

## Multiple hands: Shakespeare and Collaborative Creation

18-20th March 2027, Paris (France)



In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the players come with their own requests (“Write me a prologue”, Bottom asks), in a hilarious example of group-working. In *Hamlet*, as the Prince of Denmark gets ready to take action, one of his first decisions is to appoint himself as co-writer of *The Murder of Gonzago*: “You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in’t, could you not?” (2.2.5.528-30). Both examples show the nuts and bolts of early modern stage practice, in which co-writing was commonplace.

Against all odds, the concept of single dramatic authorship has been an enduring one in Shakespeare studies, mostly because of the widespread existing orthodoxies about the notion of intellectual property. However, from the 1980s onwards, collaborative practices have been more and more widely acknowledged, though they gave rise to fierce critical controversies in some cases. We know today that Shakespeare wrote at least nine plays (and maybe more) in collaboration, namely *Pericles*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*, not included in the Folio, as well as *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Henry VIII*, *Titus Andronicus* and *1 Henry VI*, five plays published in the 1623 Folio. The playwright was thus a frequent collaborator (with Thomas Middleton, George Peele, George Wilkins, John Fletcher and others), especially at the beginning and at the end of his career, and he was far from being the only one.

2027 will mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thomas Middleton’s death, and seems an opportune moment to revisit the question of collaboration on the early modern stage. Critics now agree on his involvement in *Macbeth*, even though the question of how many hands were involved in the writing of the play remains an open one. Be that as it may, Middleton’s own work as a playwright and pamphleteer was highly collaborative: from the early seventeenth century to his death in 1627, he wrote with no fewer than ten of his contemporaries.

Arguably, the critical focus on attribution of portions of text to a particular individual paradoxically reinforces the model of single dramatic authorship and ultimately distracts from

broader interrogation of collaborative and creative practices. The diversity of such practices thus remains to be fully explored: the interplay between playwrights and other authors, or between writers and playing companies, or scribes, or stage designers, or actors and masquers themselves, are all part of a team effort whose power should be scrutinized.

The reasons why early modern artists collaborated are not absolutely clear. Shared writing may have been an economic necessity for Shakespeare and his contemporaries because of the pressure of the performance schedule. However, others tend to think the playwrights fully controlled their working methods and thus carefully chose their collaborative partnerships.

Today, the nature of these creative synergies continues to be questioned. Cooperative practices could entail either simultaneous work or successive additions and corrections, parallel writing tasks or translations. They could also be posthumous, as Philip and Mary Sidney's work on the *Psalms* shows. On a different note, while printed miscellanies offered the reader some sort of fake, or artificial, dialogue between different authors, commendatory poems are now often seen as yet another form of fruitful collaboration. Poetry was thus not wholly untouched by such practices.

Some have suggested the term "co-creativity" in order to study the interdependence of different creative agents as a model of creativity in itself. Considering multiple authorship simply as the sum of individual efforts may indeed hide the fruitful creative interactions between, for example, compilers and printers, or illustrators and poets. Recycling and borrowing practices, deeply characteristic of early modern drama, also entailed a form of authorial partnership worth reassessing today.

In fact, while the term "collaboration" can be understood in several ways, it always implies the presence of multiple hands producing an artwork, in whatever medium it may be. For collaboration did extend to multiple forms of art. Many pictorial works of the period, for example, show evidence of more than one hand (most often that of a master and his apprentices). One might think of the Phoenix Portrait (1575), or of the miniatures begun by Isaac Oliver and completed after his death by his son Peter Oliver.

This congress thus aims to reassess the variety of collaborative practices in Shakespeare's time. Among the many questions which may be addressed are:

- How do collaborative practices qualify or alter our understanding of Shakespeare's singularity?
- Was multiple authorship the default form of writing in Shakespeare's era?
- What are the attribution methods used to assign parts of texts to writers?
- To what extent does co-writing align with intertextuality or intertheatricality?
- How did collaboration stabilize or destabilize meaning?
- Does collaboration prevent artistic unity?
- How were collaborative practices thematized and questioned in early modern works?
- How, in the context of widespread collaborative practices, can single-author models be explained?
- What critical approaches are most useful in approaching early modern collaborative authorship?
- Can the role of patrons be viewed as a form of collaboration?
- How does collaboration affect the reader/audience's response?
- Can contemporary adaptations and reappropriations be considered as genuinely collaborative works?

This list, of course, is not exhaustive. We welcome contributions that focus on Shakespeare and his contemporaries and that investigate possible aspects of collaborative practice in connection with early modern literary and artistic production. Please send your paper proposal (paper title, keywords, and a 300-word abstract) by September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026, together with a short bio-bibliographical note, to the following addresses: [societefrancaiseshakespeare@gmail.com](mailto:societefrancaiseshakespeare@gmail.com) ; [johann.paccou@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:johann.paccou@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr)

*Answers will be given on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026. Papers will be 20 minutes long. There are no registration fees, but please note that presenting a selected paper requires an active membership in the organizing society (for more details on how to become a member: <https://www.societefrancaiseshakespeare.org/annuaire/adhesion-membership/>).*