Shakespeare's *Sonnets* that differ from Foster's estimates and largely confirm the preliminary results achieved in Anne Lake Prescott's and our "When Did Shakespeare Write *Sonnets* 1609?" (*Studies in Philology* 88 [1991]: 69–109). He says most of the sonnets were composed late; we believe that many were written around 1593–94, when sonnets had become popular in England, although many were revised or added later, sometimes much later. Shaxicon is a valuable introductory tool, but other evidence, including the contexts of each pair of words produced by it, must supplement it.

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To the Editor:

Almost a decade ago, in his *Elegy by W. S.: A Study in Attribution* (1989), Donald W. Foster first explored the possibility that Shakespeare might have written *A Funeral Elegy*. A product of meticulous research and scrupulous argument, the book reached no firm conclusion on this question, but in subsequent presentations to the Shakespeare Association and the MLA, Foster has gone from cautious advocacy to unequivocal certainty. Now in his October 1996 *PMLA* article he concludes that "*A Funeral Elegy* belongs hereafter with Shakespeare's poems and plays . . ." (1082).

In the article Foster almost completely ignores the strong evidence against Shakespeare's authorship, much of which he considers in his book. Lines 139–40 (in which "country" means home area, a sense in common usage as late as Jane Austen), 145–78, and 557–60 clearly imply that WS committed a youthful indiscretion and will learn from it to avoid scandal in the future. I find it impossible to believe that at forty-eight and about to retire Shakespeare could have been concerned about his "endangered youth" and "days of youth." Foster explained in 1989: "It is certainly possible in the phrase 'the hopes of my endangered youth' to envision a poet who is speaking as a young man, perhaps a man even younger than Peter himself. Indeed, those readers who are disinclined to accept Shakespearean authorship of the poem may find here an insurmountable objection, one that counterbalances all evidence that Shakespeare may have written the poem" (*Elegy by W. S.* 176).

The elegy in its entirety provides the most compelling evidence against its attribution to Shakespeare. That the supreme master of language, at the close of his career, could have written this work of unrelieved banality of thought and expression, lacking a single memorable phrase in its 578 lines, is to me unthinkable. The poem is not simply uninspired, it is inept in its stumbling rhythm, its conventional and flat diction, its empty sententiousness. Nowhere in the work do I encounter Shakespeare's creative signature, despite Foster's astounding statement that the poetry of the *Elegy* is "no better, *if no worse*, than what may be found in *Henry VIII* or *The Two Nobel Kinsmen*" (*Elegy by W. S.* 201; my emphasis). Selecting almost any passage at random—for example, 525–36—I see a pedestrian prosiness, an absence of concreteness and specificity, a lack of any true affective quality.

What I find most distressing in Foster's article is his confident assertion that study of *A Funeral Elegy* will open "new critical directions," presumably for the study of Shakespeare's work generally (1092). That inclusion of the poem in the canon, already promised for three leading editions of the collected works, will legitimate *A Funeral Elegy* as a proper, even exciting, object of critical and biographical study is a dismal prospect indeed.

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To the Editor:

I read Donald W. Foster's essay with great interest. Partly on the basis of information supplied in the essay, I believe that the author of *A Funeral Elegy* was Elizabeth Cary rather than Shakespeare.

The subject of the *Elegy*, William Peter, was born in Devonshire in 1582 and lived in Oxfordshire from the late 1590s to 1609, when he returned to Devonshire, where he married Margaret Brewton. He was murdered in January 1612. Shakespeare was eighteen years older and lived mainly in London during Peter's entire adult life; he would have had little opportunity to have become a close friend of Peter. Cary was three or four years younger than Peter and lived mainly in Oxfordshire during Peter's more than ten years of residence in the vicinity. Cary married in 1602, but the union was arranged and apparently loveless. In the early years of her marriage Cary did not reside with her husband, who left England in 1604 and returned in 1608, the year before Peter left Oxfordshire and Cary gave birth to her first child. (Information about Cary's life can be found in the introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson [Berkeley: U of California P, 1994].)

After noting the grief felt by Peter's friends, the *Elegy* poet singles out one of them:

> Amongst them all, she who those nine of years
> Liv'd fellow to his counsels and his bed

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