

SHAKESPEARE

**BITES
BACK**

not so anonymous

by

Rev. Dr. Paul Edmondson & Prof. Stanley Wells, CBE

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Shakespeare Bites Back: Not So Anonymous



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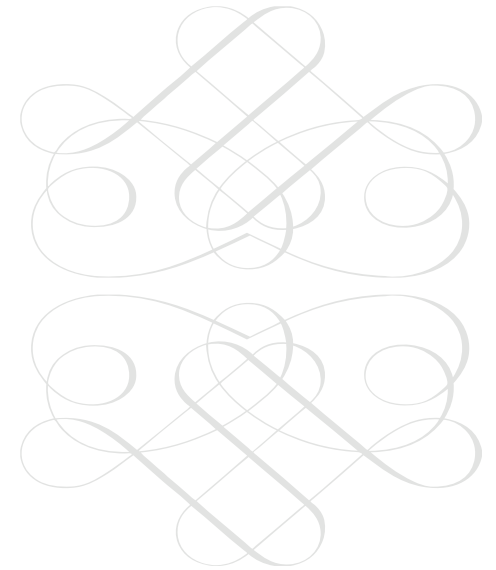
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Dr. Diana Owen
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SHAKESPEARE BITES BACK

by

Rev. Dr. Paul Edmondson & Prof. Stanley Wells, CBE

Let us tell you a true story.

A Shakespeare scholar climbed into a taxi in Los Angeles. The Russian driver asked where his passenger came from.

‘Stratford-upon-Avon.’

‘Ah, Shakespeare.’

‘Yes. That’s right.’

‘There is so much we don’t know about Shakespeare. He didn’t write the plays, did he?’

What might have been a quiet journey turned into the Shakespearian passenger giving a full account of the evidence for Shakespeare of Stratford as the author of the works attributed to him. The taxi driver listened carefully and understood clearly. But was he convinced by the time his passenger got out at the Getty Museum? He was certainly tipped handsomely.

‘Shakespearians’ – scholars, students, teachers, actors, directors, theatre-goers, creative artists, journalists, film-makers, general readers –are accustomed to being

drawn into casual conversations of this kind. Some of them groan inwardly (or even outwardly); some are more polite in their responses than others. For some this might be the first question raised after a talk or lecture. Here in Stratford-upon-Avon, the question is often raised in the five Shakespeare Houses cared for by [The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#). However Shakespearians deal with this topic, we think that they should always express surprise when anyone starts even to suggest that Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon did not write Shakespeare. Why?

The Evidence for Shakespeare

Above all - and in a sense finally - there is masses of evidence to show that he did. This is why any expression of doubt should evoke a surprised response. The nature of the evidence is rich and varied. Plays were attributed to William Shakespeare in the registers of the Stationers' Company of London and on 39 title pages of 16 of his plays in first editions and early reprints. The dedications to the poems Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece bear the signature 'William Shakespeare'.

These were printed by his Stratford contemporary and probable school fellow,

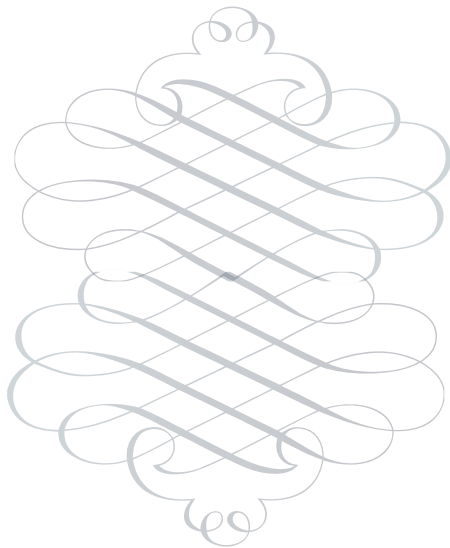
*'O, sweet Master
Shakespeare, I'll
have his picture
in my study at
the court'*



Richard Field, who became a distinguished and learned publisher in London. Modern editors think that Shakespeare may even have been in the printing house during the course of the poems' production, so tidy, neat and almost error free are their first editions.

The title-page of the Sonnets published in 1609 blazons them forth as 'Shakespeare's Sonnets, never before imprinted.' Note, the 'William' is missing; he was famous enough to be known only by his surname. The short, enigmatic poem 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' is clearly attributed to Shakespeare on its first publication in 1601 in Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr*.

Then comes a mass of evidence from his contemporaries in works surviving either in print or in manuscript. During his lifetime Shakespeare is frequently mentioned by name as a writer, sometimes in general terms, at other times explicitly. He is identified as the author of plays and poems by writers including Henry Willobie, William Covell, Richard Barnfield, John Weever, Thomas Freeman, Anthony Scoloker, and the anonymous author of the *Parnassus* plays (in which a character wants a portrait of him as a pin-up: 'O, sweet Master Shakespeare, I'll have his picture in my study at the court', and also wishes to 'worship sweet Master Shakespeare, and to honour him will lay his Venus and Adonis under my pillow'). Other writers who mention him include Henry Chettle, William Camden, William Barksted, Leonard Digges, and the dramatist John Webster.



The fact that the names of most of these writers are little known today does nothing to devalue their evidence. Francis Meres, in 1598, named 12 plays as having been written by William Shakespeare, invaluable establishing the date by which they must have been written, and showing that Shakespeare wrote comedies, histories, and tragedies. Moreover Meres mentions the Earl of Oxford as a writer only of comedies and does so in the very same sentence as that in which he names Shakespeare. Clearly, Meres knew these writers were two different people. There also exist numerous references to William Shakespeare as an actor and shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men, including references to his having acted in plays by Ben Jonson. All this unimpeachable contemporary evidence has to be denied by those who want to set about trying to prove that the Earl of Oxford (or anyone else) wrote the works of Shakespeare.

