

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, (1942, 1949)

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"Recently, J. M. Robertson has been the most outstanding proponent of the 'disintegration of Shakespeare,' a view which would leave Shakespeare with little more than the authorship of a few scenes in the best-known plays. According to this school of thought, even Julius Caesar and The Merchant of Venice are supposed to be nothing but a hotchpotch of passages by Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Kyd, and several other playwrights of the time.

Robertson's method consists largely in tracing little verbal tags, discovering inconsistencies and literary parallels. The method is extremely uncertain and willful. It seems based on a false assumption and a vicious circle: we know what is Shakespeare's work <sup>certain</sup> from/contemporary testimony (the inclusion in the Folio, the entries under his name in the Stationer's Register, etc.); but Robertson, by an arbitrary act of aesthetic judgment, selects only certain purple passages as Shakespeare's and denies his authorship of anything that falls below that standard or that shows similarities to the practice of contemporary dramatists. Yet there is no reason why Shakespeare could not have written poorly or carelessly or why he could not have written in various styles imitating his contemporaries. On the other hand, the older premise that every word in the Folio is Shakespeare's cannot be upheld in its entirety.

"No wholly definitive conclusion can be reached on some of these points, since Elizabethan drama was a communal art in which close collaboration was a very real practice. The individual authors were frequently scarcely differentiable by their styles. Two authors might well themselves have been unable to distinguish between their shares. Collaboration sometimes poses almost hopeless tasks to the literary detective. Even in the case of Beaumont and Fletcher, in which we have the advantage of having work definitely only by Fletcher written after the death of Beaumont, the division between their shares is not established beyond controversy; and the case is completely lost with The Revenger's Tragedy, which has been assigned to Webster, Tourneur, Middleton, and Marston alternatively or in various combinations." (pages 59 and 60)