

Why Shakespeare Wasn't

I had no opinion about Shakespeare's authorship of the works attributed to him, until May 18, 2014, the day before I began this essay. That evening, I saw a documentary about it. Before it was over, I realized that the plays were written by someone else. The debate has been going on for ages, but I never heard it mentioned, except rarely and briefly, as a light human-interest item; a loopy sort of 'thing-to-say-with-a-smirk', on a slow news day, when another academic had issued some comment. The only actual discussion I can remember, prior to 4/18/14, was on the William F. Buckley show, Firing Line, in the '80s, and I formed no opinion from that. (I don't know how two scholars could talk about it, for so long, without giving me a handle on thinking about the question, but everything they said seemed off the point of Shakespeare's authorship.) Why hasn't it been resolved? 1} To reject Shakespeare's authorship, you have to erase the familiar name for the new, and quash the persona which had fit the famous name; to imagine a whole new person. (Don't read, on, unless you feel that it's worth the brief, impersonal trauma of re-envisioning the author's life, for the sake of correctly crediting "the greatest author in the English language".) 2} The connection of those works with that name, has dignified the very sound of it. The work and the name are united in popular imagination, so that, perhaps, you cannot debase one, except by debasing the other. If the name does have such cache, people might just stop reading and attending the same plays, presented under another name. It might not seem so wrenching if his name were not unusual. If Ben Johnson were considered "the greatest author ...", his name still might never have acquired that degree of dignity because "Johnson" is the most common name in the English language. 3} As tourist bait, Shakespeare has value to Stratford. His wife's home has been preserved for that reason, and the whole town looks as if it has been groomed as an icon. If it were not believed that he's the author, his house might be gone, already, and the town would not be host to that festival. Without such physical touchstones, tourists would have no destination. The Shakespeare legend must bring tourists into the country, the town must draw more people who go to England, for some other primary reason, than any other destination except Buckingham Palace. Many scholars might be suborned into the conspiracy, because they don't usually make too much, and intellectual integrity doesn't pay the bills. If the question of who wrote the plays, were a great moral or social one, we would judge the professional "Stratfordists" accordingly, but, as the issue is merely authorship, we can accept the plea, "What's in a name? ".

The show of 5/18/14, tried to prove that the author was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. He was a ward of Lord Burghley who had the biggest Library in England. Such a resource would be a gold mine to anyone with a literary bent. I won't go so far as to say that DeVere* is the author, but Shakespeare is not in the running. Wherever I mean 'the works traditionally attributed to Shakespeare', I will place his name in quotation marks ("Shakespeare"). {*I take the liberty of modernizing the spelling of de Vere by capitalizing the "d" because we see it as the first letter of a family name, rather than the word "of" or "from", as it was meant. Because it's understood as a single word, I remove the space. Such names scan better. Retaining the original capital "V", tells the reader the original spelling. (Better to drop it, too, than retain the old spelling.)}

Some facts, offered by the "Oxfordians" (DeVere supporters) are insignificant. Let's start by disposing of them. 1} Some of the plays are set in Italy, and contain exact details of specific places, there. DeVere spent some time in Italy, but, if a writer wanted to embellish his Italian

settings with authentic details, he might have gathered them from anyone, even indirectly by overhearing. There must have been plenty of first-hand accounts of Italy, circulating in Tudor London. A] One reason for including those details, would be that many in the audience would have seen them. It was in Shakespeare's time that young, aristocratic Englishmen began to make a "grande tour" of the continent, and Italy was a popular destination. Such references would have been a popular little aside to the people who had been to Italy. B] You didn't have to take the grande tour to see the sights. The wealth of Elizabethan England, which made such a career as Shakespeare's, possible, was built on trade, and London was the biggest port in England. The details of cities which were not the most popular on the tour, like Padua and Verona, could have been gleaned from any merchant or sailor who had been there. > The Italian minutiae which illustrate "Shakespeare's" scænæ, prove nothing. 2} Some plays contain references to the people and inner details of the royal court and the house in which DeVere lived. A] If we accept that Shakespeare could have gotten whole plays from a courtier, we must also accept that he could have just gotten insider details of certain households from him, and inserted them into plays of his own devising. B] It has always amazed me, how much is known about the personal lives of ruling personages, by those whom they rule. They gossip about them and follow their private lives as people 'know' the royals and other celebrities, today, even taking sides in their conflicts and tribulations. Tales were bound to filter down to anyone mingling with such a variegated cross-section of people, as an author/director/actor/producer would. There's no reason to suppose that Shakespeare didn't hear accounts of great houses, directly from servants and retainers, as well as their employers.