Posthumous evidence that Shakespeare of Stratford wrote Shakespeare abounds. Ben Jonson wrote about Shakespeare in the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays known as the First Folio, published in 1623, and dedicated to the theatre-going brother-Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery. The First Folio also contains Jonson's splendid and lengthy verse tribute to Shakespeare explicitly referring to him as the 'sweet swan of Avon'. A poem with Jonson's initials printed below an engraving of Shakespeare in that volume identifies him as the author.

‘The memorial verses on Shakespeare’s monument in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon refer to him as a writer three times’



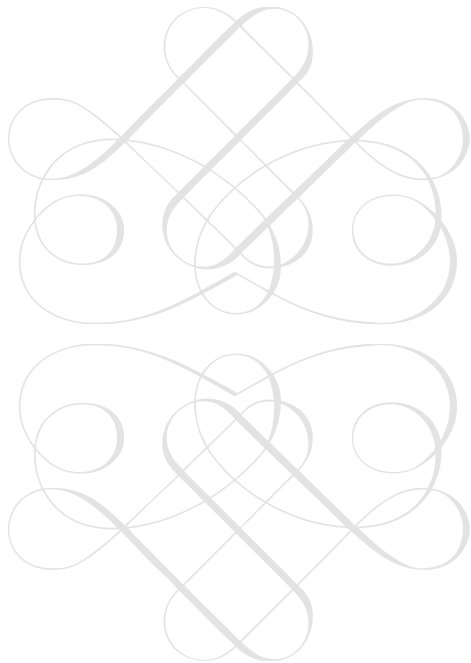
The First Folio also includes a touching letter to Shakespeare’s ‘Great Variety of Readers’ by Shakespeare’s friends and fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell. Here we find a vivid description of how Shakespeare actually wrote: ‘his mind and hand went together and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.’ In a notebook published in 1640 as Timber Jonson said of Shakespeare ‘the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, “would he had blotted a thousand.”’

In 1618-19 (over Christmas), Ben Jonson visited William Drummond at Hawthornden. Drummond made notes of their conversations in which Jonson made a number of critical remarks, speaking of Shakespeare with a mixture of affection and exasperation. Jonson, proud of his knowledge of classical literature, said that Shakespeare ‘wanted art’, criticized him for giving Bohemia a sea-coast and a desert in *The Winter’s Tale*, but said that he ‘loved the man, and do honour his memory – on this side idolatory – as much as any. He was, indeed, of an open and free nature; had an excellent fantasy, brave notions, and gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped.’

Jonson's insights into Shakespeare's personality and work are those of a friend and rival who knew him well. Even though Shakespeare wrote fluently, Ben Jonson could still delight in finding fault with him. There are other commendatory poems by Hugh Holland, James Mabbe and Leonard Digges (who refers to Shakespeare's 'Stratford monument', meaning his memorial bust in Holy Trinity Church).

The second edition of the Folio published in 1632 includes a tribute to Shakespeare in the form of a sonnet by John Milton. An elegy on Shakespeare by William Basse first printed in a 1633 edition of John Donne's poetry but probably written soon after Shakespeare died links him with the dramatist Francis Beaumont and the poets Edmund Spenser and Geoffrey Chaucer, and refers to him as a 'tragedian', that is a writer of tragedies as well as an actor of tragic roles. One of the numerous early manuscript versions of this elegy is headed 'On William Shakespeare, buried at Stratford-upon-Avon, his town of nativity.' The memorial verses on Shakespeare's monument in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon refer to him as a writer three times, comparing him to Virgil and Socrates, and announcing that Shakespeare now inhabits Mount Olympus (the celestial home of the classical poets). The inscription continues and says that 'all that he hath writ / Leaves living art but page to serve his wit.'

These facts alone are surely enough to demonstrate beyond doubt, to anyone with the least respect for historical evidence, that William Shakespeare (1564-1616) born and buried in Stratford-upon-Avon was an actor, a poet and a dramatist.



Doubting the Doubters

‘At the last count
77 individuals had
been named.’

We have offered a summary of the factual evidence, which no one disputed for well over two centuries after Shakespeare’s death. In defiance or ignorance of this evidence there began, only as recently as the 1850s, a long and continuing series of challenges to Shakespeare’s authorship. The earliest known challenger was the American teacher and writer Delia Bacon who created a web of fantasy in seeking to prove her notion that one man could not have written all the works. She formulated a theory that ‘Shakespeare’ was a committee led by the philosopher, scientist and courtier, Sir Francis Bacon.

Since her time other people who have chosen to ignore the evidence for Shakespeare have proposed an increasing swarm of individual alternative authors including a whole host of aristocrats, and even Queen Elizabeth I herself. At the last count 77 individuals had been named. The fact that there are so many of them should be enough in itself to topple the whole house of cards. Every additional name added to the list only serves to demonstrate the absurdity of the entire enterprise. All of these nominations are equally invalid; none has a greater claim than any of the others. It’s worth remembering this next time the topic comes up in conversation. Don’t start arguing against an individually named alternative; start by reminding the person putting forward the claim that their preferred nominee is in no way more valid than any of the others.



Shakespeare and Co.

Current proponents of alternative individual authors have failed spectacularly to engage with increasing evidence that Shakespeare (like most other dramatists of his time) occasionally worked in collaboration with other writers, particularly at the beginning and end of his career. Since the denial of the historical evidence relies on a ‘cover-up’ theory which kept the ‘true’ author hidden, the alternative writers are required to be isolated geniuses working on their own. Any case against Shakespeare falls down as soon as Shakespeare is understood as an honest and open collaborator.



