The Fable of the Belly
A Reassessment of the Date of Composition of *Coriolanus*

P.D. McIntosh

Researchers have estimated when Shakespeare wrote his plays using the evidence of (1) first publication date or mention in the *Stationers' Register*; (2) mention or borrowing of words, phrases or plots by Shakespeare's contemporaries; (3) borrowings by Shakespeare from published works; (4) allusions to topical events; and (5) comparisons of a play's style with that of other plays. The reliability of the estimates obtained by each method varies and generally decreases in the order 1 to 5.

Reliability

The weaknesses of methods (1) and (2) are that publication, or mention or borrowing by contemporaries, must necessarily follow public performance or appearance of a manuscript. But the gap between composition and dissemination of the work may be several years, which is self-evident for those plays published only in the First Folio. These two methods can only give a terminal date for composition, not the earliest possible date. However, the *omission* of a play from a contemporary account may indicate that the play was written later than the account, and therefore provide an earliest possible date of composition. Such negative evidence however can never be conclusive.

The reliability of method (3) depends on the scale of the inferred borrowing. Substantial amounts of text in common between two authors, or shared details of plots or narratives, are more likely to indicate borrowing than a few shared words of phrases, unless these words or phrases are unusual. But if the Shakespeare play and the presumed source are deduced to have been written at about the same time it may be unclear who borrowed from whom. If the method is proven or judged to be dependable, it can be used to estimate the earliest date of composition.

References to topical events also have the potential to provide the earliest possible date of composition but have two major weaknesses.

References to topical events (method 4) also have the potential to provide the earliest possible date of composition but have two major weaknesses. Firstly, their usefulness depends heavily on their being exclusively correlated to one event. For example, the allusion to an earthquake in *Romeo and Juliet* appears to be useful, and may relate to the great earthquake of 1580 which was felt in places as far distant as Flanders and Scotland. However, as there were other earthquakes in late sixteenth century Europe, the reference requires careful evaluation. Secondly, contemporary allusions may have been inserted into a play after its completion to improve its topicality and public appeal.

Comparisons of style (method 5) are used for indicating relative dates of the plays (i.e., placing them in a deduced order of composition) but are subjective. If the method is uncritically applied, errors and uncertainties concerning the dating of one play may be transferred to others. The method is also subject to error if a play has been revised or written over a long period and incorporates different styles, or has been co-authored. For these reasons the method is unreliable and is not considered further here.

This paper critically assesses application of dating methods 1–4 to *Coriolanus*. References to Shakespeare's text are to the Arden edition.[1]

Methods 1 and 2

No quarto editions of *Coriolanus* have survived and there is no evidence that any were printed. The play is not mentioned in the *Stationers' Register*. The 1623 Folio contains the earliest known text. No contemporaries of Shakespeare referred to *Coriolanus*. The play is not mentioned by Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* (1598). If we assume that Meres listed all the plays of Shakespeare with which he was acquainted, on stage or in print, then *Coriolanus* had been neither performed nor published before 1598. If it is further assumed that Shakespeare did not keep private a completed manuscript, then a date of composition after 1598 is likely.

Malone[2] and later Bullough[3] pointed out that the phrase "you have lurch'd your friends of the better half of the garland" [you have deprived your friends of the better half of the honours] in the closing scene of Ben Jonson's *Epicœne* (staged 1609 or 1610) is similar to Shakespeare's phrase, spoken by Cominius, "he lurch'd all swords of the garland" [he deprived all other fighters of honours] (II.ii.101) and suggested that Jonson borrowed the unusual combination of "lurch'd" and "garland" from Shakespeare. The argument is convincing because the phrase is so unusual, although the possibility exists that Shakespeare was the borrower. If the Malone/Bullough argument is accepted, *Coriolanus* must have been written by late 1609 or 1610.

