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The "author's drift" in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*: A Poetics of Reflection

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This essay focuses on the role of the author in *Troilus and Cressida* as a stage-play that is highly sensitive to the role of the book in shaping expectations of its theatre audience. The argument takes from Lukas Erne the notion that when Shakespeare wrote many of his plays, he was aware that they were making their way into print, but aims to qualify the idea of Shakespeare as a literary dramatist who arranges his work for publication by considering the ways in which *Troilus and Cressida* as a stage-play is already literary to begin with. Focusing on the scene in which Achilles and Ulysses discuss an author and his book, it explores the poetics of reflection that seems to be at work between characters, authors, and audiences, the page and the stage. Emphasising ways in which Shakespeare responds to Jonson's construction of an author, the essay questions the distinction between Shakespeare as the author of strictly theatrical or literary texts by considering how the book can be performative and the theatre literary.

'Tis not the wholesome sharp morality
Or modest anger of a satiric spirit
That hurts or wounds the body of a state,
But the sinister application
Of the malicious ignorant and base
Interpreter, who will distort and strain
The general scope and purpose of an author
To his particular and private spleen.

– Virgil, in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* (5.3.132-39)

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While Hamlet looks at a book, Polonius asks "What is the matter, my lord?" (2.2.193). "Between who?" (2.2.194), responds Hamlet, as he changes Polonius's matter as content of the book to matter as subject of a quarrel. "What's the matter?" is a question asked by characters in *Troilus and Cressida* a total of ten times.[1] The matter in *Troilus and Cressida* includes the Matter of Troy, the "quarrel" (Prologue 9) between Trojans and Greeks, but it can also be read as referring to the so-called Poets' War in late Elizabethan England. In *Shakespeare and the Poets' War*, James P. Bednarz maps Shakespeare's creative strategies in relation to Jonson's:

> The Poets' War – the most important theatrical controversy of the late Elizabethan stage – commenced when Jonson, the younger playwright, became "Jonson," the poet, by resisting Shakespeare's influence through the invention of a new critical drama that he called "comical satire." The war continued with added momentum when Shakespeare, in response, molded his comedies to accommodate Jonson's satiric perspective while eschewing its self-confident didacticism. And the battle ended only after Shakespeare, having been stung by Jonson's attack on the Lord Chamberlain's Men in *Poetaster*, "purged" his rival in the guise of Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*. (1)

In Bednarz's reading, the matter of *Troilus and Cressida* was "molded" to respond to Jonson's satire – a response that will be considered in this essay.

Another kind of matter in the history of *Troilus and Cressida* is the reams of previously published Troy literature, including Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the first book printed in English, the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, translated and printed by William Caxton about 1473-74. However, although the story of Troy was often revered in Shakespeare's time, that of *Troilus and Cressida* had, for some, become a bit of a joke. For example, Petruchio in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* names his spaniel "Troilus" (4.1.131), while in *Twelfth Night* Feste "would play Lord Pandarus" (3.1.45) to beg that another coin be added to the one he has already been given. For Shakespeare, then, the matter of *Troilus and Cressida* was even more layered than it had been for Chaucer, who had his own "auctour[s]" to think about. Unlike Chaucer, who never saw his writing reach print, Shakespeare was aware from early in

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[1] The question "What's the matter?" occurs at 2.1.49, 51, 53, and 4.2.43, 45, 58, 77, 80, 82, 86. The words "matter" or "matters" occur twenty-five times in this play, more often than in any other Shakespeare plays except *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Quotations from *Troilus and Cressida* are taken from the *New Cambridge* edition (ed. Dawson) unless otherwise stated. All other quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from the *Norton Shakespeare* (ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al.).

his career that his plays existed as printed matter. "Once a thing is put in writing," says Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, "the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place" (158). Shakespeare's compositions were enacted on stage and read on the printed page, and he probably thought about how his writing reflected his own authorship.[2]

The notion that Shakespeare was concerned about his plays reaching print has been explored by Lukas Erne:

> When Shakespeare's sonnets were published, the majority of the plays Shakespeare had written up to that date *were* available in print. Consequently, [. . .] He could not help knowing that his plays were being read and reread, printed and reprinted, excerpted and anthologized as he was writing more plays. (25)

The studies in *Shakespeare's Book* (Meek, Rickard and Wilson) similarly contend that Shakespeare wrote plays with an awareness of their future publication, and that "the representation of writing, reading and print [is included] within his works themselves" (13). By using printing metaphors and well-known books such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare creates literary landscapes for the stage, even before the plays are published in print. It is this notion of a literary landscape on the stage that this essay seeks to explore.