‘Some supporters
have been known to
shift allegiance’



Scholarship of the last thirty years or so has demonstrated either the likelihood or certainty that, for instance, George Peele wrote part of *Titus Andronicus*, that the surviving texts of *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* represent versions of the plays adapted by Thomas Middleton (with whom he also collaborated on *Timon of Athens*), and that George Wilkins had a hand in *Pericles*. We have external evidence that Shakespeare collaborated with John Fletcher on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and strong internal evidence for their joint authorship of *All is True* (*Henry VIII*).

Who's in? Who's out?

'And Edward de Vere, though no great artist, was, as Alan Nelson's biography abundantly shows, a vile man.'

Fashions in the nominations of alternative authors change over time. The last century has seen vehement proponents (both successively and simultaneously) for Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, as well as a host of less vociferously supported nominees. But we are not concerned to identify the most likely alternative since all the suggestions rest on equally false premises. Some supporters have been known to shift allegiance.

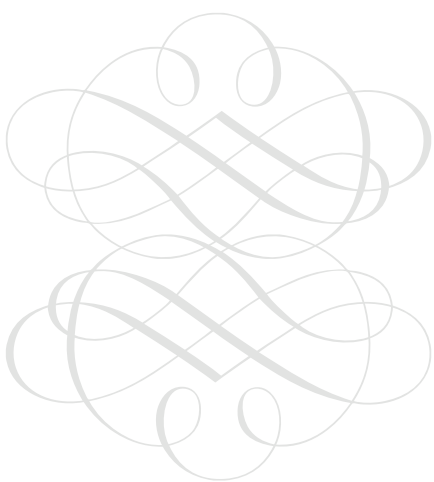
The great Shakespeare actor Sir Derek Jacobi used to support Marlowe, but now appears to have migrated to the Oxford camp. Others, such as the former Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Mark Rylance, don't seem to mind who is being nominated, so long as it isn't Shakespeare himself. Any one else will do: the Earl of Rutland, Mary Sidney, Fulke Greville, Sir Henry Neville... The nominees who are most in the public eye tend to have the biggest financial support.

It seems surprisingly easy to persuade lawyers to take part in the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory. Misplaced learning and false reasoning are superficially dressed up as scholarship. Turning to historical facts without knowledge and understanding is dangerous and foolish. Anti-Shakespearian rhetoric seeks to convince those who fail to perceive the false premises on which it is based. Money is made from book sales, lecture tours, speaking engagements, and now the high profile new film *Anonymous* based partly on a book by a distant relative of the Earl of Oxford himself. The popularity of the anti-Shakespearian

industry may seem surprising; we have grown inured to slurs that in defending Shakespeare we are doing no more than serving our own self-interests and upholding the tourist industry.



Infiltrating the Academy



Until recently, Shakespeare scholars and the academic community at large have either opposed the conspiracy theory or stood aloof from it. Worryingly, though, from having been almost entirely the province of amateurs, the topic has begun to infiltrate academia. In recent years two universities have attracted students by setting up courses in Shakespeare authorship studies. Concordia University (Oregon) has a Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre which for the past fifteen years has been organising annual 'Shakespeare Authorship Research Conferences'. The conference in 2011 lasted for days and featured the film director Roland Emmerich. \$125 makes you an associate research scholar of the Centre; \$10,000 gives you the title of 'life-scholar'.

At Brunel University in England you can take an M.A. in Shakespeare Authorship Studies at a cost of £4,400 for British students and £11,500 for overseas students. The convenors of the course keep their options open by declaring 'rather than promoting an alternative candidate as the author of Shakespeare's works, we analyse the question as a subject of perennial interest and debate.'

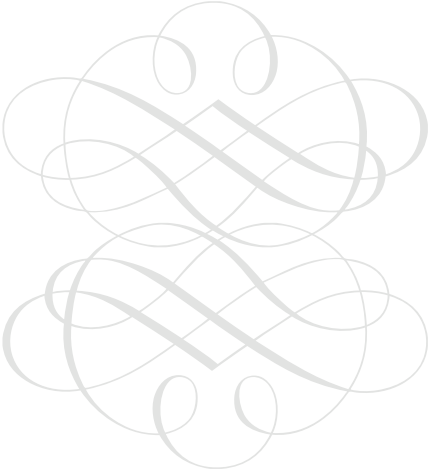
But in a panel discussion at The English Speaking-Union headquarters on 6 June 2011, the convenor of the Brunel course, William Leahy poured scorn on the idea that Shakespeare could have written the works, sarcastically maligning him for evading taxes, hoarding grain, engaging in litigation, and for having bad handwriting, as if anyone with these alleged weaknesses could not have been a great writer. Maybe he should look at Marlowe, Caravaggio, and Rimbaud. And Edward de Vere, though no great artist, was, as Alan Nelson's biography abundantly shows, a vile man.

It is clear that claims of impartiality disguise an anti-Shakespearian bias. It is not the case that these courses are only inviting people to consider the intellectual and cultural phenomenon of the discussion. In our view, they demonstrate how insidious and ingratiating the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory has become. When Brunel University launched its M.A. course in 2007 it awarded an honorary doctorate to the most prominent Shakespeare actor to declare his doubt in Shakespeare's authorship, Sir Derek Jacobi. In 2009 Brunel also awarded an honorary doctorate to Mark Rylance, chair of The Shakespeare Authorship Trust and proactive anti-Shakespearian. We have the greatest admiration for these wonderful Shakespeare actors. What worries us is that among the entire acting profession Brunel has chosen to honour the two most conspicuous actors who propagate anti-Shakespearianism. Both star in the film *Anonymous*. Brunel's website shows that the course is being promoted in order to appeal to anti-Shakespearians.