Intimate references to upper crust households, do not indicate intimacy between that strata and the writer, or anything about the class of the writer, except that the ability to write, was not cheap to acquire. DeVere was a hostage of Burghley, as so many aristocratic children are held; to assure the subservience of the father. If he is spilling intimate details of great, and even royal homes, he would require the director to whom he sold the plays, to pass as writer, or cast someone else in that role. They're all actors, after all, and accustomed to posing as someone they are not. Shakespeare would rather not have tossed such a pretense as authorship, into the juggling act he had to perform as director, procurer, business manager, etc. It was a condition, imposed by his supplier, to mask his own involvement.

If the "Shakespeare" plays were written by someone as pre-occupied as Shakespeare was, with financial management, fund raising, acting, directing, procuring costumes, etc., we would wonder where he would have wangled the time. By itself, his role as director, eliminates Shakespeare as author. Directing means conducting rehearsals, and the ratio of rehearsal time to performance time, is a ratio of hours to minutes. The nearly two play per year rate is really no more ridiculous than one, or one every other year, considering the acclaim they still receive. I don't claim literary opinion, but those who do, always agree on their quality and complexity, which can usually be grasped, at least when explained. Could those plays, written in stolen moments, sandwiched between so many other demands, have attained and maintained their status, or Shakespeare, his, as "the greatest author in the English Language" ?

I'm sure that Shakespeare's first production must follow his acquisition of a finished play, closely, whoever wrote it. The market was big enough that it should have been easy to get any half-way decent play produced, even for a new author. Unless Shakespeare had financial resources we haven't heard of, his first play would have appeared before the ink was dry. If he wrote it, he finished it the year he turned 24 (or 26) but writing often comes into full bloom in

the late teens / early 20s. Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein at 18. It wasn't published until she was 20, with some editing help from Percy, the value of which, is disputed.) Steven Crane published Maggie: A Girl of the Streets when he was 21 and The Red Badge of Courage at 23. Maggie is a contender as the seminal work of the genre called "Naturalism",* and Red Badge is widely considered to be as good as anything ever written about that war. Miles Franklin wrote My Brilliant Career, at 19. Anne Frank left her diary at 15 [& 2 months]. Gore Vidal published Williwaw at 21 and his third novel, The City and the Pillar, at 22 [& 2 months]. All of these works are considered very good, by literary experts and reading audiences. If many writers are accomplished by 20, it still might seem like a stretch to suppose that the "Shakespeare" author started writing such "great" plays in his teens, but is it really any less likely than the possibility that anyone wrote them in 20-24 years, as the Shakespeare supporters believe? (24 accepts the longest possible span; 1588 – 1612.) The impulse to write, might be generated by any number of experiences, ambitions and ideals, but it's important what sort of ground the seed falls upon. Someone who had access to one of the best libraries in Europe, by the age of 12, like DeVere, just might have begun to write at 16-18. He was 14 years older than Shakespeare (born 1550 vs 1564). If we accept that 18 is not too young to have written the early plays, he could have finished his first play in 1568; 20-22 years before Shakespeare staged one (when Shakespeare was only four). They might have been staged at six-month intervals, on average, but that doesn't tell us the rate at which they were written. If DeVere wrote a play in 1568, and lived until 1604, he had 36 years to write them. That's 12-16 more than we are accustomed to suppose Shakespeare took, and even that rate must give us pause, if one of them is Hamlet. (If dates are given in the first folio, they might not express the exact dates the plays were first staged.)

We don't know how long Shakespeare might have possessed any play, before staging it. If he got them faster than he could use them, he would have had more than one in hand, at all times. He should have been able to survive the loss of his source, with plays he had stored up. The year of DeVere's death, when sounded simultaneously with the year of Shakespeare's retirement, bellows what such an early retirement, by itself, more quietly suggests; that when DeVere died, Shakespeare had a cache which took seven or eight years to use up. Even that period of time leaves the impression of a connection, although the shorter gap of four years between DeVere's death and the earlier date of Shakespeare's retirement (1608) is even more suggestive, as circumstantial evidence. I'm not sure if that was a retirement date, but it was the stated date of the "first folio".

