

Seeing Double

Early doubters of Shakespeare's identity

Julia Cleave (2014)

In a recent review of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, Paul Dean's opening remark recycles a stock *Stratfordian* meme:

Until 1856, when Delia Bacon published "William Shakespeare and his Plays: An Enquiry Concerning Them" in Putnam's Magazine, *no one questioned* that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon had written the plays ascribed to him in the First Folio of his works (1623), and possibly, in part or whole, a few others not included there. One may well wonder why anyone ever bothered to doubt it . . .

The New Criterion (Nov. 2013)

In making this all-too-familiar claim, he takes his cue from the usual suspects: Wells, Bate, Shapiro, Edmondson, and their followers:

No one expressed doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the works attributed to him, give or take some suggestions that some of the plays might have been written in collaboration with other professional writers, as was exceptionally common at that time . . . until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Shakespeare Beyond Doubt (2013)

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith state baldly:

No one expressed any doubt or suspicion about the authorship of the plays in the early modern period, nor until the nineteenth century.

30 *Great Myths about Shakespeare* (2012)

The blurb to Shapiro's *Contested Will* is even balder:

For more than two hundred years after William Shakespeare's death, no one doubted that he had written his plays.

James Shapiro, *Contested Will* (2010)

But it is Jonathan Bate who is the most insistent:

No one in Shakespeare's lifetime, nor the first two hundred years after his death, expressed the slightest doubt about his authorship.

Jonathan Bate, *Genius of Shakespeare* (1998)

Ironically, this claim is directly contradicted in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* by one of the titles which Hardy Cook selects for his reading list: *Shakespeare and his Betters: A History and Criticism of the Attempts Which Have Been Made to Prove that Shakespeare's Works Were Written by Others*, R. C. Churchill (1958).

Cook notes that the history of doubt about the subject began in the seventeenth century and continued to the time of writing. Moreover, it is the modern so-called disintegrators—*within* the Stratfordian fold, who have done more than anyone to compromise any absolutist claims to Shakespeare's exclusive authorship of the canon, a point half acknowledged by Stanley Wells.

But such nuances are lost in the propaganda wars—the meme in its starkest form has gone viral. It's a combination of complacency and ignorance which is particularly galling to non-Stratfordians—and needs to be robustly challenged. Leaving aside the prevalence of anonymous, pseudonymous, and proxy authorship which characterised the Elizabethan theatre, and the swirl of rumours among a score of

Shakespeare's contemporaries—who seemed to have felt compelled to drop heavy hints—from Greene's (or is it Chettle's?) exposé of Shaksper's pretensions, to Jonson's extraordinary unanswered question: What Author would conceal his name?

What I propose, instead, is to re-visit a dozen occasions over the period of “more than two hundred years” between the 1640s and 1850s when doubts were cast—and what different modes and discourses were chosen to express these, and, on occasion, provide a cover of deniability. The fact that these doubts surfaced at intervals over a span of two centuries testifies to what we might call an ‘underground stream’ of doubt. Could this be evidence of traditions handed down within particular families, as well as free-thinking individuals coming independently to the same conclusion?

This is necessarily going to be a whistle-stop tour. As so often happens, you embark on a project, thinking it will be relatively straightforward, and then discover it merits much more in-depth treatment. So, what I am offering is a suggestive sampling of a series of texts, most of which appear to be unknown to the majority of Shakespeare scholars.

I've chosen to work backwards, starting with the article which appeared just four years ahead of Delia Bacon, in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, and ending with George Wither's *Great Assizes Holden on Parnassus*, dated 1645. What is striking is that, collectively—and consistently through time—they touch on virtually all the objections which we continue to focus on today, and, spurred by doubt, are driven to invent varying scenarios based on doubleness, hence the title of this article.

1852 🐾 *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*

An interesting essay puts the case very vigorously as well as entertainingly. The anonymous author of this piece was actually a Robert Jamieson (in no. 449. Vol. 18, 7 August).¹ He poses the question:

WHO WROTE SHAKSPEARE?

Thus asks Mrs Kitty in *High Life Below Stairs*, to which his Grace my Lord Duke gravely replies: “Ben Jonson.” “O no,” quoth my Lady Baby: “Shakspeare was written by one Mr. Finis, for I saw his name at the end of the book!” and this passes off as an excellent joke and never fails to elicit the applause of the audience; but still the question remains unanswered: Who wrote Shakspeare?

