

## John Casson, the source for *Hamlet*, and *The Guardian*

By Eddi Jolly

On March 5<sup>th</sup> 2018, *The Guardian* printed an article about an interview with Dr John Casson, someone many DVS members will have heard



Francois de Belleforest

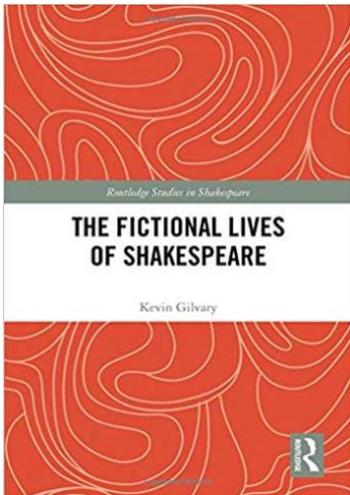
speak at the SAT November meetings. He'd examined a 1576 copy of François de Belleforest's *Les Histoires Tragiques*, held by the British Library, which has some marking on the pages of the section of the book with the story of Amleth (the French Hamlet). Casson examined these carefully and concluded the annotations might be those of the playwright Shakespeare himself. His study of this led to an article in the *British Library Journal* and eventually to this interview with *The Guardian*:

Shakespeare himself may have annotated 'Hamlet' book, claims researcher'.

I was pleased to be privy to the early draft of his paper, which carefully avoided any reference to the authorship. In *The Guardian* interview, however, Casson argued the annotations supported his case for Henry Neville as the author, and the interviewer promptly went off to Sir Brian Vickers and John Mullan, a UCL English professor, for their thoughts. These two immediately responded not to the annotations and whether these might be useful to our understanding of the creation of

the play, but to the suggestion that someone else might have written the plays.

“This is the usual snobbery, and ignorance,” said Vickers. “They [doubters] are unaware that the Elizabethan grammar school was an intense crash course in reading and writing Latin verse, prose, and plays – the bigger schools often acted plays by Terence in the original ... As for ‘experience of life’, there are a few blank years between his leaving Stratford and starting as an actor in the early 1590s where he might have travelled. In any case, London was full of books, he read widely, and he evidently had a receptive memory ...” Mullan also rejected Casson’s argument for Neville totally.



John Casson’s paper, ‘The Annotated Amleth: Belleforest in the British Library’ (eBLJ 2016, Article 7), is interesting, for libraries aren’t exactly flooded with books that researchers think Shakespeare himself might have used. *The Guardian* article shows that the authorship issue is no longer taboo. However, it also suggests that inferences and assumptions about William Shakespeare remain quite acceptable. It’s those techniques, and others, which lie at the heart of Kevin Gilvary’s recent book, *The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare* (Routledge, 2017).