

Our Enduring Authorship Mystery Still Awaiting Academic Breakthrough

By Geoffrey Eyre

Let us look forward to the day when some plucky Stratfordian mainstreamer breaks from the citadel, stiffens the sinews, and signals to his colleagues that the time has come at last to do some proper work, to lay aside his prejudice, to examine the facts, and in calm and contemplative fashion to begin to justify the existence of that most fortunate among all professional classes – the salaried scholar of the State.

Alexander Waugh, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?* Page 83

The [Shakespeare] authorship question is the largest and most consequential debate of longstanding public awareness in the humanities curriculum of the Anglo-American world and perhaps the rest of the world as well, wherever Shakespeare is taught or studied.

Roger Stritmatter, *The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford ... and the Shakespeare Question.* Page 3

A matter of national concern

Not to know for certain the identity of the main originating writer of the literary works attributed to William Shakespeare should be a matter of national concern. Shakespeare was voted in as the United Kingdom's 'Man of the [Second] Millennium' so curiosity about him and his impressive body of work is justified. Unhappily this biographical information cannot be satisfactorily obtained from any credible source.

The intransigence of the literary establishment in keeping authorship studies out of the academic curriculum for so long has denied many generations of scholars a legitimate debate. The dismal consequence of this suppression is that homage is still being paid to the wrong man, a situation unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Obdurate support for the uniquely undeserving Warwickshire commodity trader and money-lender William Shakspeare has had far-reaching adverse consequences for the teaching of English literature world-wide. Those staunchly maintaining the so-called 'Stratfordian' version of events are understandably reluctant to admit that all the thousands of signed articles, books, and lengthy detailed biographies lauding Shakspeare as the great author have no basis in fact. Such an admission would call into question many illustrious academic careers. Think of the countless grants, diplomas, prizes, doctorates, professorships and knighthoods that have been awarded for eulogising the wrong man. It would be too painful and embarrassing for them even to contemplate.

The most depressing aspect of the Shakespeare authorship repression is that those who lecture on English Literature in our departments of higher education cannot fail to be aware of the existence of so many books persuasively advocating someone other than the Stratford incumbent as the most likely true author of Shakespeare. This unwavering support for the orthodox Shakspeare position was consolidated in 2013 by the publication of a collection of essays with the title *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*. It found a compliant publisher in the Cambridge University Press but triggered a spirited Oxfordian response. This used the same title *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* but followed it with a question mark. Those Stratfordians who took the trouble to read their



own book, and were brave enough to read the rebuttal, would have found it grim reading. Has there ever been a more merciless roasting in print than Alexander Waugh's essay 'Keeping Shakespeare Out of Italy'? This heavyweight demolition of a weakly defended case almost makes you feel sorry for the hapless Strats, stuck with a brief they must know lacks all credibility. Yet few have put their tenure at risk by breaking ranks and grudgingly conceding that the author might actually have visited Italy in order to write so many famous plays set in Italian cities and the shores of the Adriatic, in Venice most notably.

Even so, *Beyond Doubt* could be seen as a small step in the right direction. Entering the debate instead of ignoring it was good, and to be welcomed, but it was constructed to serve a purpose. This was to lower expectations by down-grading and down-mystifying the so-called 'Bard' from quasi-divine status to that of a competent journeyman writer, always ready to oblige when tasked by theatre owners or stage managers to give a dud script the kiss of life. Plainly stated, and many times emphasised in the text of the book, was the message that they no longer viewed Shakespeare as a solitary genius writing in scholarly isolation but instead now ranked him as a pragmatic jobbing wordsmith writing for money, even if doing it better than most. Collaboration was the order of the day. In his notes on *Sir Thomas More in the Complete Works* Professor John Jowett writes, 'His [Shakespeare's] contribution shows him as a thoroughgoing professional sharing with colleagues whose work he respected in an essentially collaborative enterprise'. This conflicts with the Oxfordian position that doubts there is any reliable bibliographic or documentary evidence to show that the real Shakespeare ever collaborated with anyone.

The absence of *Juvenilia* and the distance back in time

It should always be kept in mind how far back in time the earliest references to works of literature with Shakespeare associations began to appear. The long narrative poem *Romeus and Juliet* dates to 1562, with the author cited as one Arthur Brooke, of whom little is known. This 3,020 line poem was later reworked as a play, the world famous *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, with only minor plot differences. John Jowett in his notes for *Romeo and Juliet* in the Wells and Taylor Complete Works writes that although versions of the story were extant in French and Italian “Shakespeare owes most to Arthur Brooke’s long poem.” This close similarity would constitute blatant plagiarism if two separate writers were involved. If the second author had contributed to the earlier version, then no charge of plagiarism would apply; but the date of 1562 would present difficulties for Stratfordians, as the Warwickshire man was not born until 1564.

In 1566, at a degree ceremony at Oxford University, Queen Elizabeth awarded the sixteen-year-old Edward de Vere an MA degree. A performance of the play *Palamon and Arcite* followed. This was based on a story by Chaucer, adapted for the stage by Richard Edwards. This surfaced later as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which is included in the Wells and Taylor Complete Works, believed by some to have been co-authored with John Fletcher.

