

## The Shakespeare Bastard

By *Richard Malim*



Richard Burbage

There is a case for saying that William Shakspere was chased out of London in 1599/1600 by the ridicule of Oxford and Jonson and by loss of support from his former patrons Essex and Southampton, for whom he was useful because of the similarity of his name with that of the playwright. This is evidenced by the lack of references to him in London, let alone any actual cultural activity<sup>1</sup>. True, he is apparently named as “William Shakespeare” in the new king James’s

patent dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 1603 as one in the acting company licensed to produce plays, between the Scots king’s favourite actor Lawrence Fletcher and the chief shareholder and entrepreneur Richard Burbage. True, “William Shakespeare” was allotted along with the rest of the Company four and a half yards of red cloth for the parade for the king’s formal entry into the city of London on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1604, but there is no record of any further such activity.



Lord Chamberlain  
Lord Cobham

Equally, there is a parallel case for saying that Shakspeare was no longer needed after the final fall of Essex in 1601. Originally I believe Essex and his supporters, including Southampton, allied with Lady Russell and had called in Shakspeare as their front man for the author against Burbage and the Lord Chamberlain's Men in the matter of Burbage's proposed development of the Blackfriars premises as an indoor theatre, which finally with the new 1596 Lord Chamberlain Lord Cobham, they successfully blocked. With the ending of The Theatre lease in 1598 and the development of the Globe, Oxford was out in the cold, since he could not in the first place produce enough support for Burbage's enterprise.

With Cobham dead in 1597, Essex disgraced in 1599 and executed in 1601, Oxford was apparently more reconciled to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, culminating I think in his successful pleading for the life of Essex's co-conspirator, Southampton. After Oxford died in June 1604, there was for the Court Christmas revels of 1604/5 a grand Shakespeare-fest conducted by Ben Jonson with the production of eight Shakespeare plays and a second performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. I note Southampton presented a performance at his London mansion of *Love's Labours Lost* in January 1605 before James's Queen Anne.

At this pinnacle of royal recognition, there is no mention of Shakspeare beyond a mention in the accounts that the author of some of the plays is "Shaxberd," which sounds suspiciously like further ridicule, a view also found in the anonymous play *Guy of Warwick*, thought to date from the 1590s.:

Sparrow: P'faith, Sir, I was born in England at Stratford-upon-Avon Warwickshire

Rainborne: Wer't born in England? What's thy name?

Sparrow: I have a fine finical [affectedly fastidious] name, I can tell ye, for my name is Sparrow, nor no hedge sparrow, nor no peaking [mean-spirited] Sparrow, nor no sneaking Sparrow, but I am a high-mounting - V, ii <sup>2</sup>

Some authorities suggest that Shakspeare's chief persecutor Ben Jonson, who had ridiculed him unmercifully in *Every Man Out of His Humour* in 1598, wrote these lines in *Guy of Warwick*.

The apparent next reference to Shakspeare is in the depositions for the Bellott v. Mountjoy case, where Shakspeare supplied a deposition (so his actual attendance in London should not be required when the case was heard in 1611) on the Plaintiff's side, is not particularly useful in the litigation: perhaps he wanted to maintain a low profile at the time in question by staying, not with any of his powerful patrons or his fellow company men, but with an immigrant Huguenot headdress maker. He says he had known the family for some ten years, but another deponent states that at the time in question he "lay" (i.e. a temporary stay) at their house in Silver Street. In spite of academic opinion, this counters any evidence of a more permanent residence being established.