Method 3

Muir[4] and Bullough[3] demonstrated Shakespeare's dependence on Thomas North's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, translated from Jacques Amyot's 1559 French version of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*. Shakespeare depended on North's Plutarch not only for plot details but also for many words and phrases, showing that North's book was undoubtedly Shakespeare's primary source. The play uses the word *conduits* found in North's 1595 edition, not *conducts* as in the 1579 edition. Composition in or after 1595 is therefore likely.

Brockbank[1], summarising arguments presented by earlier researchers concerning the source of Menenius' fable of the belly (I.i.95–153), argued for Shakespeare's indebtedness to Philemon Holland's 1601 translation of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, William Averell's *A Mervailous Combat of Contrarieties* (1588) and Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine* (1605). Brockbank argued that verbal parallels between Menenius' fable of the belly and the version attributed to Adrian IV by Camden show that Shakespeare had either read the published version of *Remaines* (in or after 1605) or seen a manuscript version, which was probably in existence in 1603, the date of Camden's dedicatory epistle in the printed version. Bullough[3] was categorical: "The play was certainly written after the publication of Camden's *Remaines*".

Muir[5] was more circumspect: "The actual vocabulary of Menenius' fable owes more to Averell's version than to any other." In Shakespeare's retelling of the fable Averell's words *cormorant*, *instrument*, *mutually*, *participate*, *rivers*, *sink* and *viand* are all used and elsewhere in Averell's pamphlet all the significant words employed by Shakespeare's Menenius appear, e.g. *contrariety*, *crammed*, *dissentious* and *superfluity*, though not *smile* and *gulf* (whirlpool). The word *smile* is too common to be a source indicator, and Muir noted that the unusual word *gulf* was previously used by Shakespeare in *Richard*

III, so was already in Shakespeare's vocabulary. However, the other words in common demonstrate that a debt to Averell is indisputable.

In contrast, the debt to Holland's translation of Livy is uncertain. Although Brockbank[1] wrote that "To Holland's Livy he [Shakespeare] owes the suggestion that the belly distributes blood through the veins into all parts of the body" an alternative reasonable explanation is that the original relevant passage in Livy (in the same book II of *Ab Urbe Condita* that contains the biography of Coriolanus) rather than the passage in Holland's translation was the source for Menenius' description of food being circulated to the body via the bloodstream. A relatively recent translation of the Livy passage reads "the belly . . did not receive more nourishment than it supplied, sending, as it did, to all parts of the body that blood from which we derive life and vigour, distributed equally through the veins when perfected by the digestion of the food,"[6] showing that the concept of the blood distributing nourishment through the body was not Holland's invention or the result of idiosyncratic translation. In addition the phrase "rivers of blood" is a common classical metaphor and cannot be used to deduce a source text. A debt to Holland's Livy is therefore unproven.

What's left to consider is the apparent debt to Camden's *Remaines*. Proved, it has the potential to demonstrate that *Coriolanus* was written in or after 1603. Camden was a noted teacher and researcher in London in the 1590s and counted Ben Jonson among his acquaintances, so it is reasonable to assume that his literary colleagues may have known of his writings before they were published. In addition, if the title of *Remaines* is taken at face value, and the book is in fact a collection of writings left over from his greater work, Camden may have collected the belly fable in or before 1586, when his book *Britannia* was published.

Although there are similarities between Menenius' speech by Shakespeare and Camden's account of the fable of the belly, those between Menenius' speech and John of Salisbury's much earlier account are greater.

Camden appears to have paraphrased the fable of the belly from John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, book VI (1159), first printed about 1470. In John of Salisbury's account the fable is presented as an apology by Pope Adrian IV for the oppression and avarice of the Church of Rome. In Camden's account the fable is also attributed to Adrian IV but the story is given an Elizabethan flavour and presented as a justification of taxation and the rule of monarchs.

