[Review of:] Shakespeare's Errant Texts: Textual Form and Linguistic Style in Shakesperean 'Bad' Quartos and Co-authored Plays / Lene B. Petersen

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Shakespeare's Errant Texts is devoted to two kinds of playtexts: the "bad quartos" and plays written in co-authorship. It is now generally accepted that Shakespeare wrote a number of plays in collaboration: Titus Andronicus (with George Peele), Timon of Athens (with Thomas Middleton), Pericles (with George Wilkins), Henry VIII and The Two Noble Kinsmen (with John Fletcher); and quite possibly the Henry VI plays, Edward III, and Sir Thomas More, with several other, mostly unidentified, playwrights. As for the "bad quartos", the term designates a group of texts of which longer and, in some ways, better versions have survived; they include the first quartos of Romeo and Juliet (1597), Henry V (1600), The Merry Wives of Windsor (1602) and Hamlet (1603). The label owes its origin to what is known as the New Bibliography, in particular to the work of W. W. Greg and Alfred Pollard, who, just over a century ago, first argued that mémorial reconstruction by actors accounts for the make-up of certain Shakespeare texts. Long marginalized in Shakespeare studies, these "bad quartos" have attracted a lot of attention in recent years because they are now thought to provide evidence about early modern performance practices. The New Cambridge Shakespeare series, for instance, includes editions of these "early quartos". Lene B. Petersen deserves credit for including in her study two other long-neglected but highly interesting texts, early German versions of Shakespeare plays, Der bestrafte Brudermond (Fraticide Punished), based on Hamlet, and Romio und Julietta, a seventeenth-century version of Romeo and Juliet.

The professed aim of Petersen’s study is a "merger of scholarly approaches" which combines "early modern attribution studies with textual studies", a laudable aim which is not helped by her book’s two-part structure. The first part is devoted to the "bad quartos", while the second addresses authorial style, particularly in early modern collaborative playtexts. The result is a book with two studies of unequal length, 141 pages for the first part and ninety-one pages for the second, whose relationship is too rarely close enough to justify putting them together.

At the heart of the first part is the argument that what accounts for the textual relationship between the long and short versions of Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet is a process of textual transmission similar to that of orally transmitted "traditional folk material". Among scholars of such material, Petersen claims, it is "generally accepted that the traditional tale or ballad when submitted to transmission will gradually shed non-relevant material". The same, she argues, happened to early modern dramatic texts. These assumptions force Petersen into a revisionist position according to which the actors’ effect on the texts was not only extensive but also beneficial. Whereas many twentieth-century scholars considered that the omissions in the short versions partly accounted for their poor quality, Petersen argues that they result from the "actors’ involvement in a memory-related propensity to skip trivial details when presenting the text". Whereas twentieth-century scholars denigrated the "bad quartos" for piratical origins and pervasive textual corruptions, Petersen reduces Shakespeare to a dramatist whose long playtexts are pervaded by "trivial details" and marred by "characters, speeches and scenes that are empty of dramatic function".

The second part of Shakespeare’s Errant Texts "explores how accurately dramatic authorship can be attributed on a basis of linguistic habit". Petersen has constructed an extensive electronic corpus of 287 playtexts (available online) with which she proposes to "explore the use of function words and functional grammatical units", in an attempt to ascertain the plays’ authorial profile. Some of the results of her analyses are so implausible that it is unclear what purpose they serve. The Bloody Banquet, by Dekker and Middleton, comes out as "Shakespeare", and Lyly’s Woman in the Moon as "Marlowe". Pericles is assigned to William Rowley, leading Petersen to speculate, despite the evidence for Shakespeare and Wilkins’s authorship, "that Rowley could also have had a hand" in it. Timon of Athens is classified as Chapman, prompting the argument that "Chapman was . . . a man who was conceivably in the right place and with the right sort of views to have had a hand in Timon". Speculations based on tests which produce such transparently flawed results will give authorship attribution studies a bad name.

The final chapter of the second part returns to Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet, and it is in this chapter, which tries to analyse by means of "stylo-statistical methods" the extent to which Shakespeare’s "authorial profile" survives in the "bad quartos", that the merger of textual studies and authorship attribution studies might be thought to come to fruition. Petersen’s conclusion is that the authorial profile is still present but "less clear" than in the plays’ long versions. The chapter is marred, however, by Petersen’s belief that Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet "both . . . survive in three substantive English versions". This is true for Hamlet (Q1, 1603; Q2 1604–05; and the First Folio, 1623), but it isn’t for Romeo and Juliet, of which only Q1 (1597) and Q2 (1599) are substantive, whereas the Folio text is not; it omits the Prologue, adds a few stage directions and regularizes some speech headings but is otherwise a reprint of the third quarto (1609), which is in turn a reprint of the second quarto. Unaware of this, Petersen presents and comments on a series of statistics and figures which distinguish between the stylistic profile of not only the first and the second quarto but also the second quarto and the Folio. These flaws suggest that Petersen has spent too much time feeding texts into an electronic database and too little time reading them.