The question is what was "the time in question." The obvious point is that by 1600, with the fall of Essex and the eclipse at Court of Southampton, he had no further reason to maintain his Globe and other shareholdings a hundred miles of bad road from Stratford-upon-Avon, so at this time, with his principal persecutor Oxford dead, he might well have had the opportunity to enter into negotiations in London with other shareholders or replacements for their disposal in part or whole. We do not know if this so, or with what result, save that in 1605 he invested £440 in local tithes. This suggested negotiation (unlike

seemingly most of the rest of the shareholding changes) does not appear to have attracted any litigation. Perhaps it was in no one's interest, as the players had the shares and Shakspere had the money, so why stir up trouble with powerful men? It is not recognised by any academic studying the problem, but again there is no evidence, save that fellow- shareholder Hemmings alleges the Phillips' share was in 1612 one-sixth. Chambers<sup>3</sup> says that that statement is a slip by Hemmings for one- seventh, but I think it shows that Shakspere had already dropped out.

Perhaps we can date any such sale by Shakspere to end 1604 to early 1605. It is possible that Phillips made his Will dated 4<sup>th</sup> May 1605 shortly thereafter. In it he bequeaths "to my fellow William Shakespeare a thirty-shilling piece in gold;" and to "my fellow Henry Condell one other thirty-shilling piece in gold." Five other actors get twenty-shilling pieces. While Condell is additionally an actor, only he and Shakspere were at any stage fellow shareholders. Phillips may have been grateful that Shakspere appeared not to have caused any trouble over any suggested sale. Of course, Shakspere far away in Stratford, had no further interest in the business and hoped he was of no further interest to the theatrical circle after the basting he received five years earlier. Apart from a business visit (again very low profile) in 1613, there is no further mention of Shakspere in London.

There is one further matter. Quite the oddest conundrum among many inside the Shakespeare Authorship Question is the one that relates to the career of Edmund Shakspere, the brother of William Shakspere. We have the Stratford upon Avon Church record of his baptism, and then nothing until his death in 1607, at least if we judge the entries that relate to the same person. The payments record is in the Southwark Cathedral records of Burials for December 1607(Fig 1):

“31 Edmund Shakspeare A player Buried in the Church

*[bracketed with a second line]*

Nota a forenoone knell of the great bell

XXs”

Let us dispose of one point. There is a modern stone in the Chancel in the Cathedral commemorating the Burial. I am fortified by the fact that there are three other entries on the same page for December 1607 all “Buried in the Church – Nota a knell of the great bell XXs”, one like Edmund’s, “a forenoone knell,” one “a knell”, and the third “an afternoon knell.” If they were all buried along with everyone else for whom “XXs” could be laid out in the Chancel there would an impossible squash.

The full title of Southwark Cathedral is “The Cathedral and Collegiate Church of St. Saviour and St. Mary Overy.” “Overy” simply means “over the River (Thames)” and may indicate that the deceased came from the North side of the Thames.

Then there is a fair copied entry in another ledger in superior penmanship, again for December 1607 (Fig 2):

“31 Edmond Shakespeare a player in the Church”

We note the slight change in the forename and the spelling of the surname with a medial ‘E,’ which indicates that the better educated clerk was familiar with that spelling. Naturally ‘orthodox’ biographers pitch on these entries (and the ones I refer to below) as clear references to Edmund Shakspeare, and indeed there seems to be no reference to Edmund’s death or career in Stratford. With no mention of him in William’s Will, we can accept that this interpretation stands a good chance of being correct. But this accuracy can be a two-edged sword. If these are records for the player-brother of the great playwright, actor, director and shareholder of the Globe, how come there is no other record of Edmund’s career; surely someone would have noted his appearance and relationship. But no one did, and this absence is

obviously lowering of William's importance, especially as 'orthodoxy' holds that he was at the artistic pinnacle of the alleged last period of his playwriting. Like so much pro-Stratfordian evidence, it is yet another example of a touted piece of evidence which is damning rather than supportive of the "Shakespeare" thesis. Some suggest that the appearance of the villainous brother Edmund in *King Lear* is some sort of reference or tribute, which is indeed curious, not least because versions of *King Lear* may well have existed many years earlier, even before Edmund's birth (Jiméne33z 295).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps whoever arranged the burial had a small joke at the Shakspere family's expense.