In order to compare the vocabulary in Menenius' speech, including the interjections of the first citizen, with the vocabulary of the belly fable in the accounts of John of Salisbury[7], Camden, Livy and Sidney (who included a short version of it in his *An Apology for Poetry* (1595)) I have listed in Table 1 the significant words that each account has in common with Shakespeare's. It is noted that over a third of the words used by Shakespeare (44 out of a total of 127) are found in the other accounts. Shakespeare's version has more words in common with the account of John of Salisbury (31) than with that of Camden (18), Livy in a relatively recent translation (16), Livy in Holland's translation (19), or Sidney (6). Significantly, of the 18 words common to Shakespeare's and Camden's account, only the words *good*, *gulf* and *heard* are not used by John of Salisbury, and these three words are not useful indicators of source. In regard to Shakespeare's possible use of Holland's Livy, it may be significant that Shakespeare did not borrow Holland's unusual words *concocting* and *delightsome*.

In summary we can be certain that Shakespeare borrowed from Averell's 1588 book, but it is unlikely that Menenius' speech is based on either Holland's translation of Livy or Sidney's short account of the fable of the belly. Although there are similarities between Menenius' speech by Shakespeare and Camden's account of the fable of the belly, those between Menenius' speech and John of Salisbury's much earlier account are greater. Therefore the argument that Camden's account is a source for Menenius' fable of the belly cannot be sustained.

Method 4

Of the possible allusions to contemporary events in *Coriolanus*, four deserve careful assessment. The first is contained in the statement by Caius Martius complaining that the rebellious citizens cannot be trusted (I.i.169–173):

> …He that trusts to you,
> Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;
> Where foxes, geese: you are no surer, no,
> Than is the coal of fire upon the ice,
> Or hailstone in the sun.

Caius Martius is speaking metaphorically: "You citizens are no more dependable than cinders on ice: first hot then cold; or hailstones in the sun, first hard then melting away." However Bullough argued that line 172 related to a specific event described by Thomas Dekker: the great frost of 1607/8, when "pans of coals to warm your fingers" were available to citizens walking over the frozen Thames.[8] Note that in contrast to Caius Martius, Dekker does not mention contact of hot coals with ice. For Bullough's argument to be credible Caius Martius' speech should describe a similar event to the Thames freezing over, but it does not: hard frosts, frozen rivers, pans of coals and cold fingers are not mentioned. As any Elizabethan or Jacobean householder would have been familiar with the throwing out of hot cinders onto winter ice, I suggest that there is no more justification for relating the phrase "coal of fire upon the ice" to an historic hard frost than for relating the phrase "hailstone in the sun" to an historic hailstorm followed by sunshine. Brockbank was unconvinced by Bullough's argument which he described as "unsure." Furness[9] was more explicit, dismissing it and other supposedly topical allusions with the comment "these evidences are all of slight import."

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The second possible allusion concerns the phrase (II.i.95–96) "he'll turn your current in a ditch / And make your channel his" which Harrison[10] suggested related to a 1609 plan to build a canal from Hertfordshire to London. If Coriolanus had been speaking about engineering works Harrison's argument might have some merit, but Coriolanus is again speaking metaphorically: "He'll divert the powers of the patricians and senators to his own advantage," and for the metaphor to spring to mind it is doubtful that a writer would need the stimulus of the Hertfordshire canal proposal. For those who insist on an engineering origin for the words one might also point to the 1593 quarrel between the Earl of Shrewsbury and Sir Thomas Stanhope over a weir Stanhope had constructed on the River

Trent.[11] However, as Brockbank pointed out, Shakespeare's primary source, North's *Lives*, tells how Coriolanus compelled the plebeians to yield to him by cutting off "the pipes and conduits by which the water ran into the Capitol," so it is unnecessary to search further than North's translation of Plutarch for the origin of these lines concerning diversion of water supplies.

Attempts to relate the mention of scarcity of grain in *Coriolanus* to the food riots in the Midlands in 1607/08 can be dismissed with a similar argument: an account of the Roman food scarcity occurs in Shakespeare's primary source so it is not necessary to suppose that he drew from contemporary experiences. Even if it is assumed that he did so, there were shortages of food and consequent disturbances at other times in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England[12] which could also have served as his subject matter.