More specifically, this essay focuses on the role of the author in *Troilus and Cressida* as a stage-play. *Troilus and Cressida* seems to be highly sensitive to the role of the book in shaping expectations of its theatre audience. Jeff Dolven and Sean Keilen explain that "Shakespeare returns again and again to scenes where a character is perusing a letter or turning a page or brandishing or just talking about a book" (15). By considering one such scene in *Troilus and Cressida*, this essay aims to qualify the idea of Shakespeare as a literary dramatist who arranges his work for publication by considering the ways in which Shakespeare's plays as staged are already literary to begin with. *Troilus and Cressida* produces characters that read each other and discuss ideas from books. This essay argues that it is Shakespeare's awareness of stage and page that produces a rather self-conscious reflection on the author's drift, an awareness that is sensitive to the propensity for an author's reputation to drift.

An "author" is mentioned three times in *Troilus and Cressida.* The Prologue states:

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[2] It is certainly not surprising that when Richard Dutton looked for "The Birth of the Author" he turned to the first publication of this play (1609) which in its epistle positions audiences and the author. This epistle only exists in the second state of the publication (see Gregory 193-95).

> And hither am I come,
> A prologue armed, but not in confidence
> Of author's pen or actor's voice, but suited
> In like conditions as our argument (Prologue 22-25)

Later, Troilus promises Cressida:

> True swains in love shall in the world to come
> Approve their truth by Troilus: when their rhymes,
> Full of protest, of oath and big compare,
> Want similes, truth tired with iteration [. . .]
> As truth's authentic author to be cited,
> "As true as Troilus" shall crown up the verse
> And sanctify the numbers. (3.2.153-56, 161-63)

Finally, when Ulysses reads a book written by "A strange fellow" (3.3.95), he explains the "author's drift" (3.3.113) to Achilles.[3] In each case, the author remains elusive – mentioned, only to be hidden. As the Prologue speaks without "confidence / Of author's pen", the author appears in the negative, only represented by a metonymic pen. In Troilus's speech the author occurs as someone to be cited in a "world to come," part of Troilus's imagination, his rhetoric and rhyme. But in a play where Troilus asks "what's aught but as 'tis valued?" (2.2.52), "truth's authentic author" is unsurprisingly hard to locate.[4] Both the "author's pen" in the Prologue and Troilus's "authentic author" can be read as stand-ins for Shakespeare, offering "fictions of authorship" (Cheney 147). The Prologue in *Troilus and Cressida*, however, speaks without the author or the voice of the actors, plainly telling the audience to "Like, or find fault, do as your pleasures are, / Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war" (Prologue 30-31). *Troilus and Cressida* thus creates a tension between the importance of an author, however distant, and the power of an audience's view, described (appropriately for this play) in terms of pleasure and war.

The war mentioned in the Prologue can be read as the Trojan War, but it can also be seen as an allusion to the Poets' War. Although the armed Prologue only exists in Shakespeare's first folio, it is usually taken

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[3] Although it is not actually stated that Ulysses holds a book (rather than a scroll for example), it is just the kind of anachronism employed in Shakespearean drama. See, for example, the scene in *Julius Caesar* where Brutus keeps a "book" (4.2.303) "in the pocket of [his] gown" (4.2.304) with the "leaf turned down" (4.2.324).