If published anonymously—what critic of any age would ever have ascribed these works to Shaksper?

Unfortunately, the search for “a local habitation and a name” for such a genius is at once “cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd” by the authentic recorded whatabouts, whenabouts, and whereabouts of ws, actor, owner, purchaser, and chattels and message devisor whilom of the Globe theatre, Surrey-side.

The unsurpassed brilliancy of the writer throws not one single spark to make noticeable the quiet uniform mediocrity of the man.

It will not do to fall back on genius to explain this discrepancy.

His solution to the mystery: Shakspeare kept a poet. He posits a scenario in which the calculating man of “commonplace transactions” finds a Chatterton-like pale youth in some garret, whom he employs to pen the plays for him. “Where are the manuscripts?” he asks.

Take besides the custom of the age, the helter-skelter way in which dramas were got up, sometimes by half-a-dozen authors at once, of whom one occasionally monopolised the fame; and the unscrupulous manner in which booksellers appropriated any popular name of the day, and affixed it to their publications.

How comes it that Spenser, Raleigh, and Bacon ignored the acquaintance—and that Heywood, Suckling, and Hales confine themselves to the works, and seem personally to avoid the man—the exception being Ben Jonson—bound by the strongest ties to keep the secret.

He notes what he calls the “unqualified fib” of Jonson’s description of the Droeshout portrait. He concludes:

In fine, we maintain we have no more direct evidence to show that Shakspeare wrote Hamlet’s soliloquy than we have that he wrote the epitaph on John a Coombe, the ballad on Sir Thomas Lucy, or the epitaph to spare his “bones” on his own tombstone—all of which the commentators are now determined to repudiate.

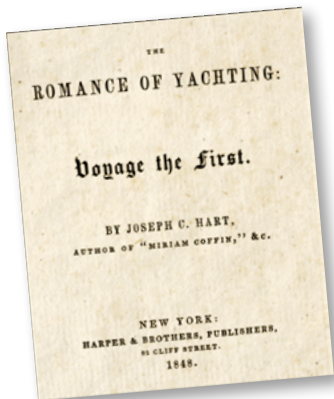
His final point could have been made by any doubter:

All at once Shakspeare leaves London with a fortune, and the supply of plays ceases. Is this compatible with such a genius thus culminating on any other supposition than the death of the poet—and the survival of the employer?¹

¹ <http://www.hotfreebooks.com/book/Chambers-s-Edinburgh-Journal-No-449-Volume-18-New-Series-August-7-1852-Various.html>

1848 🐾 *Romance of Yachting, by Joseph Hart*

This eccentric book is a discursive ragbag of opinions and observations in which the author devotes more than thirty pages to dissing Shakespeare (208–243). What seems to have piqued him was a denigratory “Life of Shakespeare” by Dionysus Lardner in his *Cabinet Cyclopaedia* 1830–49, vol. II, p. 100. Hart writes:



Shakespeare grew up in ignorance and viciousness and became a common poacher. And the latter title, in literary matters, he carried to his grave. . . .

It is a fraud upon the world to thrust his surreptitious fame upon us . . . the enquiry will be, Who were the able literary men who wrote the dramas imputed to him?

His [Lardner’s] account of ws is one of under-hand brokery—speaks of his “literary thievery and pirating propensity: He is a mere factotum of the theatre—a vulgar and unlettered man,” who “left no records of his literary labours” and merited “the indifference of his contemporaries.”

Hart’s observations, however, amount to a rather confused rant—he seems to be attacking the idea of “Immortal Shakespeare” as much as questioning the authorship. He disputes the authorship of most of the plays, regarding them as joint productions, often highly derivative, and vitiated with “gross impurities.” Where its value lies is in reflecting the existence of a groundswell of dissenting opinion in the 1830s and ’40s—Hart constantly refers to other “commentators,” some of whom he names: Rees, Chalmers, Lardner—reacting to the excesses of bardolatry and the discrepancy between the claims made for “Immortal Shakespeare” and the absence of any documentation of a literary life.