Imagining Experience

Over the years a number of scholarly attempts have been made to refute the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory. The most substantial book on the topic is [James Shapiro's Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare? \(2010\)](#). Shapiro identifies the origins of the movement and traces its growth. He examines the psychological, social, and political factors which have led distinguished people (such as Sigmund Freud and Mark Twain) to doubt Shakespeare's authorship. The last part of Shapiro's book sets forth in sober detail the case for Shakespeare. All of this is valuable material; the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory is a fascinating phenomenon in its own right. To our minds, however, Shapiro's most interesting contribution is his suggestion that anti-Shakespearians have learnt their methodology from a scholarly tradition which attempts to identify autobiographical elements in Shakespeare's work. The death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet at the age of eleven in August 1596 has long been related to Lady Constance's speech over her absent son Prince Arthur in King John.



Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then have I reason to be fond of grief. (King John 3. 4. 93-8).

Freud himself, in wanting to connect the death of Shakespeare's father in 1601 to Prince Hamlet's grief for the late King, had to revise his opinions when George Brandes changed his mind about the date of Shakespeare's play. All of these attempts relate more broadly to the view that an artist has to have direct personal experience of what he writes about. Where does this leave the power of the human imagination?



Art Imitating Life

All art is based to an ultimately unknowable extent on the artist's actual experience. Some experiences are more directly identifiable in the work than others. Shakespeare 'experiences' ancient Rome, Egypt, mediaeval England, and the Italy of his time through books and objects of art. Some authors do indeed make art out of their own life stories (think of the novels of Mark Twain and the Brontë sisters).

For many writers we have a great deal of information about their public and private lives. Personal documents such as letters and diaries may allow us to create a picture and gain an understanding of how and to what extent their work is based on personal experience. This is not possible for most people of Shakespeare's time. There are many gaps in the record of Shakespeare's life, and these should not be regarded as suspicious.

‘All art is connected to the life and cultural context of its creator; the degree to which this is knowable or discernible will depend on what we know about the artist.’



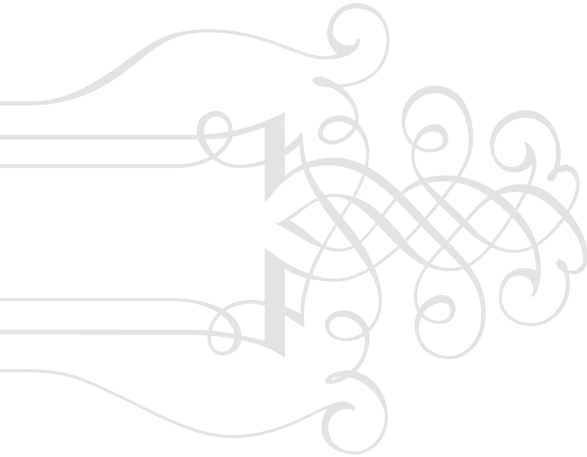
Here we wish to distinguish between crude biographical readings of Shakespeare’s works and deeply informed ones. The Sonnets, for example, are often read as though they were the direct expressions of Shakespeare’s experience as well as his feelings. But even the most apparently confessional among them cannot legitimately be treated in this way. All art is connected to the life and cultural context of its creator; the degree to which this is knowable or discernible will depend on what we know about the artist. Deeply sensitive biographical readings are fully informed by the historical context and knowledge of the artist’s work. The writing of biography should derive from a subtle and nuanced approach to the work in relation to the artist’s life and times.

We too often see anti-Shakespearians basing their claims for alternative nominees on crude biographical readings which see characters in the plays as direct attempts to represent real-life people. Hamlet is especially susceptible to this kind of interpretation because of the rhetorical intimacy of its central character and its Renaissance court setting. It is understandable that Denmark’s royal palace of Elsinore should invite parallels with the court of Queen Elizabeth. This does not mean that precise identifications of real life figures can legitimately be made. Polonius is not necessarily a satirical portrait of one of Elizabeth I’s close advisors. Neither Hamlet nor indeed any other Shakespeare play should be read as veiled attempts to portray the otherwise secret confessions of either Shakespeare himself or any other real life figures of the period. Hamlet does not represent, as it were, the secret adventures of the Earl of Oxford which he couldn’t help but cast into dramatic form. But this is the way in which many Oxfordians choose to read Hamlet.



Among the Conspirators

A belief in the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory typically pinpoints a specific incident pertaining to Shakespeare and proceeds to cast doubt on its plausibility in relation to the questioner's preconceptions about him. Here is a question put to us by an anti-Shakespearian which illustrates the dangers of the methodology: 'it is my understanding that the first production of Richard II was in December of 1595 at the home of Sir Edward Hoby who was the nephew by marriage to William Cecil, Lord Burghley. How was Shakespeare able to procure a private audience with such a prominent member of the Queen's court? And what other instance of such a private showing as pertains to William Shakespeare can you tell us about?'



There are two basic problems here. One is that - as often happens - the questioner has an insecure grasp of the facts. We know of a dinner invitation from the courtier Sir Edward Hoby to Sir Robert Cecil in 1595 in which Hoby says that 'King Richard will present himself to your view.' There is no mention of a play about 'King Richard' nor is the reference necessarily to King Richard II. Moreover he might have 'presented himself' not in a play but in a painting or even a book. Secondly, the questioner is making several unnecessary assumptions. One is that the invitation refers to Shakespeare's play Richard II. The second is that it refers to the first performance of the play. The third is that Shakespeare himself would necessarily have been present. Fourth - and most significant - is the assumption that Shakespeare would have been totally out of place in aristocratic company.

‘Here we reach
the dangerous
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theories.’