[4] But what is an "authentic author"? In George Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*, Nestor fights with "his new-drawn authentic sword" (Book VIII, l. 74). This instance of "authentic," according to the *O.E.D.*, means "Belonging to himself, own, proper."

to refer to Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* which was performed in 1601, probably just before *Troilus and Cressida*, and published the year after. In Jonson's play an armed Prologue enters to scare off the monster, Envy, and protect the author. Jonson's monster comes to "damn the Author" (Induction 46) and to "tear / His work and him" (Induction 52-53). The Prologue then enters with a "well erected confidence" (Induction 74) saying:

> If any muse why I salute the stage
> An armèd Prologue, know, 'tis a dangerous age,
> Wherein who writes had need present his scenes
> Forty-fold proof (Induction 66-69)

Shakespeare's use of an armed Prologue signals his recognition of this "dangerous age" while alluding to Jonson's construction of his own authorship in the induction to *Poetaster*. David Bevington suggests that Shakespeare's Prologue "introduces a play that will not choose the Jonsonian path of authorial self-assertion and certitude. Shakespeare's play chooses instead to explore disillusionment and multiple perspectives in an experimental way that implicitly criticises Jonson's more dogmatic approach" (10). However, as well as promising a play of "multiple perspective," the reference to *Poetaster* and the author's bodyguard promises a play that will engage with the Poets' War and satire. This so-called "War of the Theatres" was highly sensitive to the part the author had to play in the production of the play's meaning for audiences and "participates in the definition of the emergent category of 'literature'" (Gieskes 77). This can be seen, especially, in Jonson's Prologue's reference to the author as a "writer," and Shakespeare's Prologue's reference to the "author's pen." Satirical verses or epigrams were forbidden to be printed by the Bishops' Ban of 1599. According to Oscar James Campbell, "Jonson and Marston immediately sought to write plays that would serve as effective substitutes for these banished satires" (vii). In this reading, the comical satires are thus a conscious theatrical substitute for poetic verse meant to be read. The armed Prologue, opening Shakespeare's play in *medias res*, therefore seems to mark an intention to be more literary and to raise the issue of authorship.[5] The Prologue speaks without confidence of the author's pen, in contrast to Jonson's Prologue who speaks for the author, and Jonson's play that contains a range of classical poets as characters such as Ovid, Horace and Virgil. When *Troilus and Cressida*

[5] Bevington explains that "Horace's *Ars Poetica*, 146-8 (LCL, 462-63), commends the rule especially suited to a play on the Trojan war" (355).

is read in response to Ben Jonson and the Poets' War the issue of authorship is particularly pressing.

In his essay, "What is an author?", Foucault wondered "at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes" (281). In a seminal passage of *Troilus and Cressida* which has been largely ignored by critics, Shakespeare stages classical heroes who discuss an author. In the middle of the play, Ulysses arranges for the Greek heroes to walk by Achilles' tent "strangely" (3.3.71), thus performing Achilles' fall from grace and loss of reputation. Achilles asks: "What are you reading?" (3.3.95). Ulysses answers:

> A strange fellow here
> Writes me that man, how dearly ever parted,
> How much in having, or without or in,
> Cannot make boast to have that which he hath,
> Nor feels not what he owes, but by reflection –
> As when his virtues shining upon others
> Heat them, and they retort that heat again
> To the givers. (3.3.95-102)

It is not clear whether Ulysses paraphrases or quotes directly from the book he is reading. Critics have searched in vain for a direct source.[6] Ulysses suggests that a man only knows himself by reflection; this notion displays not only ways of reading people, but also ways of seeing or reading actors on stage and, obviously, ways of reading a book and its author. Achilles responds:

> This is not strange, Ulysses:
> The beauty that is borne here in the face
> The bearer knows not, but commends itself
> To other's eyes; nor doth the eye itself,
> That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
> Not going from itself, but eye to eye opposed,
> Salutes each other with each other's form,
> For speculation turns not to itself
> Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
> Where it may see itself. This is not strange at all. (3.3.102-11)

Achilles says that this idea is nothing new; it "is not strange." As Bevington notes (365), the idea is "familiar" from Shakespeare's own *Julius Caesar*, written just a few years before *Troilus and Cressida*: "Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?" (1.2.53), Cassius asks. Brutus replies:

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[6] For possible sources, see Bevington (365).