I am indebted to Alexander Waugh for passing on some further evidence of this “groundswell of dissenting opinion.” John Dowdall, in his *Traditionary Anecdotes of Shakespeare* (1838), makes a glancing reference in his introduction (6) to an unnamed sceptic, and perhaps the earliest Marlovian. Dowdall considers “the persons who have invented and perpetuated the anecdotes of

[Shakespeare’s] early life,” and observes:

Perhaps it was in ridicule of his predecessors that another gentleman, determined to outdo all who had gone before him, had the hardihood to question the poet’s identity; having laboured to prove that he was one and the same person with Christopher Marlowe!

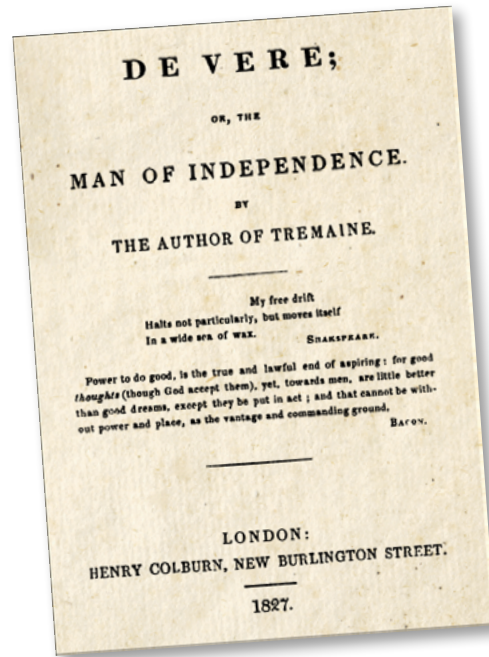
1827 🐷 *De Vere; or, the Man of Independence*

De Vere or the Man of Independence is a Regency *roman à clef* which has nothing overtly to do with the Shakespeare authorship—yet it does include some suggestive material from an Oxfordian point of view. It was attributed to “the author of Tremaine,” i.e., Robert Plumer Ward (1765–1846), barrister, politician, and novelist.

The narrative is laced with quotations from Shakspeare [*sic*], aptly shadowing characters and plot lines and providing the epigraphs to almost every chapter. However, the fact that the central protagonist is named Vere should not mislead us into supposing that we are being presented with an allegorised portrait of a particular Elizabethan. Ward’s chief concern is to moralise and philosophise upon the party politics and social mores of his own time. The character and fortunes of Mortimer de Vere do not closely resemble those of the 17th earl; rather they are intended, at least in part, as a compliment to the current holder of the title: Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford (of the 2nd or 3rd creation) and Earl Mortimer. The fact that Harley is connected to the De Vere line through marriage, his wife, [Lady Henrietta Cavendish Holles](#), being the great-great-granddaughter of Sir Horatio de Vere, Oxford’s cousin, and heiress through her Cavendish father, of Welbeck Abbey, and hence of the so-called Welbeck portrait of the 17th Earl, suggests that he is most likely to have been Ward’s informant on the details of Edward de Vere’s biography. These are referenced in two striking incidents which occur early on in the story.

In Chapter 2, the narrator, Beauclerk, and his new acquaintance, Mortimer De Vere, come upon a “fair seat”:

Two immense gates . . . flanked by two stone pillars—on top of one the figure of a boar cut in stone, supported by a shield of arms of ancient simplicity, being quarterly gules, and or, . . . but what particularly struck me . . . obelisk, or pedestal . . . a tablet . . . inscription: it was in old characters . . . bore the date 1572, and read thus:



*Trust in thy own good sword,
Rather than Princes' word.
Trust e'en in fortune sinister,
Rather than Princes' minister.
Of either, trust the guile,
Rather than woman's smile.
But most of all eschew,
To trust in Parvenu.*

In this “memorial to trust unrequited” we may easily construe references to the Queen and to Burghley as instruments of Oxford’s ill-fortunes, but the identity of the “Parvenu” remains a mystery. Mortimer speculates, “Whether in his passion (for he was a man of most vehement spirit) by Parvenu he meant the minister whose family, though ancient enough, was not to be compared to his own; or whether it referred to an insinuating, designing flatterer of a secretary, who he thought had influenced the minister, I cannot make out.” (Such a smooth-faced insinuator, explicitly referred to as the Parvenu, does indeed play a role in Mortimer’s own misfortunes later in the story.)

Mortimer further informs Beauclerk that “this identical inscription, tablet and all, was supposed to have been cut from the wall of the cabinet or oratory of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, at Castle Hedingham in Essex, chief seat of the family.” Moreover, carved into the pedestal beneath the inscription, is the device of a broken column and a hollow tree from

which new shoots are sprouting, and bearing the motto: *insperata floruit* (flourishing unexpectedly).

