Literary Shakespeare Revisited

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Ten years ago, a groundbreaking study mounted an important challenge to the assumption that Shakespeare was only interested in writing his plays for the stage. Now, on the publication of a second edition of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* and a follow-up book exploring the playwright’s place within the book trade, Lukas Erne looks back on the reception of one of the 2003 TLS Books of the Year.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Oxford in the mid-1990s, I first became interested in questions that were to find their way into *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*. Much evidence points to early modern performance times of two to three hours, so why are many Shakespeare play texts too long to be played in such a short time? If acting companies were opposed to the publication of plays, as the received wisdom had it, why did about half of Shakespeare’s plays appear in print during his lifetime? Why did quite a few plays by Shakespeare not only reach print but do so in more than one version, with short and long texts? If printed playbooks constituted ephemera, as scholars had argued, why did excerpts from them appear in literary anthologies and printed commonplace books alongside passages from *The Faerie Queene* and other prestigious poems? When I had completed the doctorate and had more time to pursue these questions, the answers I arrived at led to the argument that Shakespeare was not only a theatrical but also a literary dramatist, who wanted his plays to be published and read as well as staged, views which put me at odds with some long-held opinions in Shakespeare studies.

Soon after publication in early 2003, a full-page review appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and many others followed, about three dozen in all. Scholars to whom I had looked up in admiration called *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* ‘one of those rare books that changes how Shakespeare is perceived and edited’ and claimed that it ‘achieves nothing less than the complete undoing of our understanding of Shakespeare as author’ and ‘sets out probably the most exhilarating change in our image of Shakespeare as a writer for decades’. At the end of 2003, the TLS named it a book of the year. In the following year Richard Wilson organized a conference at the University of Lancaster to channel discussion of its argument.

While the book earned me recognition from some, others passionately disagreed with it. A long review found not a single good thing to say about it and claimed it was informed by post-9/11 trauma. Other reviewers accused me of ‘anti-theatrical prejudice’ or of trying to start ‘another uncritical movement’. As recently as 2011, a fellow academic held up a copy of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* at a conference and mimed machine-gunning it. Others have responded less passionately and more thoughtfully in articles or books, voicing their disagreement with certain aspects of my argument, concerning questions of publication, performance, authorship, or editing.

A criticism that struck me as persuasive is that *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* ‘spends surprisingly little time exploring the printing houses or book stalls’. My book is chiefly concerned with questions of Shakespearean intentions and agency, with what Shakespeare did to earn himself a readerly reception. This is different from but intimately related to what the book trade did to earn Shakespeare a readerly reception. As I fully realized only in the years after completing *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, both perspectives are necessary to provide a full account of
what led to Shakespeare’s readerly dissemination in his own time. As a result, I have written a follow-up monograph, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade*, published earlier this year (and reviewed in these pages). Whereas *Literary Dramatist* argues that Shakespeare wanted to be read on a large scale (and crafted his plays accordingly), *Book Trade* shows that the ambition was fulfilled.

What has happened to some of the other arguments of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* since its original publication? The casual statement, often repeated in the last century, that Shakespeare was indifferent to the publication of his plays now seems to have largely disappeared. Tiffany Stern among others has increased our awareness of how theatre companies and publishers shared interests rather than competed with each other. The view that Shakespeare’s playbooks would have been treated as more than ephemera has been strengthened by Alan Farmer, Henry Woudhuysen and others. That Shakespeare was aware of his emerging authorship as a poet and dramatist in print, concerned with authorship in the fiction of his plays and poems, has been convincingly argued by several scholars, including Patrick Cheney and MacDonald Jackson. As for editing, John Jowett has diagnosed ‘a new emphasis at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one that pares back the theatrical dimension and asserts on new grounds the presence of Shakespeare the author in the field of textual studies’.

Whereas Shakespearean authorship was in decline late in the twentieth century, it seems to have fully recovered early in the twenty-first.

Coinciding with the publication of *Shakespeare and the Book Trade*, a second edition of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* has been issued by Cambridge University Press. It adds a preface in which I review and intervene in the debate the book has triggered, and a bibliography with reviews, articles and books that respond to or build on the first edition.

Lukas Erne is Professor of English at the University of Geneva. The second edition of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* is published by Cambridge University Press, price £18.99. A review of *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* appears on page 50.