

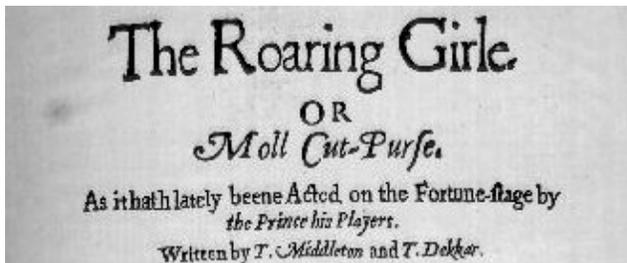
Shakespearean Authorship Trust



Collaboration in the Time of Shakespeare

“It has begun to be clear that collaboration – in its insistent ‘impurity’ – is a much more appropriate model for textual production than is ‘solo’ writing.” Dr Gordon McMullan, Kings College, 1996.¹

In most people’s eyes, Shakespeare is an all-powerful single author. His statue in Leicester Square, the portraits showing him quill in hand, not to mention the vast Bard industry, all support this comforting image. However, as the quote above from Dr McMullan suggests, collaboration amongst playwrights was widespread, especially during the period 1590 to 1610 and a significant number of Shakespeare’s plays show that others were also involved. There were two types of collaboration: the first was obvious and direct and you could see the names of the authors on the title sheet. For example, “The Roaring Girle” by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker.



The other type of collaboration is indirect and is the subject of much scholarly investigation and sometimes controversy. In this form, there was no contemporary acknowledgement that the authors worked together. For example, it is now widely accepted that *Pericles* is a ‘collaboration’ between George Wilkins and Shakespeare.

However, nobody knows whether they actually worked on it together, or if it was put together as two separate parts.

What was the extent of collaboration? Gerard Bentley noted that of all the 900 plays written by professional dramatists of the period “... as many as half ... incorporated the writing of more than one man”.² In Henslowe’s Diaries, commenting on plays performed at his theatre, the Rose, nearly two thirds of plays mentioned are attributed to more than one writer. Below is a table compiled by Douglas Brooks in 2000³ that gives a good summary of collaboration from 1580 to 1640:

	1580-89	1590-99	1600-09	1610-19	1620-29	1631-40
Ave. Number of Titles <i>per year</i>	10	26	30	22	23	26
% Attributed	58	54	75	74	81	89
Of these, % Collaborations	5	15	18	6	9	2

Why did playwrights collaborate? One reason was that they were close friends. Two of the most famous collaborating dramatists were John Fletcher (1579-1625) and Francis Beaumont (1585-1616). Their closeness is perhaps best described by John Aubrey who said of them, “They lived together on the Bank Side, not far from the Play-House, both bachelors; lay together; had one wench in the house between them, which they did so admire; the same cloathes and cloake, & C.”⁴ A visit to Southwark Cathedral very close to the Globe Theatre will reward the visitor with two memorials in the choir floor – one to Fletcher and next to him the grave of Philip Massinger – both writing together extensively.

It is more likely that the main reason for collaboration was commercial. It was quicker to get two or more playwrights working on specific themes using diverse styles. Some would be better at comic scenes, others specializing on sombre scenes and so on. Writers might be employed to add spectacle – as Middleton did by inserting parts of his play *The Witch* into *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare and Collaboration

Some think that the entire Shakespeare canon cannot include any collaboration, but as Ashley Thorndike said, "This objection is simply another exhibition of the common fallacy of always regarding Shakespeare as a world genius and never an Elizabethan dramatist. Shakespeare's own practices and the general practice of Elizabethan dramatists show that his collaboration ... would be no cause for wonder."⁵ Those who accept collaboration in Shakespeare's works generally see these plays as collaborations:

Henry VI Part 1 some	At least 2 collaborators, one possibly being Thomas Nashe – suggest Shakespeare wrote no more than 20%
Henry VI Part 2 & 3	Some collaboration, unidentified
Henry VIII	Generally considered a collaboration with Fletcher
Macbeth	One witch scene plus revisions in 1615 by Thomas Middleton
Pericles	Significant contribution by George Wilkins
Timon of Athens	Jointly with Thomas Middleton
Titus Andronicus	Collaboration/revisions by George Peele
Two Noble Kinsmen	With Fletcher – about half each
Edward III	Possibly Marlowe and Peele
Sir Thomas More	With Munday, Heywood, Dekker and possibly others

How is it possible to tell whether a play is a collaboration? Only by extensive lexical, metrical and stylistic tests as well as detecting changes in content and tone. For example, in *Pericles*, there is a very strong correlation between Acts 1 and 2 and Wilkins's *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* published in 1608, the date of the registration of *Pericles*. Word occurrences are also used to detect different authors. For example, words such as *yon* and *yonder* appear very frequently in Wilkins's works, but hardly ever in Shakespeare. Many other tests were carried out which confirmed the joint authorship of this play. Other playwrights were investigated such as Rowley, Day and Heywood, but these were rejected. Some have suggested that the first two acts are so different that they must have come from an earlier period of Shakespeare's writing. However, Sidney Thomas flatly rejected this idea saying that the style of the first two acts "...is not archaic or formalised; it is simply incompetent, flat in diction, lifeless in rhythm and unconvincing in content."⁶ There is no evidence that the two men actually collaborated on this work. Indeed, it is more likely that it was put together from memory and possibly from a corrupt text.

Other techniques have been employed to confirm who the other writers were. For example, work on *Timon of Athens* identified Thomas Middleton by analysing such characteristics as:

- Short lines used for no apparent reason
- Un-Shakespearean frequent use of rhyming couplets
- Comparing % of rhymed verse, blank verse and prose
- Comparing imagery
- Comparing characterisation
- Problems in structure
- Spellings of names

Analysis by Frederick Fleay⁷ found the proportion of rhymed verse in:

The Revenger's Tragedy = 19.1%
 Co-author's scenes in *Timon* = 23.6% (17.3% in Brian Vicker's analysis⁸)
 Shakespeare in *Timon* = 3.3%

Fleay also discovered the co-author's mixture of blank verse, rhyme and prose was exactly the same metre of the *Revenger's Tragedy*, and is typical of Middleton. Later investigators have consistently found Middleton's frequently used words and phrases, which do not or very rarely appear in other Shakespeare plays, occurring in the parts of *Timon* ascribed to Middleton (Vickers 2002). For example, this chart shows the number of times various contractions appear in the scenes ascribed to Middleton and Shakespeare:

Ascription	Middleton Scenes	Shakespeare Scenes	Whole Play
Length	897 lines	1,418 lines	2,315 lines
'em	16	4	20
them	16	50	66
has	25	6	31
hath	8	21	29
does	16	8	24
doth	0	9	9
I'm	3	0	3
I am	13	27	40
Has	4	1	5
'tas	2	0	2
moe	0	4	4

This gives some idea of the work carried out and in this short contribution, it is not possible to summarise all the work. Research is still going on into collaboration and although it may be a difficult subject to reconcile with the Authorship debate, there is no doubt amongst virtually all scholars that collaboration not only did occur in the plays of Shakespeare, but that this process was quite normal for the period.

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References

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- ⁴ Aubrey, John, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick, Secker & Warburg, London, 1958
- ⁵ A. H Thorndike *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakspeare*, Worcester, Mass, 1966
- ⁶ Thomas, Sidney 'The Problem of Pericles', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1983
- ⁷ E.G Fleay, *On the Play of Pericles* (1876 TNSS and *Shakespeare Manual*, London, 1876) both cited by Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare as Co-Author*, Oxford University Press 2002
- ⁸ Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare as Co-Author*, Oxford University Press, 2002