Letter to the TLS concerning response by Maguire and Smith, issue of 8 June 2012.

Sir,

Emma Smith and Laurie Maguire were right to see a connection between the article that Marcus Dahl and I published in your journal disputing their claim that Middleton co-authored *All’s Well That Ends Well* (Commentary May 11), with a previous article disputing Gary Taylor’s similar claim that Middleton co-authored *Macbeth* (TLS, 28 May 2010). In both instances we used a novel methodology, drawing on recent work in corpus linguistics showing the prevalence of collocations (recurring sequences of words) in a normal speaker’s lexicon, and hypothesising that establishing individual preferences might help to identify and discriminate authorial styles. We validated this idea by applying recently devised software programs intended to spot student plagiarism, programs that automatically detect the recurrence of three-word collocations in any two texts ‘read’ in parallel.

By comparing the usages of Middleton and Shakespeare against a database of 450 Elizabethan plays we could show that Middleton had no hand in *Macbeth*. The original TLS essay was accompanied on the website of the Institute for English Studies (http://www.ies.sas.ac.uk/about-us/news/middleton-and-shakespeare) by 48 pages of additional data and analysis, including an essay on the two dramatists’ very different prosodies by Professor Marina Tarlinskaya, the leading exponent of quantitative metrics. Considering that the software program is less than ten years old, it was rather harsh for Smith and Maguire to dismiss us as ‘flat-earthers’ and ‘Canutes’.

For *All’s Well* we used a simpler method, focussing on the Smith-Maguire argument that the recurrence of certain contracted word-forms indicated Middleton as co-author. Search of our database soon showed this to be false, with many of the contractions occurring in other Shakespeare plays in the 1623 Folio. Our written text was again supplemented by 35 pages of data, also available on the website.

While Smith and Maguire have not contested this, the major part of our rebuttal, they now raise a number of smaller, indeed trivial objections. We referred to the ‘bed-trick’ in *All’s Well* as being comparable in dramaturgy and date with the similar instance in *Measure for Measure*, an affinity eloquently defended by Barbara Everett (Commentary 30 May) in response to her Oxford colleagues.

Maguire and Smith claimed that the King was suffering from a fistula *in ano*, a detail that ‘connects *All’s Well* with two Middleton plays’ (and others by Marston and Jonson). We denied their diagnosis since the anatomical location is not specified in the play, and Shakespeare’s source (William Painter’s translation of *Decameron* 3.9) says that [Helena] ‘heard by report, that the French king had a swelling upon his breast, which by reason of ill cure was growen to be a Fistula, which did put him to marueilous paine and griefe’. The phrase ‘by
report’ is significant, since in *All’s Well* the fistula is said to be ‘notorious’, a word which in Shakespeare’s time had the main sense ‘well known; forming a matter of common knowledge’, without the ‘indelicate’ associations they would give it.

Smith and Maguire, abreast of ‘new scholarship’, claim that we ‘cling to an old date’ for *All’s Well*. It may well be that Gary Taylor in 2001 was ‘inclined to put it’ in 1607, and that others have been inclined to follow him. But contrary evidence cannot be dismissed. In Taylor’s own *Textual Companion* (1988) to the Oxford Shakespeare seven pages of tables listing various types of linguistic evidence place *All’s Well* after *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*, and before *Timon* and *King Lear*, thus in the period 1604-5. If Taylor now flirts with the idea of placing it after *Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Pericles* then he will have to disown the data collected in these tables. Writing from a literary critic’s standpoint, Barbara Everett has given some strong reasons for not lumping *All’s Well* with Shakespeare’s late plays, and these can be supplemented with Marina Tarlinskaya’s prosodic studies, which place *All’s Well* before *King Lear*. In the humanities, as in the sciences, the truth or falsity of a proposition can only be established by a consensus among those qualified to judge. Time will tell.

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