"No, Cassius, for the eye sees not itself / But by reflection, by some other things" (1.2.54-55). Cassius and several letters act as mirrors telling Brutus to "see [him]self" (2.1.46) as a restorer of the Republic. So for those who had seen *Julius Caesar* performed, there is the possibility that the "strange fellow" (3.3.95) *was* Shakespeare.

Ulysses responds that he is not so much interested in the idea, which is "familiar," as in "the author's drift." In his "circumstance," the author, according to Ulysses, shows that unless a man communicates his qualities to others and they are reflected back to him, it is as if he did not have them. The obvious meaning of "circumstance" in the following passage is argument; however, it could also be read in its more modern sense, as situation. In this reading, the author of a book is in a similar situation to the hypothetical man who is not "lord of anything, [. . .] Till he communicate his parts to others":

> I do not strain at the position –
> It is familiar – but at the author's drift,
> Who in his circumstance expressly proves
> That no man is the lord of anything,
> Though in and of him there be much consisting,
> Till he communicate his parts to others;
> Nor doth he of himself know them for aught
> Till he behold them formed in the applause
> Where they're extended, who like an arch, reverb'rate
> The voice again, or like a gate of steel
> Fronting the sun, receives and renders back
> His figure and his heat. I was much rapt in this,
> And apprehended here immediately
> The unknown Ajax. (3.3.112-25)

What is striking about the argument is that it includes the theatrical metaphor of "applause" as appreciation which invites an audience to see the man as an actor or, possibly, as an author who is applauded.

Sceptics of the notion that a playwright might be linked with applause must bear in mind two such occasions that can only be considered briefly here. In the oft quoted induction to Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, the Scrivener brings on stage "Articles of Agreement indented between the spectators or hearers at the Hope on the Bankside in the country of Surrey on the one party; and the author of *Bartholomew Fair* in the said place and country on the other party" (Induction 58-61). Since they have paid already, the spectators are asked to "add the other part of suffrage, [their] hands" (Induction 137-38) to seal the deal before the play begins. Closer to the time when Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* was

was probably first performed is an even more significant instance of an applauded author. Thomas Dekker's *Satiromastix* is likely to have reached the stage between *Poetaster* and *Troilus and Cressida* and was published in 1602.[7] In the Epilogue, Captain Tucca says: "Are you aduiz'd what you doe when you hisse? you blowe away Horaces reuenge: but if you set your hands and Seales to this, Horace will write against it, and you may haue more sport" (sig. M2v-M3r). What Tucca suggests is that by hissing at the play they will cool Horace's heated annoyance at Dekker's riposte. Horace has of course long been identified as a satiric portrait of Jonson.[8] Tucca goes on to claim that if the audience puts its seal to the performance by applauding it, Jonson will be impelled to write another play in response which will, like a series of revenge killings, continue the War of the Theatres. In Tucca's view, the play becomes more important because the audience applauds it, just as the man in Ulysses' book becomes "formed" by being applauded.

Whether a theatre audience would recognise the author of Ulysses' book as a possible playwright is difficult to ascertain. Although the author is described as "A strange fellow," having a book in the theatre, as Tiffany Stern argues, was not a strange occurrence. Bearing this in mind adds a new dimension to the scene between Ulysses and Achilles. Rather than being something in which Greek philosophers (like the play's anachronistic Aristotle) engage, the thoughtful exchange can be seen as a comment on the practices of reading within or related to the theatre. In an essay entitled "Watching as Reading," Tiffany Stern argues that "printed books [. . .] were regularly read in the playhouse and, indeed were also sold there" (137). She imagines "canny members of the audience" (138) who would arrive early for a performance and bring a book with them, probably reading it aloud. "Written texts – in performance – filled the playhouse, and 'literature' [. . .] regularly intruded into the theatrical space before the play began" (138). If Stern imagines the off-stage reading as a miniature performance, rather like the gents who sat on stage in Blackfriars, then, in his staging of Ulysses, Shakespeare provides an analogous situation.[9] Not only is Ulysses being played by an

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[7] Thomas Dekker refers to a "Poetomachia" (sig. A3v), the Poets' War, in his preface to the first publication of *Satiromastix*. James P. Bednarz provides a "Chronological Appendix" for the Poets' War (265-76).