Bullough argued that "Shakespeare's reduction of the grievances [of the citizens] almost to the one about dearth was surely topical" but Bullough surely overstated his case, for Rome's citizens do not in fact complain only about dearth: on the contrary they present to Menenius a list of several grievance (I.i. 80–84): they are going hungry while the rich (the patricians) are hoarding grain; the laws support usurers; laws limiting the power of the rich are being repealed; and laws restraining the powers of the poor are being enacted. Bullough's argument also overlooked the fact that in order to achieve dramatic effect Shakespeare undoubtedly simplified, selected, compressed and emphasised aspects of the Coriolanus story as told in his sources.[13] The combining of Plutarch's usury and famine riots into one disturbance need not imply an intent by Shakespeare to comment on a recent event—Shakespeare's purpose in simplifying the classical accounts may well have been determined by the demands of the stage.

There are parallels between the life of Coriolanus and the second Earl of Essex: both achieved a famous military victory, both were arrogant and headstrong, both negotiated unwise personal bargains with enemies of the state, and both died as a result of their excessive self-belief and lack of political acumen or sensitivity.

Muir[5] devoted several pages to comparing the "political theory" contained in *Coriolanus* to that in four books published in the early 1600s, each of which referred to the Coriolanus story. Dudley Digges discussed the use of war for curing internal dissension in *Four paradoxes or Politique Discourse* (1604). Richard Knolles' 1606 translation of Bodin's *Six Bookes of a Commonweale* (1606) warned of the danger of banishing a great man from the state. Edward Forset, in his *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique*, promoted the idea that "maladies of the bodie politique" require the firm action of a sovereign physician – he included in his book a brief version of the belly fable. William Fulbecke noted the evils of democracy in his book *The Pandectes of the Law of Nations* (1602). Muir's analysis demonstrated that issues of privilege, leadership style, state malfunction and the perceived threat of democratic principles were matters of intense discussion among the intellectuals at the time. However, such democratic stirrings within a corrupted parliamentary system were characteristic of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean times[14] and the sharing of current ideas between authors is hardly surprising. Shared political ideas of a general nature cannot be taken as proof of borrowing – the evidence for borrowing has to be more specific and Muir failed to provide it. Consequently Muir's placing of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in a contemporary political and social context does not help to determine a precise date of composition of the play. Furness' cautionary comment applies: "there is nothing in the political situation of Coriolanus which may not come out of Plutarch."[15]

Malone's idea[2] that the mention of the ripe mulberry fruit being too soft to handle (III.ii.79–80) related to the royal proclamation of 1606 encouraging the propagation of mulberries was described as "bizarre" by Brockbank[1] and as having "the very accent of folly" by Furness[16] and needs no further examination.

There are parallels between the life of Coriolanus and the second Earl of Essex: both achieved famous military victories (at Corioles and Cadiz respectively), both were arrogant and headstrong, both negotiated unwise personal bargains with enemies of the state, and it can be argued that both died as a result of their excessive self-belief and lack of political acumen or sensitivity. The evidence suggests that *Coriolanus* is concerned with (and may have been prompted by) Essex's fall from military hero to rebel leader, but is not conclusive.

Summary and Conclusion

Previous research has indicated a post-1603 date for the writing of *Coriolanus*, and specifically a dependence on Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine* (1605).

It is well established that Shakespeare's primary sources for *Coriolanus* were North's 1595 translation of Amyot's French version of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Averell's *A Mervailous Combat of Contrarieties* (1588). But the evidence presented in this paper indicates that *Coriolanus* cannot be dated by supposed borrowing from the fable of the belly as related in Camden's *Remaines* (1605) as John of Salisbury's account containing the same fable (in *Policraticus*, 1159, first printed about 1470) contains more words in common with Shakespeare's account and similar verbal parallels. In addition the words in the fable that that are common only to *Remaines* and *Coriolanus* are commonplace or previously used by Shakespeare, and there is no reason to suppose that *Policraticus* was unavailable to Shakespeare or that *Remaines* was Shakespeare's preferred text for consultation.