We are also asked to connect with Edward Shakespeare, who makes his appearance as "Edward Shakspire the sonne of Edward Shakspire was baptised the same daye" in the record of Christenings for 12<sup>th</sup> July 1607 (fig 3). Some recorders read the script as "Sharkby" or some such, but it looks clear enough to me. Then in the records of St. Giles Cripplegate for Burials in August 1607 (Fig 4), we have "Edward sonne of Edward Sharkspeere ye player base borne 12." I think there can be little doubt that these entries refer to the brother ("Edward" or "Edmund," appears not to matter) and relative of William Shakspere of Stratford upon Avon. The question is why chose the name 'Edward' for the child? Perhaps to pin his paternity away from successful, rich, would- be social-climbing William and onto Edmund?

However, there are oddities in the whole affair. While contemporary records do provide examples of the fathers of "base born" children being listed, a mere bald reference to the birth and death of the poor child might have set tongues wagging as to who the real father was. Newly armigerous social climbing William, safe in the bosom of his deeply Protestant kin and wishing to improve his social ambience, would be desperate not to be associated in any way with sexual scandal or the stage or any revelation as to the origins of his fortune.

The jigsaw puzzle has too few pieces. This is my attempt/speculation to connect them in the light of the last paragraph. Rich William could have been visiting in London in autumn 1606; he might have been collecting part of his sale price, or if the earlier sale(s) covered only a fraction, collecting a further or the final one. Then he might have had a liaison and later was made aware of his potential scandalous fatherhood. Hastily he might employ and finance his youngest brother Edmund to pass himself off as the father, and as his actor brother. Edmund has the baby christened and buried in July/August 1607 and passes himself off as the father. Perhaps he was hoping to avoid questions by having the baby christened in one parish and buried in another. Perhaps on instructions he was deliberately drawing attention to himself, and away from William. Then in December Edmund dies too. Enough money is available presumably in Edmund's possession to empower a local to have the body interred in the heart of theatreland in Southwark as a "player" and have a knell on the great bell tolled (as a macabre joke/comment?). Without some basic financial support and in the absence of William from London, I cannot see that the apparently resource-less Edmund would venture there on his own account. Anyway, if that was William's plan, it was entirely successful, even at the expense of tiny Edward and the great man's youngest brother who could not survive in the seething slum of Jacobean London.

As I say there are too few jigsaw pieces. Malone discovered the burial references for Edmund,<sup>5</sup> but I have not found out who discovered those for little Edward. I do think the deliberate references to Edmund as a "player" in the absence of any others for a quite high-profile profession is highly suspicious, and there must be a reason for it; but then perhaps I have a certain sort of mind. I would have liked to have found in a play dated 1607-10 by, say, Jonson, or Marston or Chapman or Beaumont, a scene where a rich man employs a person of less standing to take the

blame for a sin or social solecism. Equally, perhaps Shakspere could be worrying unnecessarily. Nobody in London after 1600 cared a damn about him, except the actors, who wanted his shares and him finally cleared out of their way. He was not worth lampooning, and anyway the actors might have owed a bit for the shares. Otherwise he was totally irrelevant, and we can counter any idea that Shakspere was a person of any cultural consequence in London (or social importance anywhere): we can also point to his absences, such as his non-appearance at the performance of *Richard II* in 1601 at the time of the Essex Putsch inquiry and trial, let alone the Court performances in 1604/5. Perhaps my book with its Appendix “William Shakespeare, the Irrelevant Life” will assist generally.<sup>6</sup>

1. Richard Malim: *The Earl of Oxford and the Making of Shakespeare*: McFarland 2011: 247ff.
2. id. 258
3. Sir E. K. Chambers: *The English Stage*: Oxford U.P. 1970 : II, 423a
4. Ramon Jimenez: *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship*: McFarland 2018 295
- 5 S. Schoenbaum: *Shakespeare's Lives*: Oxford U. P. 1970 246
6. Malim 258ff

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