[8] Bednarz explains that "*Satiromastix* contains such a thorough caricature of Jonson that it continues to shape all biographical accounts of his early career [. . .]. A stage direction at the beginning of act 2, scene 2, for instance, informs us that Horace enters in 'his true attire' – that is, the clothing that Jonson actually wore" (216). The reference to Horace's *Ars Poetica* in the *Troilus and Cressida* Prologue could, therefore, be seen as a nudge towards Jonson's artistry, along with the armed Prologue.

[9] For audience members sitting on stage, see Gurr (19 and 280-81).

actor and therefore performing a reading, but Ulysses the character is also using the book reading for his own Machiavellian ends, rather like Hamlet who uses the book to perform a kind of "madness" (*Hamlet* 2.2.203) to Polonius. The reading that Stern describes just off-stage as performative is mimicked by Ulysses on stage. Stern suggests that these "Book-owners would hope, by reciting and analyzing the texts in their hands, to draw attention to themselves, highlight their choice of literature and broadcast their talents" (138). Ulysses goes armed with a book to put on a "well erected confidence" (*Poetaster* Induction 74) when he persuades Achilles of his lost reputation. However, the scene demonstrates that it is Achilles who confirms Ulysses' reputation for wisdom, in this case by giving his words credence. Reputation is built not only on the work, what Achilles has done on the battlefield, how an actor performs, or what an author has written, but also on how the performance was appreciated.

Patrick Cheney suggests that in "passages such as [. . .] Ulysses' speech on the 'author's drift,' we can see the author at work, crafting his text out of the texts of other authors, reading those authors and rewriting them through pressures from his own literary environment" (15). If we do "see" the author at work it is only through a certain amount of reconstruction, however. In this, Shakespeare differs from Ben Jonson's "Apologetical Dialogue" which James P. Bednarz argues was added to *Poetaster* after *Troilus and Cressida* was first performed (274). "Instead of disappearing behind his works as Shakespeare does," James D. Mardock explains, Jonson "constantly points to himself as their creator and origin" (7). In Jonson's *Poetaster* Epilogue, apparently performed only once, the author (likely played by Jonson himself) is discovered in his study.[10] He explains to two critics (and the audience) that the abuse he has suffered would be enough to "damn his long-watched labours to the fire [. . .] / Were not his own free merit a more crown / Unto his travails than their reeling claps" ("Apologetical Dialogue" ll. 198, 201-02), claps here perhaps holding the sense of both strike and applause. Jonson believes in his own worth, asserting that he is, as Ulysses' author would say, not troubled to "behold [his own quality] formed in th'applause."

It seems likely that the dialogue between Achilles and Ulysses conceives of reputation not only as the status of classical warriors but also in terms of the standing of authors. Ulysses notes how, as he thought on the book, he "was much rapt in this, / And apprehended here immediately / The unknown Ajax" (3.3.123-25). Bednarz has argued that, even though the craze to find allusions to Elizabethan celebrities in *Troilus and Cressida* has led to some far-fetched identifications, it seems probable

[10] For Jonson appearing himself on stage, see Cain (261) and Bednarz (274-75).

that Ajax is in some way a representation of Jonson (32-45).[11] What is important for this argument is that, although the representation of authorship is associated with theatrical applause, the book is seen as integral to authorship – even in the theatre – whether in the dialogue between Achilles and Ulysses, or in Jonson's "Apologetical Dialogue" of *Poetaster* where the poet-playwright refers to his plays as "books" (l.71). The book is often part of the fiction of authorship within the plays of Jonson and Shakespeare, even if, in the case of *Troilus and Cressida*, the play was not actually published as a book until around eight years after it was first performed. Lynn S. Meskill demonstrates how in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* "the act of writing [is] defined immediately in terms of specularity" (98), and that this is partly because "underneath the 'War of the Theatres' is a battle within the poetic imagination between the act of creation and the necessity to submit and expose this creation to the eye and the ear of the reader" (100). Shakespeare's creation of the man in Ulysses' book responds to Jonson's concern with authorial "specularity" in *Poetaster* by using the theatre to create a poetics of reflection between author, audience and book. Shakespeare puts Ulysses and his book on the stage with some assurance that one day this scene will be reflected on again when published in print.

