

Foster may speak of a general tendency among his small totals, but I remain doubtful.

CHARLES W. HIEATT  
Cambridge, England

To the Editor:

I appreciate Don Foster's generosity in giving versions of Shaxicon on disk to colleagues. Charles Hieatt and I have made use of it since 1993, while waiting for part of the now complete Shakespeare Dictionary materials from the Shakespeare Database in Münster, a project associated with the names of Marvin Spevack and H. J. Neuhaus.

Foster's formula and the graphs constructed from it develop a principally accurate picture, based on statistically appreciable quantities (1090–91). However, I'm puzzled to find in one numerator a total of rare words including all their repetitions but in both denominators totals of rare words excluding their repetitions. And in fact Foster finally multiplies instead of dividing as his formula asks. [Editor's note. See the correction on page 434.]

Unless you've used Shaxicon, you can't appreciate its power and (as we see it) its pitfalls. A "rare word" in Foster's sense is one used in up to twelve of Shakespeare's plays, and the count embraces all possible inflectional forms of the word, because any competent English speaker who can use one form has mastery of them all. *Sums* as a verb is one word with *summ'd*, *summeth*, *hath summed*, *are summed*, and so on, but not with the nouns *sum*, *sums*, *sum's*, and *sums'*. These nouns together form another word, as in a dictionary entry. Consequently, for Shaxicon the difference between the verb *sum* and the noun *sum* is as great as the difference between *sum* (n. or vb.) and *dearth*, an arrangement that seems at best approximative. Second, Shaxicon (contrary to dictionaries and to our practice) treats two nonfinite forms of a verb as separate words. For Shaxicon the phrases "defeated enemy" and "defeating the enemy" would entail two words distinct from the finite verb, although both the participial adjective and the gerund are automatically available to any competent English speaker who says, "She defeated enemies." This turns hosts of unrare words into rare ones. There are other important difficulties, some unavoidable.

Foster seems to me to impose on this structure loads that it can't bear. For instance, Foster says that because Shakespeare played the part of Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors* at various times, he held Egeon rare words in creative memory when he wrote *Henry VIII*. Thus, although Egeon rare words form only 11.9% of the rare words in *Errors*, they make up 22.0% of the *Errors* rare words ap-

pearing in *Henry VIII* (1090). But this increase in percentage amounts to only 6 words of the 853 rare words in Shakespeare's presumed part of *Henry VIII*, a statistically trivial quantity.

Vocabulary can identify its owner, but a word relates to context as well as to user. In a mass of Shakespeare's words, contexts may cancel one another out, and the author may be revealed; however, a set of 6 words out of 853 reliably indicates only the fictional events being evoked. This observation is especially important for Foster's claim that Shakespearean authorship of *A Funeral Elegy* is more assured because 40.5% of the *Errors* rare words in the poem are Egeon words. Foster neglects the point that Egeon's speeches and *Elegy* are both mostly lugubrious recitals of disaster. How many of the insignificant number of rare words common to the two texts are more likely to be required by shared contexts than by shared authorship? Only attentive study of the contexts of each pair of words will give an answer. Foster's corresponding point that only 11.4% of the *Errors* rare words shared with Jonson's *Every Man in His Humor* are Egeon words is unsurprising: Jonson's comedy is unlugubrious (1092).

Even the persona of the poet, deduced in this case from forty-four works, is an equally valid datum, faulty as it has sometimes proved in the past. Some of Foster's evidence (e.g., the Shakespearean *who* for *which* [1084]) is striking, yet I still prefer to believe that the persona behind the Tudor commonplaces and sanctimony in *Elegy* belongs to some other WS, a sometime Oxonian under strong Shakespearean influence (as Foster describes John Ford in another connection).

Admittedly, none of WS's other works have been identified, but nor have those of many an Anon. And where are the outpourings of William Peter's "well-abled quill" (*Elegy* 238)? I'm not convinced by Foster's comments in his annotations of the poem or by the implausible notion of the Bard's hoping to regain credit in Oxford, where malice had ruined his youthful hopes (*Elegy* 145–52; note to 154). The poet describes Peter as "there" (presumably Oxford) and then "here," where parents bear witness to children—presumably around Exeter, not Stratford (154, 156–74). But was even Oxford meant? Are "there" and "here" ambiguous? In an article forthcoming in *Shakespeare Studies* in 1997, Katherine Duncan-Jones shows that "education and new being" (152) likely means "birth and upbringing." So "there" may mean not Oxford but the West Country of both Peter and her William Sclater (who, unlike Peter, attended Cambridge, not Oxford; see Foster 1092).

Using Shaxicon, furthermore, Charles Hieatt and I have arrived at dates for the composition and revision of

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.

A. KENT HIEATT  
Deep River, CT

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  
Syracuse, NY

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