If it is assumed that in 1598 Meres listed all the plays of Shakespeare with which he was acquainted, in stage or print versions, and it is further assumed that Shakespeare would not have kept private a completed manuscript, then a date of composition of *Coriolanus* after 1598 is likely. If Ben Jonson borrowed the construction of his phrase "you have lurch'd your friends of the better half of the garland" from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, 1609 or 1610 must be the latest possible date of *Coriolanus*' composition. Thus the evidence does not allow the writing of *Coriolanus* to be dated more precisely than sometime in the period 1598–1610. If uncertain allusions to the fall of the Earl of Essex are allowed, this period would be reduced to 1601–1610.

While a twelve-year range for the writing of *Coriolanus* may be considered a somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion by those who wish to establish a firm chronology for the date of composition of Shakespeare's plays, a time range reflecting the true uncertainty of the date of composition of this play is preferable to a precise but inaccurate date based on unsound or questionable evidence.

Table 1

Comparison between the vocabulary of the belly fable in *Coriolanus* (Shakespeare), *Policraticus* (John of Salisbury), *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine* (Camden), *Ab Urbe Condita* (Livy) and *An Apology for Poetry* (Sidney). In column 1 words or their close derivatives occurring in any other version are printed in **bold**. In columns 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 words or their derivatives common to that column and column 1 (Shakespeare's version) are also printed in **bold**.

Shakespeare	John of Salisbury	Camden	Livy (Freese *et al.*)	Livy (Holland)	Sidney
Accused	Abstain	Accord	Accordingly	Agreed	
Accusers	Accumulate	Advice	Afforded	Altogether	
Affection	Acquitted	Agreed	Agree		
All	Action	Allow	Anything		
Agents	Advantage	Allowances	Apparent		
Answer(ed)	Advantageously	**Arms**			
Appetite	**All**				
Apply	Alternates				
Arm	**Arms**				
Audit	Attend				
Back	Belong	Beheld	**Belly**	Befell	**Belly**
Bearing	**Beneficial**	Better	**Blood**	**Belly**	**Body**
Belly	Blame	**Body(ies)**	**Body**	**Blood**	
Benefit	**Body**			**Body**	
Blood	Bold				
Body	**Brain**				
Brain	Brother(s)				
Bran					
Cares	Callous	Cause	Calmly	Came	Concluded
Comes	**Care**	Comforted	Chew	Carefulness	Conspiracy
Common	Cast	**Common**	Conspiracy	Chew	
Cormorant	Cause	**Commonweales**	Convey	Commons	
Competency	Claim	Conspired	**Counsel**	Concocting	
Complain	Cleaving	Consumed		Conspired	
Counsellor	Closely	**Counsel**		Consumption	
Counsels	Commenced	Course		Convey	
Court	**Common**				
Cranks	**Commonwealth**				
Crowned	Conspired				
Cupboarding	Consumes				
	Contend				
	Contrariwise				
	Counsel				
Deliberate	Day	Day	Degree	Delightsome	Devoured
Deliver	**Deliberation**	Desired	Derive	**Digesteth**	
Devise	Denounced	Dim	Desiring	Distributeth	
Digest	Depends		**Digestion**		
Discontented	Devoured		Distributed		
	Devours				
	Dim				
	Distribute(d)				