Retiring might indicate the financial latitude to do so, but the freedom to do something, doesn't preclude the possibility of a pressing reason, as well. Ghost authorship was very commonplace, but I don't know if it was a secret from most theatre patrons. If Shakespeare only had a single source, his audience might never have doubted his authorship. They would always have heard the same "voice"; the overall style or manner of presentation which distinguishes an author. If one person had supplied enough plays to keep Shakespeare in business, they would be consistent in character. If he started using another author's plays, suspicion would quickly have fallen on his authorship of all, and, if the supposed author is found to be passing off another person's work as his own, even once, he might have just been getting away with it, all along. Although not so highly regarded as they are, today, the plays were very popular. Having established a distinctive voice as his own, retirement would seem preferable to exposing the deception; losing the respect he enjoyed as author, and provoking resentment for succeeding at the charade for so long.

There is a claim that Shakespeare did not re-write anything, and that he had a conviction about it; that he didn't 'believe in' re-writing. That story also says that he was at odds with Ben Johnson, on the issue. Having done this, constantly, for 24 years, I find it impossible to believe that any writer lives with the first draft of anything bigger than the rare sentence, regardless of their skill level, purpose in writing, or even time deadline. It's so ridiculous, we must wonder why a comparison with Johnson was ever made, and why Johnson would have bothered to say he edited his work, instead of just scoffing at Shakespeare's claim. If Shakespeare was buying plays, so good that he couldn't improve them enough to justify borrowing any time from his other tasks, no one would ever have seen him in the act of writing. The question would occur to those nearest to him, why that was. Obedience to a technical 'philosophy' of getting every jot perfect, first time, every time, might suffice for an explanation, to people who have never tried to write anything but a grocery list, but it still would not have explained why he never had ink on his fingers or cuffs; the indelible badge of writing with quill and bottle. His close friends and associates would know he was not a writer, but they were invested in his success, which depended on the deception. The theater is a small circle. His actors and other associates, should not want to bring him down, even if they had a falling out with him, because it would hurt everyone else in his company. (Even so, it seems like a minor statistical miracle that no one outed him, out of pique over any sort of conflict, in all those years.)

You've heard the expression, "read and write". I used to think that was redundant. I assumed that anyone who can either read or write, can do the other. It's not so. The monks of the Middle Ages, who copied the ancient books, could not read what they were writing. They were merely drawing the characters. St. Augustine did not have his sermons in front of him, as he delivered them. Wingin' it without a script, is too risky, unless you have no choice, and we know he wanted to preserve what he said, because he had scribes take it down. If he could have written his sermons, he would have. That he could read, is part of his conversion story. To direct and act in the plays, Shakespeare only had to be able to read. There are five signatures, which some people apparently agree to be his, but no two are alike. 1} I don't know how they know that any of the five are his. What could be their reference sample? It sounds like assuming; that they are willing to err on the side of inclusion. 2} Had he ever worked in a law office, as one claim has it, his signature would have been required every day, as witness to so many documents, that Stratford would be wall-papered with them. Lord Penzance says it isn't possible that he "... could have been at work in an attorney's office without being called upon continually to act as witness, and in many other ways leaving traces of his work and name".* The comment of Lord Campbell, appears just above, in Mark Twain's book on the subject,* in which so many others comment on that same statistic; zero signatures, throughout "... half a dozen shires" where researchers had looked.* Clemens concludes that the law career was manufactured to account for the author's fluency in legaleze.* 3} The reason we most need a verifiable signature, discourages variation. To enter into contracts and other legal arrangements, it's necessary to verify the identities of every party. Because life is a succession of such agreements, our signature is the combination of letters we write most often, by far. Repetition and the need to verify, train us to standardize it. If all five of Shakespeare's extant signatures are different, it means that he didn't even write his own name, often enough for it to become uniform, in spite of the incessant rounds of legal jousting which comprise his retirement. > If he

couldn't even write, his artistic ethic of never re-writing, is just a cover-story for the fact that no one ever saw him with a pen in his hand, unless they were holding it, too; guiding it to help him 'make his mark'. {All *s - Footnote 3}

The accuracy of Shakespeare's legal jargon can't have any more meaning than his accuracy of his sailors' and soldiers' jargon. No one disagrees that his rendering of their dialects, is perfect, too, and that he precisely captures the class of sailor and soldier-speak; ship captain and field marshal, as well as their sailors and soldiers. If his legal-speak means that he worked for a lawyer, his naval/military dialogue means that he spent a lot of time at sea and in the army, in the upper echelons of both, and as a common seaman and foot soldier. Any one of those careers is precluded by his career in theatre, because it began when he was 22 or so.