This shows an ignorance of the high degree of social mobility in Elizabethan society and of Shakespeare’s increased access to court circles through his profession as a playwright. By 1595, Shakespeare was a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. It is perfectly possible that he and his fellow actors could have been invited to give such a private performance. Still more importantly the questioner has seized upon a single perceived ‘problem’ as if an answer to it would be enough to defeat the entire case for Shakespeare.

Here we reach the dangerous heart of conspiracy theories. Fictions we might choose to tell ourselves about the past become no less valid than interpretations constructed through empirical evidence such as documents and material remains. Ultimately, this is a deeply moral point. A denial of evidence amounts to a lie about the past. People who are duped by conspiracy theories find in them something they may like to believe. Generously viewed, their misplaced belief might be excused on the grounds of ignorance. Those who know virtually nothing about the history of a particular period may enjoy engaging with and creating fantasies about it.

The mindsets of conspiracy theorists allow these fantasies to have the same status as properly informed interpretations of the facts. It may be enticing to believe in stolen documents, secret codes, buried treasure, and illegitimate children of Elizabeth I. But the belief itself doesn’t make the fantasy true. The listener often


avoids challenging what is being said for fear of causing offence, but to allow any conspiracy theory to go unchallenged may be interpreted as acquiescence and at the same time build up the confidence of the speaker who propounds the theory. The human mind has never found it easy to accept a state of conscious ignorance. It is natural to want to be in control and we like detecting and finding patterns in order to explain things we don't fully or don't want to understand. Yet ignorance abhors a vacuum. The great scholar F. P. Wilson, author of a book on Marlowe and Shakespeare, once said that the most important thing a scholar has to learn to say is 'I don't know.' Conspiracy theories fill that vacuum with stories that seem to fit.

*'The human mind has never found it
easy to accept a state of conscious
ignorance.'*



Duping the Dean

‘How good does the surviving evidence have to be before it can be refuted?’



The anti-Shakespearians even succeeded in duping the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey who, in 2002, misguidedly allowed themselves to be advised by people who want to believe that Christopher Marlowe wrote Shakespeare. In properly honouring Marlowe by installing a commemorative window in Poets’ Corner, the Dean and Chapter authorized the presence of a question-mark to precede the year of Marlowe’s death. In doing so they flew in the face of a mass of unimpugnable evidence. Marlowe died on 30 May 1593 as a result of being stabbed in the eye by an identified criminal, Ingram Frizer. The coroner’s report survives. It was witnessed by a jury of sixteen men who inspected the corpse. It is recorded that Marlowe was buried in the churchyard of St. Nicholas at Deptford on the same day as the inquest (1 June 1593). Moreover there are numerous references to Marlowe’s death and tributes to his genius in the years immediately following it. Most significantly Shakespeare himself alludes to Marlowe in *As You Like It* when Phoebe is swept off her feet on first seeing Rosalind disguised as Ganymede:

Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might:
“Whoever loved that loved not at first sight.” (3.5.)

The quotation is from Marlowe’s famous erotic poem, *Hero and Leander* (published posthumously in 1598). In *As You Like It* (almost certainly written in 1599) Shakespeare paid a fine and public tribute to his dead colleague. If Marlowe


wrote Shakespeare this means that he is writing about himself as dead, and from beyond the grave. How good does the surviving evidence have to be before it can be refuted? The evidence of the coroner's report is unimpeachable. The question-mark in Marlowe's memorial window should be removed.




The Language of the Doubters

Shakespearians will be familiar with some of the frequently employed tactics of anti-Shakespearians. The same old arguments recur again and again. These include: 'Why aren't there any books mentioned in Shakespeare's will?' (reinforcing an accusation that Shakespeare didn't own any books); 'There is no evidence that he went to the local grammar school' (implying that he lacked the necessary education to have written the works); or 'His children were illiterate' (suggesting that Shakespeare denied them an education because he himself was uneducated).

Quick scholarly responses to these three points might include: books were regarded as chattels which might or might not have been listed in a separate inventory. Inventories were required for a will to be approved for probate. Shakespeare's inventory, like many others, does not survive. There was a school in Stratford from the 1490s, the grammar school was established under a charter from King Edward VI in 1553. Full records of those attending the school survive only from 1800. As the son of an alderman Shakespeare was entitled to a free



‘The rhetorical manoeuvre that employs the phrase ‘couldn’t have’ demonstrates no more than a lack of historical imagination in the mind of the questioners.’



education at the school. It has been more than amply demonstrated that no more than a grammar school education would have been required to produce the works. Evidence that Shakespeare’s daughters could write is provided by the signatures of Susanna and Judith which survive in the archives of [The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#), along with the signature of his granddaughter, Elizabeth.

The fact that anti-Shakespearians triumphantly parade false or illogical assumptions as though they were trump cards in a poker game is itself indicative of minds in the full grip of conspiracy theories. At public discussions anti-Shakespearians tend not to ask questions but to make irrelevant assertions which they put forward as unassailable fact: ‘Shakespeare’s surviving signatures don’t look like those of a writer’; ‘He couldn’t have written the plays set in Italy because he didn’t travel abroad’; ‘He couldn’t have written about royalty and aristocrats because of his status as a commoner’. The rhetorical manoeuvre that employs the phrase ‘couldn’t have’ demonstrates no more than a lack of historical imagination in the minds of the questioners.

We have been accused of being anti-post-modern in our approach. ‘Post-modernism’ isn’t something one can agree or disagree with; it simply is, and it’s always been a vague, all-encompassing, and perhaps ultimately unhelpful term. It does, however, make much of gaps in the narrative and therefore the historical record. When this is applied to what for many years (and still for most people)

isn't even an issue with regard to the authorship of Shakespeare's works, we have to part with a post-modern agenda that regards all evidence as relative and on equal terms. This is when we see the discourses of historical denial and conspiracy theory come into the discussion, and we think both of those are ultimately dangerous outcomes of post-modern practice. The discussion then takes on a moral dimension. And absence of historical evidence is never the same as evidence of absence.