Are we dealing here with a genuine family tradition, now lost, or a romantic fiction, the product of Ward's gothic imagination? It is impossible to tell. That the author is acquainted with the conventional version of Oxford's biography is clear from what follows:

He was a poet, and not a very good one, but ranked with those of his time; and this, added to his quarrels with his father-in-law, Burghleigh, for not saving his friend the Duke of Norfolk, according, as he thought, to a promise made, both by queen and minister, created a tradition in the family that the inscription was his.

This somewhat dismissive conclusion is not the end of the story, however. A second episode, some sixty pages later, speaks of Mortimer de Vere in terms which clearly

mirror the antiquarian interests of Edward Harley, and it provides a quite different account of Edward de Vere:

But English history lay before him in the library, and the puissant De Vere figured with such power and brilliancy, in the earlier part of it, as to engage his attention. This was heightened even to devotion by a large and illuminated manuscript which his research had discovered on neglected shelves, in which the family history had been blazoned. Here, besides a long line of Norman heroes, he found that Edward, Earl of Oxford, who in the days of Elizabeth united in his single person the character of her greatest noble, knight, and poet.

This is doubleness of a different order, both saying and un-saying. What are we to make of it: intended to let slip an inadmissible truth under a veil of deniability?

1786 🐷 *The Story of the Learned Pig, by an Officer of the Royal Navy*

Going back a further forty years, we have *The Story of the Learned Pig*—almost certainly a reference to Francis Bacon—appearing in 1786, with this rather delightful frontispiece. It's a novel with an outrageously picaresque plot line turning on transmigration. The narrator inhabits a series of lives, alternating between the animal and human species. Two of his human incarnations are as a Roman—Brutus, and as an Elizabethan—Shakespear [*sic*]. Here is the most relevant passage:

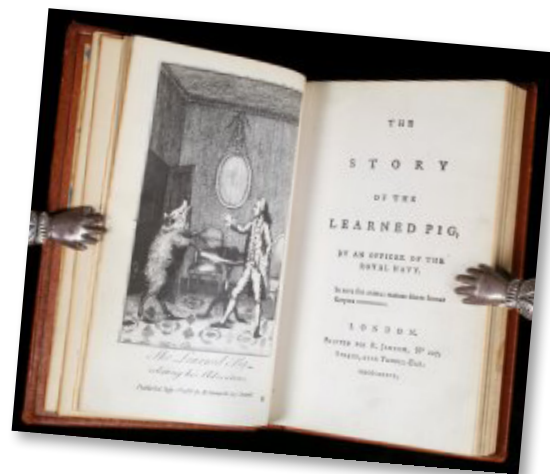
I am now come to a period in which, to my great joy, I once more got possession of a human body. My parents, indeed, were of low extraction; my mother sold fish about the streets of this metropolis, and my father was a water-carrier, even that same water-carrier celebrated by Ben Jonson in his comedy of *Every Man in his Humour*.

I was early in life initiated in the profession of horse-holder for those who came to visit the playhouse, where I was well-known by the name of **Pimping Billy**.

I soon after contracted a friendship with that great man and first of geniuses, the “Immortal Shakespeare,” and am happy in now having it in my power to refute the prevailing opinion of his having run his country for deer-stealing, which is as false as it is disgracing.

With equal falsehood has he been father'd with many spurious dramatic pieces. *Hamlet, Othello, As You Like It, The Tempest, and A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for five, of all which I confess myself to be the author.

This is truly seeing double—who is the true author? Handy dandy—is it the “Immortal Shakespeare”—or is it Pimping Billy?



1769 🐼 *The Life and Adventures of Commonsense: An Historical Allegory*

The author is believed to be Herbert Lawrence, a physician and a friend of Garrick. It was popular enough to have a second edition in London and to be published in France and Switzerland in 1777. A century and a half later, in 1917, it was hailed in a catalogue entry for an auction that took place in New York as:

The first book of the Bacon-Shakespeare Controversy. The character of "Wisdom" in the story can easily be identified as Sir Francis Bacon by the references to his being often consulted by Queen Elizabeth and James I, and to his "Common Place Book" which, of course, survives.