Mark Twain remarks on the documentary void for decades after Shakespeare's passing. The lack of continuity between the existence of a person and the first mention of him, probably means that the first statements are not coming from anyone who encountered him. Something could have been transmitted by word of mouth, across two generations, but, if he left such a small personal impression on his world, that there is no written mention of him, despite those two decades in such a visible career, why should such a tenacious oral tradition take root, so long after his exeunt? We're not stranded by the literary trickle of the Bronze Age, but surfing the Golden Age swell of literacy. Clemens is not the first to dismantle the myth of Shakespeare's legal experience. He mostly just sums up the falsity of that and other claims, compiling what many have always understood. His most important contribution is the most profound reason that anyone still clings to 'Shakespeare-the-name'. He sees it as one of those things which people must hold on to, and says that the belief in Shakespeare's authorship, is imposed by believers, on others. He calls it, "superstition". (Maybe you can think of another word for "superstition", to describe that virulent faith in fiction; the need to believe something which is irrational, the assumption of the right to do so, and the presumption to foist that belief on others.)

Mythical figures often have the same name as some real person, about whom so little is really known that anyone can make things up, without fear of contradiction, except by someone else who has nothing to go on. Any false claim about a real person, can be stuffed into the shell which is the succession of letters and sounds, comprising their name. 'S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e the writer' is a fictional character, only resembling Shakespeare the person, in costume, setting and spelling.

What is the cost of losing "Shakespeare", the writer? The houses, theatre and other icons of his presence have the same value, not just for their representation of that era, but because he is still important. To hold his audience, as long as he did, he must have excelled at the many functions he did perform, and, if the plays had not succeeded for some time, they would not have been preserved. A sufficient number of them had to succeed, to be deemed worth compiling into those "folios". Had he only succeeded for two or four plays, we might never have heard of them. (Of course, another director might have bought them and done better, so that we would know the plays by his name.) Even the best play won't succeed without good direction, casting, costuming, etc., and the success of a manager/director depends on many peripheral talents, like co-ordinating the conflicting temperaments and ambitions of his company and negotiating leases, prices of materials for each production, and obstacles to acquiring them. Shakespeare must have been a human dynamo with an agile, multifarious brain, nearly exempt from the need to sleep.

The guy must have been awake twenty-one-and-a-half hours a day without ever sitting down long enough to learn how to write his own name. We owe the survival of the plays to his rarified brilliance in presenting them to a boisterous, fickle, illiterate audience, in such a way as to keep them coming back for two decades.

I have heard that Mark Twain said, ‘Well, if Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare, then it was someone else, named Shakespeare’.* Shakespeare couldn’t have said it better, himself, if he really were the one who said, “... a rose, by any other name ...” The value and quality of the “Shakespeare” plays, do not depend on whether Shakespeare wrote them. {*I’m still looking for this quotation, but if I can’t find it, so what? If Clemens didn’t write it, ...}

5/19/14 — 8/12/19

4/06/21

Footnotes

1} Shakespeare’s age has been “corrected”, mistakenly or not, to 46 or 48. I don’t know how it was expressed when I first learned it. It might have been in dates, from which I figured it.

Until a few years ago, I had never heard any date for his baptism and death, except April 30. I find that his death has been moved to the 26th. Many sites concur, although none acknowledge the opinion which was the only opinion for at least, more than the 50 years, I used to hear of it. It has never been acceptable to overthrow long established facts without a description of how the new information has been gleaned. Many sites say with confidence, that it has always been assumed that he was born on the 23rd. A] To even mention it, without citing a single actual statement which even recites the assumption, isn’t good. B] Lacking any evidence, why repeat it? C] It suggests that the assumption has weight, as if it contained facts or an argument from fact.

Having changed the death date, and because that was previously the same as the baptism date, some have moved the baptism date to April 26th, as well! Well, they are supposed to be the same date!

2} Some credit Emile Zola as the father of Naturalism. Although Stephen Crane did not acknowledge it, literary scholars agree that he was influenced by Emile Zola. Did Crane even read Zola? I assume that the answers to both questions are known without dissent, because those opinions of literary influence, must be based on them.

3} Mark Twain; Is Shakespeare Dead?; Ch. 8

5/19/14 - 02/28/18

Work Dates

5/19/14 — 6/27/14

8/25 & 27/14

3/14/15 (Last Sentence)

4/25 & 28/15

8/17-23 & 25/14

2/14/15

2/14/16

3/23-31/16

12/29/16

12/?,29/17

01/7,8,20,31/18

2/5?,6,7,28/18

9/15-18/18

10/06,10,29,31/18

11/02/18

8/7,8,9,12/19