This is why anti-Shakespearianism should never be equated with merely being a revisionist approach to history. History is always open to fresh interpretation and revisionism can often re-invigorate a particular area of study by inviting us to consider the evidence from fresh perspectives. A good example of revisionist scholarship in Shakespeare studies would be the way Shakespeare has come to be understood more as a collaborative writer over the last thirty years, and especially since the publication of *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1986; 2nd edition 2005). Similarly, the 'Dig for Shakespeare' at **New Place**, led by **The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust** in collaboration with Birmingham Archaeology (from 2010), is leading to a fresh understanding of the entire site of Shakespeare's Stratford home from 1597. But neither of these examples starts from a position of contradiction. Rather they re-examine the positive evidence that is already there with an open mind.

Anti-Shakespearians may claim that they are ‘looking objectively’ at the evidence, but they never are. Their anti-Shakespearian bias prevents them from ever doing so. Instead, anti-Shakespearianism seeks first to deny the evidence for Shakespeare and then to position an alternative nominee in the gap Shakespeare has left behind. Anti-Shakespearianism is therefore synonymous with a denial of history, rather than with a revisionist and scholarly interpretation of the past.

‘Anti-Shakespearians may claim that they are ‘looking objectively’ at the evidence, but they never are.’

Sucking Shakespeare's Blood

'The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory is an entirely parasitic phenomenon, attacking the truth in order to feed off its life-blood.'

Anti-Shakespearians we have met seem to be singularly lacking in a sense of humour, at least as soon as they start riding their hobby-horses. They hardly smile, perhaps a characteristic of an obsessive mind. Dare to suggest that snobbery is a hidden agenda of the anti-Shakespearian movement (in its general propensity to offer aristocratic or university educated nominees) and you stand the risk of having your head bitten off, or being made to feel you have caused offence. The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory is an entirely parasitic phenomenon, attacking the truth in order to feed off its life-blood. Like all conspiracy theories it has no independent, self-determining life of its own and instead attaches itself, leech-like, to a healthy body. And yet, time and again we see the phrase 'keeping an open mind' being used by anti-Shakespearians (as though everyone else's minds, apart from their own, were closed).

Sometimes anti-Shakespearians complain about being excluded from contributing to academic Shakespeare conferences and they have even been known to gatecrash them against the organisers' wills. As the former Director of The Folger Shakespeare Library, Gail Kern Paster, has said, 'to ask me about the authorship question is like asking a paleontologist to debate a creationist's account of the fossil record.'

Adherents of such opposing points of view risk feeling as ill at ease in one another's company as vegetarians at a pig roast, or teetotalers at the Munich Beer Festival. Since [The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#) launched its Shakespeare Authorship Campaign with its digital platform www.60minuteswithShakespeare.com both authors of this e-book have received abusive, offensive and slanderous messages. We have also been accused of upholding the Shakespearian cause not because we believe in it but because it is the main purpose of the independent charity that we serve. In fact, all our scholarly training prompts us to be interested in every aspect of Shakespearian study. We have examined the anti-Shakespearians' case with objective rigour and we reject it totally. Any competent court of law would do the same.




'We have examined the anti-Shakespearians' case with objective rigour and we reject it totally.'



Speaking up for Shakespeare

Visitors to the five Shakespeare Houses in Stratford-upon-Avon, as well as students attending talks and sessions in The Shakespeare Centre, often ask questions relating to The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory. Sometimes this may be because they can't think of anything else to ask (the fact they fall back on this question almost by default illustrates its insidious ubiquity). Our guides are regularly primed with information to help them respond in an informed and courteous manner. Information about the topic is available [through The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's digital platforms](#). (Links are listed at the end of this e-book).



In addition we have commissioned a volume of essays by a distinguished team of academics on various aspects of the authorship discussion to be published by Cambridge University Press. It will discuss the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory as a cultural phenomenon. Contributors will concern themselves with various aspects of the topic as well as giving an account of its main protagonists and their theories. We shall present the authorship of Shakespeare's works in relation to historical evidence, to the ways in which history is understood, to the psychology of conspiracy theory, and to literary and textual concerns. Leading authorities on some of the alternative nominees (Oxford, Bacon, and Marlowe) will discuss the claims made for them. The book will have three sections: Shakespeare as Author; The Sceptics; and The Cultural Phenomenon: Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare? This last section will look at the ways in which The Shakespeare

Authorship Conspiracy Theory has embedded itself into the imagination and culture of our time through fiction, films, satire, and other popular media. All being well, the book will appear in the spring of 2013.



Not at all anonymous

‘As a cinematic experience its techniques belong to a world of fantasy.’

This free e-book you are reading forms part of a multi-faceted response by **The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust** to the Shakespeare authorship discussion and is especially prompted by Roland Emmerich’s film *Anonymous*. It’s a visually seductive, sweeping melodrama of a film which engagingly evokes the London of Shakespeare’s time. As a cinematic experience its techniques belong to a world of fantasy. Though it is located in the genre of fantasy, the film asks us to believe that the Earl of Oxford used the actor Shakespeare as a front man to avoid the shame that an aristocrat would suffer if he were discovered to be writing plays for the public theatre. The widely disseminated poster focuses entirely and aggressively on the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory by boldly posing the question: ‘Was Shakespeare a Fraud?’, superimposing the figure of a man standing with his back to the viewer.