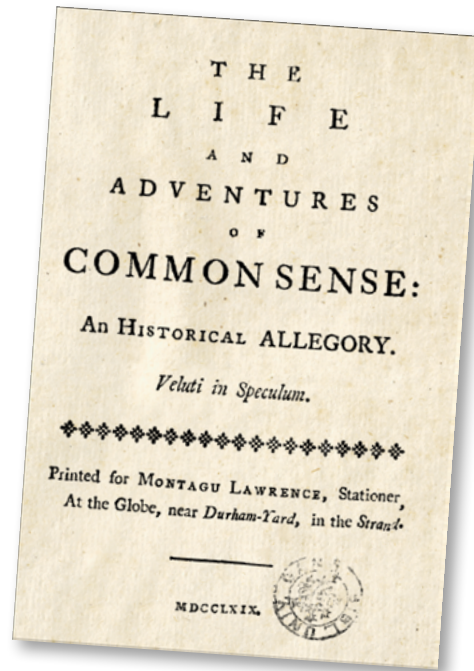
The story relates the various adventures of Common Sense, the son of Wisdom and Truth from the time of Cicero to the reign of George I. Chapter 9 of Book 2 sees the narrator's parents making their way to London:

Upon their arrival they made an acquaintance with a Person belonging to the Playhouse; this Man was a profligate in his Youth, and, as some say, had been a Deer-stealer, others deny it; but be that as it will, he certainly was a Thief from the Time he was first capable of distinguishing any Thing; and therefore it is immaterial what Articles he dealt in. I say my father and his friends made a sudden and violent Intimacy with this Man, who seeing they were negligent, careless people, took the first opportunity that presented itself, to rob them of everything he could lay his hands on.

Amongst my father's baggage, he presently cast his eye upon a common-place Book, in which was contained, an infinite variety of Modes and Forms, to express all the different Sentiments of the human Mind, together with Rules for their Combinations and Connections upon every Subject or Occasion that might occur in Dramatic Writing.

With these Materials, and with good Parts of his own, he commenced Play-Writer; how he succeeded is needless to say, when I tell the Reader that his name was Shakespear.

Interestingly, these events are dated pre-1587.



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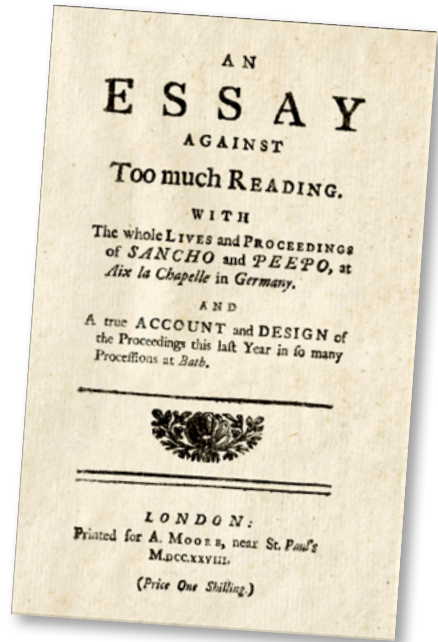
1728 🐉 *An Essay Against Too Much Reading Captain Goulding*

This mock essay uses hyperbole to inveigh against “too much reading.” Under cover of this supposedly enraged invective, the author, a Captain Goulding, satirises Bardolatry. Here’s a flavour of it:

Shakespear has frighten’d three parts of the world from attempting to write; and he was no Scholar, no Grammarian, no Historian, and in all probability, could not write English. Although his plays were historical, as I have heard, the History Part was given him in concise and short, by one of these Chuckles that could give him nothing else.

I will give you a short account of Mr. Shakespear’s Proceeding; and that I have had from one of his intimate Acquaintance. His being imperfect in some Things, was owing to his not being a scholar; which obliged him to have one of those chuckle-pated historians for his particular Associate, that could scarce speak a Word but upon that subject; and he maintain’d him, or he might have starv’d upon his History. And when he wanted anything in his Way, as his Plays were all Historical, he sent to him, and took down the Heads of what was his Purpose.

On the one hand, this is *reductio ad absurdum*—it is difficult to be sure just how seriously to take this author. Beyond highlighting the inadequacy of the Stratford biography, is he making any kind of serious point about dual or proxy authorship, possibly involving Francis Bacon?

