or the characters' travels and wanderings; but also a geography of the creation itself. It is true to say that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have not experienced the fetishisation of writers' homes that, from the eighteenth century on, became the destination of literary pilgrimages and touristic curiosities. However, to track the places of the composition of the works and the constitution of what Katherine Scheil designates as a 'geography of collaboration' could be important. In the case of Shakespeare, few are the documents which allow such a geography, divided between London and Stratford, but for other writers the data available may help to situate the writing of their plays, poems or novels in different spaces: the cabinet, the library, the theatre, the court, the public square.

Such a geography might have a place in a second research perspective, the one suggested by a comparative approach. Paola Pugliatti outlines it by confronting the theatrical practices of the *commedia dell'arte* and those of the English stage, and by stressing the companies' organisational forms, the part left to improvisation (which is not absent in the English theatrical performances, as is shown by the Clowns' jokes, that are condemned by Hamlet in the 1603 Quarto edition), or to the role of women (players and often authors in Italy). This analysis is an invitation to expand the space of comparisons, for instance considering the Spanish *comedia* (women are actresses in it, but, as spectators, they have their own place in the *corrales*, the *cazuela de las mujeres*), or the French theatre between the end of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth (which has nothing similar to the London public amphitheatres, but practises, as English playwrights do, the technique of commonplaces and the permeability among genres). Such an approach may suggest an expansion in a morphological perspective, by comparing the places and the audiences of the theatre, but also in historical terms, by tracking the companies' itineraries, the reciprocal borrowings among playwrights, the translations or adaptations. Such a perspective could avoid the anachronisms sometimes introduced by literary history. For example, if, in Shakespeare's time, English drama is largely Spanish, since it often draws its plots from the *comedias*, the short stories and novels (as proven by Shakespeare and Fletcher's – and Taylor's – *Cardenio*, inspired by *Don*

Quixote), on the contrary, the English repertoire is almost unknown outside of England, apart from some performances by English troupes in the Low Countries and the German Empire.

It is only in the eighteenth century that Shakespeare starts to be known and translated in France and, if one thinks of Voltaire, not always to his advantage.

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