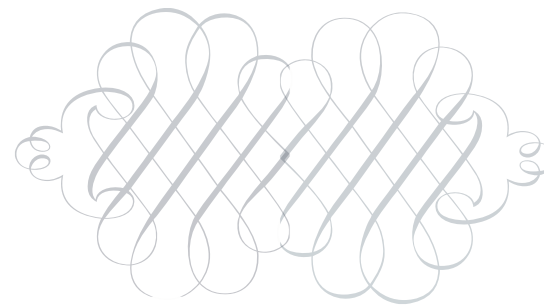
‘illegitimate
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The Earl of Oxford is portrayed as a brooding and isolated genius, hovering in the galleries of the theatre, while the plays are being received with vehement acclaim. We see him browsing through his bookshelves packed with manuscripts in a Harry Potter-like study. He is paying Shakespeare to take the credit for a string of masterpieces, including those first performed after the date of the Earl’s own death in 1604. His wife, Ann, comes into the room and berates him for writing when he should be raising money for their daughter’s dowry. Alas, the Earl of Oxford cannot help but write. The voices of his inner genius won’t remain silent: ‘the voices, Ann; I cannot deny the voices.’

The Earl is depicted as having been a child prodigy, ably extemporising verse on a theme given to him by the young Queen Elizabeth. We are led to believe that he wrote and performed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* while still only a child. We see him acting in a performance at court in or around 1559, several decades before the play was actually written. The unlikely connection between the young Earl and Queen Elizabeth doesn’t end there. She waits until he is a little older and then has a secret child with him, only to discover that the Earl of Oxford is also her illegitimate son. Thus does the film bear out the so-called ‘Prince Tudor Theory’ in which illegitimate royal children become part of the conspiratorial cover-up.

Shakespeare's own part in the story is typically caricatured. After a successful performance of *Henry V* (which features a charming rendition of the Prologue by Mark Rylance) there are calls of 'Playwright! Playwright!' (a word not recorded until 1687). A virtually inarticulate and drunken Shakespeare comes onto the stage to accept the enthusiastic applause. He can hardly string a sentence together, which might make us wonder how on earth the audience can be fooled into thinking he was capable of writing the play they've just seen. But it is a long-established trope of the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory that Shakespeare himself couldn't have written the plays having had no education and coming from the 'backwater' of Stratford-upon-Avon. And all of this in the film *Anonymous* is humourlessly presented as though it were authentic historical fact. *Anonymous* represents only the latest manifestation of The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory, as well as the one in which there has been the heaviest financial investment.





A Pro-Shakespearian Manifesto

We think the time is ripe for a vigorous refutation of the unreasonable denial of historical evidence which passes under the guise of legitimate speculation by ‘open minds’. Therefore we wish to propose the following:


- We should use the term ‘anti-Shakespearian’ to describe those who propagate this particular conspiracy theory. In the past they have more usually been referred to as ‘anti-Stratfordians’, which allows the work attributed to Shakespeare to be separated from the social and cultural context of its author. We wish to insist that no artists should be divorced from the work they have produced. To deny Shakespeare of Stratford’s connection to the work attributed to him is to deny the essence of what made that work possible. Michelangelo cannot be separated from Florence and Rome; Charles Dickens wouldn’t be Charles Dickens without London. Shakespeare was formed by both Stratford-upon-Avon and London.

The phrases ‘the Stratford man’, ‘actor from Stratford’, and even ‘anti-Stratfordian’ itself perpetuate the kind of divide with which we are here taking issue. These terms concede that such a division between an artist and his or her background and cultural context is possible. ‘Anti-Shakespearian’ reminds us that in attempting to separate Shakespeare from his place of origin you are in effect vandalizing the works themselves and the world’s appreciation of them. We call upon anyone involved in this discussion who is speaking up for Shakespeare to call those who are attacking him ‘anti-Shakespearian’.


‘Professional academics have refused to treat the topic as one worthy of intellectual consideration.’

- Until recently, ‘anti-Shakespearianism’ has existed outside the world of Shakespeare scholarship. Professional academics have refused to treat the topic as one worthy of intellectual consideration. We are concerned about the way in recent years it has insidiously infiltrated the academy with the founding of Shakespeare Authorship courses in America at Concordia University and in England at Brunel University. We have been castigated for daring to doubt and to question the intellectual justification of these courses. But we continue to do so because we do not understand how any approach to knowledge which has to deny the evidence of recorded history can be intellectually justifiable.
- It is misguided to try to establish hypotheses which contradict Shakespeare’s authorship without first properly disproving the historical evidence in Shakespeare’s favour.
- The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory started in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was the era of an inherited Gothic and Romantic imagination, reacting to Darwin, and alive to the beginnings of detective fiction. Emphasis was placed on reading literature in relationship to the writer’s own experiences, which often formed the basis of literary works (for example William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, and Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*).


- We need to be clear about what kind of phenomenon this is. We use the term Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory. Debates and controversies can arise only where there is room for plausible and rational disagreement or difference of opinion. It is a conspiracy theory pure and simple, and needs to be named as such. Conspiracy theories set out to offend, disrupt, and undermine the truth. Following Jonathan Kay's suggestion in *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground* (2011), we suggest that any conspiracy theory should be as much despised as any mainstream political or moral taboo or '-ism', such as sexism, racism, or homophobia.
- Conspiracy theories are entirely parasitic, existing only in contradiction to well-established truths. They give to our understanding nothing which is positive and rely entirely on proving a negative case, which is logically impossible: absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence.
- We see within the conspiracy theory a disconnection between the professional historians and Shakespeare scholars on one side and well-educated non-specialists on the other. This divide occurs in many disciplines. It is all too easy for anyone to have an opinion or to start speculating and then to set out to try to create an argument to support their case. Our approach to the facts and historical evidence is complex and is informed by a deep knowledge in order to understand them. History is never as tidy as conspiracy theories would have us believe.




