

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.

SIDNEY THOMAS
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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

Hath the most share in loss: for I in hers
 Feel what distemperature this chance hath bred.
 (511–14)

The “she” mentioned in this passage cannot have been Peter’s wife, who was only nineteen at his death, but may have been a friend of Cary or even Cary herself. In the quoted passage the poet deeply empathizes with the woman who shared Peter’s bed.

If Cary was the author of the *Elegy*, why did she not identify herself? In the seventeenth century a married noblewoman’s public display of grief for a male commoner would have provoked gossip. Gossip and scandal are major themes of the poem. For example, the poet mentions having been the victim of scandalous rumors in the past (137–48). It makes sense that Cary would have disguised her identity. Why not adopt the initials of a leading poet-dramatist? Cary was an aspiring poet and a closet dramatist. It would be flattering if someone surmised that her poem was written by Shakespeare.

The unusual poetic form of the *Elegy* is identical to that of Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam*. Each consists mainly of quatrains of iambic pentameter rhyming *abab*, punctuated irregularly by couplets. The poetic style and skills exhibited in the *Elegy* are similar to those evident in *Mariam*: the versification is competent, the ideas are clearly and simply expressed, and imagery and figurative language occur infrequently and are commonplace. In 578 lines there are no striking images, metaphors, or puns, no vivid phrasings, no flashes of poetic brilliance. Nowhere in all Shakespeare’s works, not even in his least admired writings, can one read so many consecutive lines of undistinguished poetry.

Foster provides evidence of lexical similarities between the *Elegy* and Shakespeare’s works. But he finds comparable similarities between the *Elegy* and *Mariam*: “A text that WS drew on but that Shakespeare is not known to have read is Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam*. . . . Cary’s play has a significantly high lexical match with *A Funeral Elegy*. . . . Examples of the correspondence between *Mariam* and *A Funeral Elegy* can be multiplied” (1085). The lexical similarities between the *Elegy* and Shakespeare’s works may have arisen because Cary was influenced by the many works of Shakespeare that had been published by 1612. It is more likely that Cary encountered Shakespeare’s published works than that Shakespeare had access to Cary’s as-yet-unpublished manuscript of *Mariam*.

Why does Foster not present an argument that Cary could not have written the *Elegy*? Perhaps he assumes that the author could not have been a noblewoman on the grounds that in the seventeenth century noblewomen did

not typically write elegies for male commoners. But noblewomen of the period also did not typically publish original plays—the only one to do so was Elizabeth Cary. Although Cary was not a great poet, she was not a typical noblewoman, and the *Elegy* nowhere specifies the sex or social class of the poet. It is more likely that Cary wrote the *Elegy* for a fellow resident of Oxfordshire under the cover of the initials of a poet whose work she admired than that Shakespeare wrote 578 consecutive lines of prosaic poetry in memory of a person he had little opportunity to encounter.

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Editor’s note. During the final stages in the preparation of Donald Foster’s essay, an error was introduced into the formula on page 1091, the denominator being accidentally inverted and the key misreported. The editor regrets this error. A correction is given in the erratum on page 434 below.

Reply:

A Funeral Elegy seems to have displaced *Primary Colors* as a favorite attributional guessing game. Scholars wanting to avoid ascribing this funeral text to Shakespeare have tossed other names into the ring for twelve years, beginning in 1985 with Stanley Wells’s prepublication advice to me to consider the Devon poet William Strode. Yet the identification of WS with William Shakespeare stands unshaken. James Hirsh’s speculation about Elizabeth Cary illustrates why this is so. That Cary did not write WS’s elegy is obvious from internal biographical evidence, as well as from Cary’s lexicon, grammatical accident, syntax, and prosody. During the time that Hirsh imagines Cary and William Peter becoming close friends in Oxford, she was in Burford and then in Berkhamstead, living under authority so strict that she was often not permitted even to read.

Because Jacobean society was a small world and closely knit, tenuous evidence can be adduced to identify WS as almost anyone, including William Shute and William Strachey (both published by Thorp) or the playwrights William (not “Wentworth”) Smith, author of *The Hector of Germany* (1613), and John Ford (an associate of William Peter). Katherine Duncan-Jones first nominated William Strode (father to Wells’s 1985 nominee), then William Sclater (a Puritan divine). I wait to see whether Duncan-Jones will present internal evidence or will even include external evidence that I have made available: the Strodes were distantly related to the Peters