Troilus and Cressida provides a perfect example of what Julie Stone Peters describes as the *Theatre of the Book*:

> If the performance of the book was central to the arts of the Renaissance [. . .] the process of inscribing performance was equally central to Renaissance self-reflection on its media of expression. As the paradigmatic medium for the union of text and performance, theatre could, in this context, become a locus for the broader discussions of the relation between letters and speech, live presence and inscriptions on the page. (106)

When Ulysses sees Cressida in the Greek camp he exclaims:

> Fie, fie upon her!
> There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, [. . .]
> O these encounterers, so glib of tongue,
> That give a coasting welcome ere it comes,
> And wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts
> To every ticklish reader. (4.5.54-55, 58-61)

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[11] Bednarz pays particular attention to the second scene of the play involving Cressida and her servant Alexander. The servant provides a long Jonsonian character sketch of Ajax "where Shakespeare seems to mimic the exorbitant praise Jonson lavished on himself as Criticus in *Cynthia's Revels*" (35).

Ulysses describes a performing book or rather a *Facebook*. Charlotte Scott notices that when "Hector berates Achilles, 'O, like a book of sport thou'lt read me o'er' the book is explored, like the body, for traces of the artless heart and the honest soul" (9). The Matter of Troy thus consists of actors and books that perform. Although Shakespeare may not have agreed completely with the "neuer writer['s]" (sig. ¶2r) construction of the author in the epistle when it was finally printed in the quarto, the poetics of reflection at work in this play paved the way for a performative writing that could almost be described as theatrical in its positioning of author, actors and audience.

Unlike Jonson, whose play apparently tells the audience what the author thinks, Shakespeare's drift can be harder to locate, but as regards authorship we might begin by thinking about the "strange fellow" in Ulysses' book who prefers to be warmed by an audience rather than his own "free merit." As Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann stress, "the dialogical relationship between the media [of stage and page] doubled a poetics of 'reflection' and interaction relating to the production of character in the plays" (179). This poetics of reflection also sowed the seed for the construction of the author on the stage of the page. Unlike Jonson who was always willing to *characterise* himself as an author, Shakespeare, as Ian Donaldson points out, refers to the author in his plays directly "only on two occasions in the entire canon, and then with an air of mild self-depreciation" (322).[12] This is not to suggest that Shakespeare did not think about authorship – his poems and the construction of authors in his plays suggest that he did. Rather, by not *stressing* the author's drift or intention, Shakespeare takes a peculiar kind of responsibility for the significance of his play and what it promised. Shakespeare can be hailed an inventive author who created multiple meanings, but, at the same time, Shakespeare leaves the significance of his plays, and even the value of his own authorship, to reflect into the future. The fact that the letter "a" of the "author's drift" morphs from a small "a" in the quarto (sig. G1v) to a capital "A" in the first folio (sig. ¶y1r) perhaps reflects the growing authority ascribed to the author just a few years

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[12] The Chorus of *Henry V* explains in a sonnet epilogue that "Thus far with rough and all-unable pen / Our bending author hath pursued the story" (Epilogue 1-2). Here, in a rare occasion, the Chorus imagines the author bent over his desk writing, or with bended knee, or rather ducking out of sight. The other occurrence is when the Epilogue of *2 Henry IV* reports that the "humble author will continue the story with Sir John in it" (Epilogue 22-24), but even here the Epilogue is not party to what the author thinks, saying that "for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat – unless already a be killed with your hard opinions" (Epilogue 25-26). In the end Sir John does not appear in *Henry V*, despite the apparent promise.

after Shakespeare's death, probably not by the author himself, as in the case of Jonson, but by the book and in others' eyes.[13]

[13] I would like to thank all those who took part in the Freie Universität Berlin workshop, "Performing the Poetics of Passion: *Troilus and Criseyde / Troilus and Cressida,*" in May 2010, particularly Wolfram R. Keller. I would also like to thank Irene Morra for her timely comments.

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