‘We find nothing in the plays or poems to suggest they could only have been penned by an aristocrat.’



- In being interested only in demonstrating that anyone other than Shakespeare is the author of these works, The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory enslaves the works into the service of primarily biographical readings in order to prove the case of an alternative nominee.
- The Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory amounts to a gross act of intellectual theft. It is neither more nor less than an on-going attempt to steal one person’s reputation and achievements and give them to someone else. This adds a profoundly moral dimension to the discussion which is usually ignored.
- We scorn any anti-Shakespearian argument which begins with the formulation, ‘Shakespeare couldn’t have written the works because...’ This is the equivalent to saying ‘how could the world possibly be round because our eyes tell us that it is flat?’
- We scorn any argument against Shakespeare’s authorship which relies on preferring the aristocratic privilege of an alternative nominee. We find nothing in the plays or poems to suggest they could only have been penned by an aristocrat.
- There is nothing unusual about gaps in the record of people who lived during Shakespeare’s time, however eminent they may have been in some spheres of activity. We know more about Shakespeare than we do about, for example, the



‘Shakespeare puns on his own first name, William, in Sonnets 134, 135, 136 and 143. Sonnet 136 ends with ‘for my name is Will.’



playwrights John Webster and John Ford.

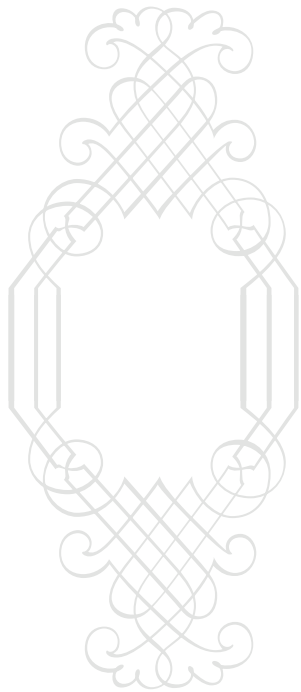
- Shakespearians themselves are sometimes criticized for overly determined biographical readings of the works. In our view there are degrees of determination. It is one aspect of the art of biography to identify a compelling context in which to read the work. When, for example, the disguised Innogen names her master as ‘Richard du Champ’ in *Cymbeline* it seems reasonable to hypothesise that this might be a concealed allusion (perhaps even a private joke) to Shakespeare’s Stratford contemporary, Richard Field, publisher of his poems. Similarly, Shakespeare puns on his own first name, William, in Sonnets 134, 135, 136 and 143. Sonnet 136 ends with ‘for my name is Will.’ We are in favour of a cautionary approach to making links between the works and their author’s life.
- None of the 77 or more people who have been nominated should have precedence over any other. Queen Elizabeth I, King James I, Daniel Defoe, Lancelot Andrewes, Lady Mary Sidney, Fulke Greville, Sir Henry Neville, The Earl of Rutland, Miguel de Cervantes, Edmund Campion, Sir Thomas More: these and all the others have neither more nor less of a claim than the current favourites, The Earl of Oxford, Christopher Marlowe, or Sir Francis Bacon.
- Over the last thirty years, Shakespeare has come to be understood more as a collaborative writer. Seven of the plays written at the beginning and end of his career either show the evidence of one or more other hands or are mentioned in

external evidence as having been written in collaboration. Our understanding of how Shakespeare wrote will continue to develop; his status as author, like many authors of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, is a combination of solo authored and collaborative working practice. This puts paid to the notion that the works were written by an alternative and isolated, conspiratorially hidden aristocrat or other alternative nominee.

- People often say that it doesn't matter who wrote the works, we still have the works themselves. Noel Coward puts this into song:

Christopher Marlowe or Francis Bacon,
The author of Lear remains unshaken.
Willie Herbert or Mary Fitton,
What does it matter? The Sonnets were written.

But it does matter. Utterly. To claim otherwise is to deny history, the nature of historical evidence, and also to sever from the works any understanding of the humanity and personality behind them. As people we want to know as much as possible about the artist responsible for the work. Even though we don't have as much personal information about Shakespeare of the kind we should like to have - diaries, letters, account books- our desire to know as much as possible remains unabated. That is where the art of Shakespearian biography commences.



- We call upon the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey to remove the erroneous question mark before the date of Christopher Marlowe's death in the stained glass window in Poets' Corner. It denies history.



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We hope you have enjoyed reading this free e-book and that you may like to forward or recommend it to your friends and contacts. You can sign up to the Shakespeare Authorship Campaign at www.60minuteswithShakespeare.com and hear the views of 60 scholars, writers, actors, and theatre practitioners. You can watch Charles Beauclerk, Michael Dobson, Paul Edmondson, Roland Emmerich, William Leahy, and Stanley Wells give speeches about the Shakespeare Authorship at www.esu.org/news/item.asp?n=12890 . David Kathman and Terry Ross's excellent website www.shakespeareauthorship.com sets out the evidence for Shakespeare and analyses some of the anti-Shakespearian theories. It provides a further reading list and a comprehensive summary of other web-based resources.

We are speaking up for Shakespeare in defiance of all those who want to believe that the past can be re-made according to their own tastes. He was a man from an up and coming middle-class background, a glover's son, who was formed by a humanist, grammar school education, worked hard at what he was good at, and went on to produce some of the greatest plays and poetry ever written.

It is time for Shakespeare
to bite back.



RESOURCES



Please feel free to follow the authors on Twitter at [@Paul_Edmondson](#) and [@Stanley_Wells](#).

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We look forward to connecting with you!

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