In 1567 appeared the first parts of the translation by Arthur Golding of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Golding was Edward de Vere’s maternal uncle and Latin tutor, also a fellow resident at Cecil House in London. Many Oxfordians believe that Golding’s much-admired translation could have been a master and pupil collaboration. There are some 900 classical allusions in the Shakespeare canon, which suggests that the writer knew

the *Metamorphoses* line by line. No Shakespeare juvenilia has survived but the quality of the young de Vere's early poetry and his proficiency in Latin would have made the joint effort possible. (In 1571 he wrote a long prefatory letter in Latin for the translation of *Il Cortegiano*). To allow for this age discrepancy, orthodox scholars date the individual plays as late as possible, 1610-11 for *The Tempest*, for example, when all the major sources were available by 1580.

Some of the missing information

Where were the 18 unregistered and hitherto unknown plays housed between Edward de Vere's death in 1604 and their appearance in the *First Folio* of 1623? Who provided the high level of literary expertise that would have been necessary to process all 36 plays through to publication? Who underwrote the cost of printing and distribution? And what became of the manuscripts after publication? There is no record that anyone named William Shakespeare received payment for any form of writing, either in London, in Stratford-upon Avon, or elsewhere.

There is no record that the author known as William Shakespeare owned a house for himself and his family in London. There is no record that the author known as William Shakespeare ever attended at court. There is no record that the author known as William Shakespeare was ever asked by any other writer of comparable standing to supply a testimonial, or for any other form of help. There is no record that the author known as William Shakespeare received any tributes from fellow writers when he died. Not in his Warwickshire home town, in London, or anywhere. These awkward facts add to the mystery.

Edward de Vere was, and remains, central to the Shakespeare authorship mystery

Those most closely involved in producing the *First Folio* of 1623 were members of the court, as earlier for the two narrative poems. All were linked in some way to Edward de Vere the 17th earl of Oxford, the most widely supported candidate as the true author of the Shakespeare canon.

Henry Wriothesley the young earl of Southampton and a royal ward, received the dedication of the two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. In 1590 he had been heavily fined by Lord Burghley for refusing to marry his granddaughter Elizabeth Vere, the earl of Oxford's eldest daughter. Prominent among this extended aristocratic family were the Herbert brothers, William and Philip, the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery respectively. William had been contracted to marry middle daughter Bridget Vere but was unable to agree dowry terms with her guardian Lord Burghley. Susan, the earl of Oxford's youngest daughter, was married to Philip Herbert the earl of Montgomery. Elizabeth Vere, the eldest of Lord Oxford's three daughters, previously rejected by the earl of Southampton, was finally married to William Stanley the earl of Derby, a scholarly man who maintained a company of players.

The Herbert brothers sponsored the *First Folio* project and received the dedication. At the time of publication William Herbert was the Lord Chamberlain, the arbiter of last resort in what could be published or performed on the London stage. His mother Mary Sidney the Countess of Pembroke was the sister of the soldier-poet Sir Philip Sidney. She was a literary figure in her own right and a generous patron of writers, in her salon at Wilton House near Salisbury, as well as in London. She would have possessed the discrimination and knowledge of writing required for



assisting in the editing process, which took place between 1604 when the earl of Oxford died and 1623 when the *First Folio* was published.

Also accepted at court were Francis Bacon (from 1618 Viscount St Alban), a cousin by marriage to the earl of Oxford, and Ben Jonson the protégé, friend and writing collaborator of William Herbert, the earl of Pembroke and Lord Chamberlain. Opportunities for research into this highly literate family of aristocrats, soldiers, lawyers and courtiers remain stifled by the orthodox refusal to concede on the authorship question. It is a matter of profound regret. The contents of the plays take on a new significance when viewed as the work of a palace insider, one with close ties of kinship to Queen Elizabeth and her senior ministers. Little would need to be explained away and much would fall into place if the earl of Oxford was ever confirmed as the author known by the pseudonym ‘William Shakespeare.’

William Herbert as the prime mover in producing the collected edition of the Shakespeare plays known as the *First Folio* in 1623 may also have held the answer to the frequently asked question concerning the absence of a Shakespeare archive. Not only have the handwritten manuscripts disappeared but also the writing essentials of desk, chair, ink, quills, binding materials, diaries, notebooks, loose papers, letters and correspondence, reference books and dictionaries, all the paraphernalia needed to provide an appropriate working environment for a full-time writer. Our best guess is that the archive was preserved in Baynard’s Castle in London, a former royal palace owned by the Herbert family and used by William Herbert as his London home. He died there in 1630 at the age of fifty.

On 3rd September 1666 the castle and everything in it were burned to the ground in London's great fire. Nothing survived. If such was the case it would provide a practical explanation for the almost complete absence of documentation that has hindered research into the Shakespeare authorship from that day to this.

The Looney Centenary 2020

It will soon be a hundred years since *Shakespeare Identified* exploded into the ivory-towered comfort zones of the most prestigious university common rooms. The reverberations are still being felt. Why the notion of a more credible author has always been so strenuously resisted is yet one more part of the overall mystery. It remains a sensitive issue, greeted as always by the dispirited shuffling sound of closing ranks. This forces the issue that the time may have come to help the Shakspeare hardliners ease themselves out of the quagmire they have got themselves into by continuing to reject the case for a more acceptable alternative author. With the Looney centenary almost upon us this would seem an opportune moment to reach out to the newly qualified graduates of English literature and seek a rapprochement. If we could help to reconcile the present unhappy state of affairs that still divides informed opinion over the disputed Shakespeare authorship, that would make a fitting hundredth anniversary present for J Thomas Looney.