

Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister, eds. *Anonymity in Early Modern England: "What's in a Name?"*

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This collection of eight essays is loosely organized around the theme of anonymity; it is divided into three sections focusing respectively on anonymous manuscript poetry and anonymous printed plays and pamphlets; the final section comments theoretically on anonymity and attribution. The essays derive from papers presented at a seminar on anonymity at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, New Orleans, 2004. Perhaps predictably, one of the essays in this final section is entitled the "Anonymous Shakespeare."

The editor and most of the authors are eager to differentiate their field, “anonymity studies,” from what they term “attribution studies,” which they narrowly define as the attempt to “authenticate authorship.” In contrast, the editors position themselves as follows: the goal of these essays is to “investigate the original conditions of publication and circulation in order to increase understanding of a text’s reception and shed further light on modes of reading” (3). Although admittedly, it is more fashionable to stress agency and to discuss author function, none of this seems incompatible with setting out to authenticate authorship, particularly in instances in which the canon of a particular author, for example, Sir Walter Raleigh, is doubtful.

Marcy North, in the first essay, entitled “Anonymity in Early Modern Manuscript Culture: Finding a Purposeful Convention in a Ubiquitous Condition,” focuses on revealing the strategies used in constructing two genres that were frequently anonymous, epitaphs and libels. She argues that in the absence of an identifiable author, the compilers of manuscript collections group poems by subject matter, sometimes without regard for politics or tone. Claiming that authorship in manuscripts was less “fixed” and “defined” than in print culture, she points out that compilers felt free to alter, add to, and correct texts; they acted as “author, publisher, and reader as they collected and copied items” (27). Janet Starnier offers an analysis of numerous versions of “Jacke on Both Sides” to illustrate an instance in which readers, not authors, “control texts” (44).

After lamenting the relative neglect of anonymous plays, Thomas Cartelli makes a perceptive and compelling case that *Woodstock* belongs to a group of dramas, including Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI*, Marlowe’s *Edward II*, and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, that explores political dissidence in relation to the power struggles of the 1590s. His discussion of *Woodstock* is insightful, but the analysis of contemporary court history is oversimplified. On the contemporary political scene, he sees “ambitious *apparatchiks* headed by Robert Cecil” and aristocratic dissidents “led by Essex on the one hand and Raleigh on the other” (90). It is troubling to have Essex characterized as egotistical, unreliable, vain, and ostentatious. Surely, Robert Cecil had as much, or more, to do with the “leasing out” of government prerogatives, i.e., monopolies, as Essex, and it should be noted that Raleigh profited mightily from his monopoly on tin.

In a more theoretical essay, entitled “Dealing with Dramatic Anonymity,” Barbara Howard Traister sets out to examine the contemporary treatment of the very popular *Mucedorus* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. It should be noted that even though *Mucedorus* was anonymous, it was associated with Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*, itself a frequently reprinted text, and this association may help to explain its popularity. Traister argues that grouping together the devil plays, *Faustus* and *The Devil is an Ass*, and reading them intertextually adds to our appreciation of them.

In what is likely to be the most controversial of the essays in this volume, “The Anonymous Shakespeare: Heresy, Authorship, and the Anxiety of Orthodoxy,” Bruce Danner may succeed in annoying all of those actively engaged in debating the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays. Danner labels the academically orthodox as

“Stratfordians”: their position is that William Shakespeare of Stratford, Warwickshire was the author of the plays now understood to have been written by Shakespeare. The anti-Stratfordians consist of the “Oxfordians,” who think that the Earl of Oxford was the real author of the Shakespearean corpus, and those who propose another candidate such as Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, or Queen Elizabeth. This essay has already generated a review on Amazon.com arguing that an “anonymous Shakespeare” may be a “necessary transition that will one day allow Stratfordians to discard their discredited theory.” This overstates Danner’s position. He is not interested in the authorship question, but in theorizing about why Stratfordians caricature anti-Stratfordians. Claming that the Shakespearean profession itself is the “author of anti-Stratfordianism,” he charges that professional scholars have failed either to portray or to theorize the figure of Shakespeare beyond the “sphere of anonymity.”

It is true that anonymous works receive less attention than those works that can be attributed to a canonical author, and this collection succeeds in suggesting ways in which carefully selected anonymous works may be usefully approached thematically and historically, and as specific genres. The implications of the attacks on “attribution studies,” however, raise troubling questions unanswered by this collection: Is it sufficient, or desirable, for an editor to construct an author’s canon by listing every play or poem ever attributed to him or her historically? This kind of editorial approach would minimize the importance of authorship, and, indeed, an edition constructed along these lines was recently awarded an MLA prize.

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