	Due				
Envied	Ear	Ears	Emaciation	Enjoy	End
Examine	Empty	Enemy	Enjoy	Enough	
Eye	Enemy	Estate	Entered	Extreme	
	Enfeebled	**Eyes**	Entire		
	Eye(s)		Equally		
Fabric	Failed	Faint	**Food**	Famish	Fruits
Feel	Faint	Faltered		Fed	
Find	Fatal	Far		Fell or feel	
First	Feeble	Fareth		**Fit**	
Fit	Feet	Feet		**Food**	
Fitly	Filled	Followed		Fresh	
Flour	Followed	Forbear		Full	
Food	Foot	Functions			
Foremost	Forthcoming				
Former	Fruits				
Friends					
General	Gathered	**Good**	Gratification	Gotten	
Good	Grasping	Grievous		Grind	
Grave	Greediness	**Gulf**			
Gulf	Greedy				
Head	Hands	Hands	Hands		
Hear	Harm	**Heard**	Human		
Heart	**Hearing**	**Heart**			
Helps	**Heart**	Hunger			
	Hungry				
Idle	**Idle**	**Idle**	**Idle**	Intent	
Incorporate	Ills		Indignant	Intestine	
Inferior	Irksome		Indignation	Inward	
Instruct			Individual		
Instruments			Influence		
		Jointly			
Kingly	**King**				
Labour	Labouring	Laboured	**Labour**	**Labour**	**Labour**
Leg	**Labours**	**Labours**	Last	Lands	
Little		Laid open	Language	Like	
Live		Lay open	Life	Limbs	
Lungs		Lazy		**Little**	
		Limbs		**Live**	
Malign	Magistrates	Matter	**Members**	**Man's**	**Mutinous**
Man	Manifold	**Members**	**Midst**	Meaning	
Members	**Members**	Misery	Mouth	Meat	
Midst	**Midst**			**Member**	
Minister	Military			**Midst**	
Muniments				Minded	
Mutinous				**Ministry**	
Mutually				Mood	
				Mouth	
				Mutinied	
Natural	Necessity	Necessity	Nothing		Notorious
Nerves	Nought		Nourishment		
	Nourished				
	Numb				
Once	Observe	Others	**Office**		

Offices	**Office**				
	Oppressiveness				
	Others				
Patience	Paid	**Parts**	**Parts**	**Parts**	**Part**
Participate	**Part**	Passed over	Perfected	Perfect	Plagued
Parts	Palate	Peace	Pleasures	Pined	Punishing
Petty	Passage	Performed	Presented	Pleasures	
Proceeds	Passed	Persuasion	Provided	Poor	
Public	Pay out	Pine away			
	Peace	Princes			
	Perform	Proclaimed			
	Persuaded	**Public**			
	Pervert				
	Plain				
	Present				
	Pressure				
	Prince(s)				
	Provide				
	Public				
Rascal	Rationer	Reason	**Receive**	Reach	
Rash	Reason	**Receiving**	Reduced	**Receive(d)**	
Rebelled	**Received**	Re-established	**Resting**	Repined	
Receipt	Refuge	Repine			
Receive	**Remains**	Respect			
Remain	**Rest**				
Remember	**Restored**				
Replied	Revived				
Rest					
Restored					
Restrained					
Rightly					
Rivers					
Rome					
Seat	Said	Served	Sending	Same	Short
See	Sated	**Spake**	Service	Sedition	Spender
Senators	**Seeing**	Steward	Several	**Seen**	**Starve**
Send	Seeks	Stomach	**Starve**	Self	
Shop	Senses	Supply	Supplied	Serve	
Sink	Service	Support		Service	
Small	Sick	Swallowing		Several	
Smile	Silence			Small	
Soldier	**Soldier**			Speech	
Speak	Somewhat			Still	
Starvation	Soundness			Stomach	
Steed	Speech			**Strength**	
Storehouse	**Starvation**				
Strongest	Starve(d)				
	State				
	Stomach				
	Strength				
	Supplied				
	Sustain				
	Sustenance				