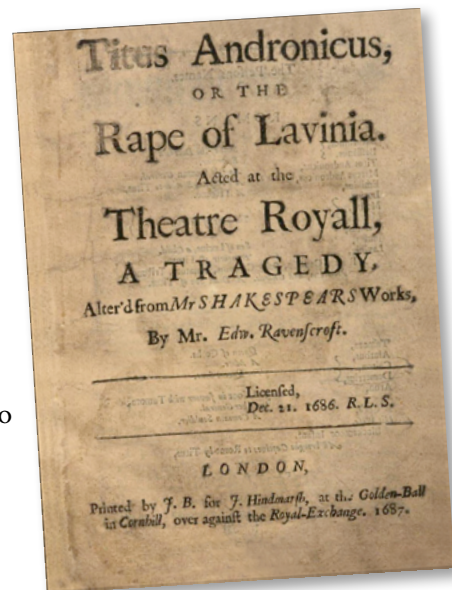


1687 🐉 *Edward Ravenscroft*

The seventeenth century playwright Edward Ravenscroft (fl. 1659–1697) wrote a string of plays in the 1670s including his own adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. The extensive DNB article on him does not include the fact that in the introduction to his adaptation, he stated:

I have been told by some anciently conversant with the stage that [Titus Andronicus] was not originally his but brought by a private author to be acted.

Here we have it—in straightforward statement—from someone who appears to have no agenda but is simply reporting what he has been told. Here is Shakespeare acting as playbroker—his most plausible role in the whole Authorship mystery. It also matches John Ward’s statement, that Shakespeare *supplied* the stage with two plays a year.



1645 🐼 *The Great Assises: Holden in Parnassus, by Apollo and his Assessours*

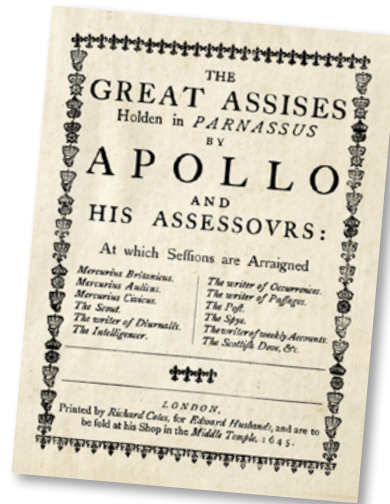
My final example takes us one step closer to Shakespeare's time, and chiming with all the heavy hints dropped by his contemporaries about Shake-scene, Harvey's "rich mummer," or Jonson's Poet-Ape. This is another teasing work which takes an established satirical genre — a mock trial of contemporary authors—and has a great deal of fun with it.

Written in an established satirical tradition of a mock trial of prominent literary figures, *The Great Assises: Holden in Parnassus, by Apollo and his Assessours* was published anonymously in 1645, but the author is generally believed to George Wither. He places Lord Verulam, Francis Bacon, the Chancellor of Parnassus, as president of the proceedings. This befits his actual judicial role as Chancellor of England, as well as his extensive literary activities involving a scriptorium of "good pens." Sir Philip Sidney is his High Constable, and Edmund Spencer acts as the Clerk of the Assizes. Apart from Apollo, all thirty-two figures involved in this tribunal (both the assessors and the accused) are real persons. The sixteen assessors include European humanists of the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, such as Mirandola, Erasmus, and Casaubon.

Shakespeare: The writer of weekly accounts

The essence of the joke in *The Great Assises*, this satirical broadside (extending more than 900 lines), is that the twelve named jurors are simultaneously the twelve malefactors. Within its hierarchical schema, it is worth noting that William Shakespeare is relegated to 31st place. He is the eleventh of the twelve jurors. Under the parallel list of malefactors he is identified as "*The writer of weekly accounts.*" As each charge is read, the accused has the opportunity to offer his defence. In many cases, adding to the comedy, this defence takes the form of an attack on his fellows, challenging their fitness to act as jurors. Thus Thomas Cary declares:

*Shakespear's a Mimicke, Massinger a Sot,
Heywood for Aganippe takes a plot:
Beaumont and Fletcher make one poet, they
Single, dare not adventure on a Play . . .*



As instances of the word "mimicke" cited in the OED for this period show, it refers exclusively to an actor, mimic, or jester. It is not a neutral term; it is invariably pejorative, and it would fit with the evidence we have for a minor actor within the company: "Shakespeare ye Player." When it comes to the specific charges levelled at Shakespeare, they are veiled in deliberately obfuscatory terms which require careful decoding. We note the implications of the word "pretend." His role appears to be that of someone who seeks to maintain the commercial success of the theatre ("the art of lying") by procuring written material ("accounts") of dubious provenance ("pamphlets vain"):

*And this was he, who weekly did pretend,
Accounts of certain news abroad to send.
He was accus'd, that he with Pamphlets vain,
The art of lying had sought to maintain.*

The charge continues and confirms this interpretation of Shakespeare playing an entrepreneurial role within the company. It refers specifically to an actual transaction which took place on 19 May 1603:

*Which trade, he and his fellows us'd of late,
With such successe, and profit in the State
Of high Parnassus, that they did conspire,
A Patent from Apollo to acquire:
That they might thus incorporated bee,
Into a Company of Lyers free.*

The Lord Chamberlain's Men were granted a royal patent to become the King's Men shortly after the accession of James I, and it was assumed that this initiative came from the King. What was not known,

until it was announced in April 2014, was that a document has recently come to light in the National Archive which shows that it was Shakespeare and his fellows who took the initiative to apply and pay handsomely for this privilege. This discovery was hailed by scholars and reported in the press as revealing his opportunistic instincts and “flair for self-promotion.” An article in *The Times* observed: “The speed with which Shakespeare’s company acquired the King’s patronage demonstrates that they were not only artists but businessmen who recognised the value of what would now be considered a brand name.” Hannah Crumme, the discoverer of the document, wrote: “It shows that he was a cunning businessman who took active steps to make his own fortune.” This assessment concurs precisely with the reference in our poem to “success and profit” resulting from the acquisition of a patent from “Apollo.”

The final punishment meted out by Apollo consigns him to “Stygian gloom.” He is condemned “to keep true accounts” (a legalistic formulation specific to the practice of accountancy) “upon a wooden tally” and to ferry ghosts back and forth across the river Styx “for seven year’s space.” (A possible allusion to the period

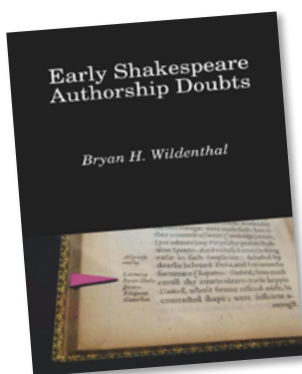
1597–1604 during which the bulk of plays attributed to Shakespeare were published, prior to the appearance of an additional eighteen in the First Folio, after a gap of nineteen years?) He is “judg’d to be a **bond-slave**” and “for his **hire**, each night receive hee must / Three fillips on the nose, with a browne crust / Of mouldy bread.” This ignominious fate is in sharp contrast to the judgement passed on one of his fellow jurors, Michael Drayton, whom “The Spye” (Thomas Heywood) attempts to traduce. Instead of punishment, Apollo rebukes his accuser, and devotes thirty lines of high praise to Drayton, commending variously the sweetness and sublimity of his poetic and dramatic works.

Conversely, Shakespeare is consistently associated with a lexicon of financial dealing: *accounts* three times, plus *trade, profit, acquire, incorporated, tally, bond, hire*. So here we have it: smuggled in under the smoke-screen of satire, an accurate profile of the Man from Stratford as procurer of plays, theatre entrepreneur, and occasional mimicke.

For a complete version of the poem and a short bibliography: <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=33437>.

Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts

by Bryan Wildenthal, 2019



This book examines dozens of early authorship doubts before the 1616 death of William Shakespeare of Stratford, including five indications that the real author of the works of “Shakespeare” (whoever that was) died years before 1616. This is the most sensational literary mystery of all time. The denial of these doubts by most orthodox scholars is an academic scandal of the first order. Wildenthal brings fresh insights and rigorously impartial scholarship to this controversial subject. He shows that these doubts were an authentic and integral part of the time and culture that produced the works of “Shakespeare.” His book has been hailed by acclaimed author Alexander Waugh: “Professor Wildenthal’s witty and forensic tour de force examines the evidence of

Shakespeare’s contemporaries and what they really thought of him. Seldom is the argument against conventional opinion so devastatingly articulated.”

About Julia Cleave

Julia Cleave is an independent scholar and a trustee of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust.