	Swore				
Tauntingly Things **Tongue** Touching Trumpeter	Take(n) Temporal Themselves Toil **Tongue** Took Tribute Truth	Tedious Themselves **Tongue** Travelled	Teeth Time	Teeth Thoroughly Thought	Tale Time Themselves Thought
Unactive	Utility Utterly				Unprofitable
Veins Viand Vigilant	Voracious		**Veins** Vigour	**Veins**	
Walk Way **Weal o'th'common** **=Commonweal(e)** **=Commonwealth**	Wages **Walking** Watchfully Weak Weight Welfare Well-known Whole Withdrew Work	Want Wars Waxed Withdrawn Withdrew		Wasted Wise Working	
Yourselves					

Notes

[1] Brockbank, pp. 24–35.
[2] Malone, pp. 372–376.
[3] Bullough, pp. 453–454.
[4] Muir, 1957, pp. 219–214.
[5] Muir, 1978, pp. 238–251.
[6] Freese, Church and Brodribb.
[7] Dickinson, Book VI, chapter 24.
[8] Bullough, p. 562.
[9] Furness, p. viii.
[10] Harrison, pp. 239–240
[11] Neale, p. 53.
[12] Bullough, pp. 456 and 553–534.
[13] Brockbank, pp. 33–34.
[14] Neale, pp. 244–245; 398–401.
[15] Furness, p. 61.
[16] Furness, p. 610.

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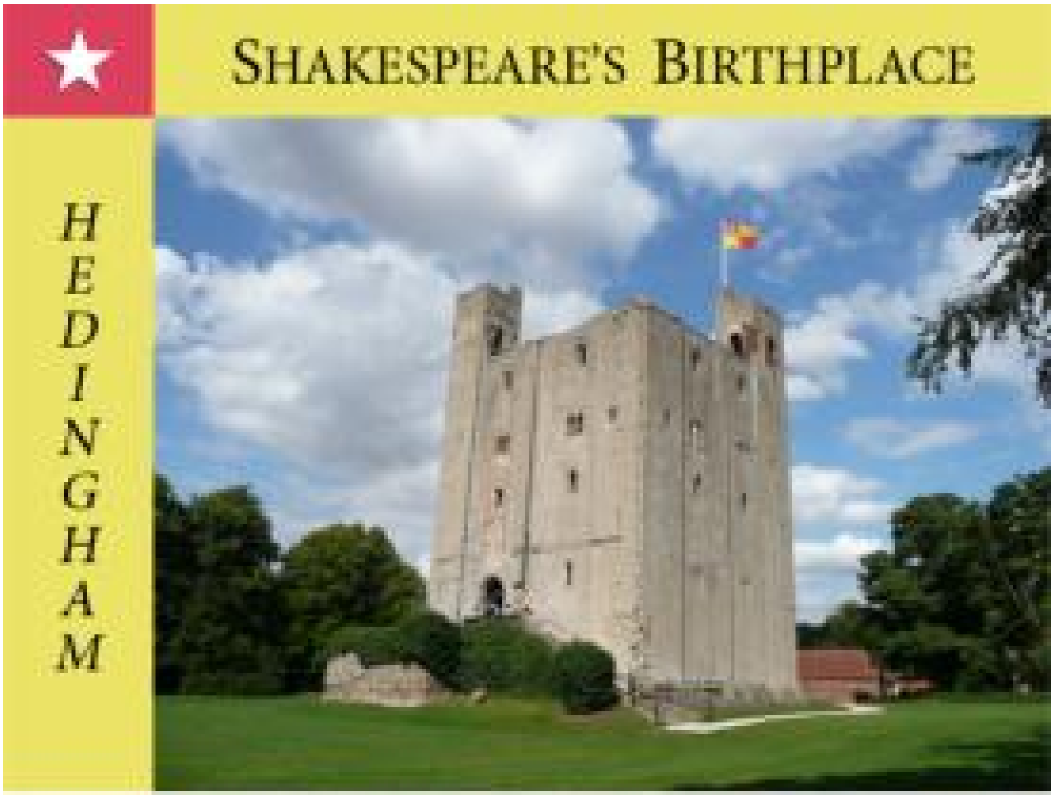

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