

Bardgate: Shake-speare and the Royalists Who Stole the Bard

by Peter Dickson

Mount Vernon, OH: Printing Arts Press, 288 pages, 2011

Reviewed by Gary Goldstein

Bardgate is the first authorship book to provide a comprehensive solution to the “cover-up” of the Shakespeare authorship mystery through a combination of literary and historical evidence showing how the canon was used for political purposes by competing court factions during the reigns of King James and King Charles. In this highly detailed exposition, Dickson offers a combined literary-historical perspective on how William Shakespeare became identified with William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon.

At the book’s center are two bibliographic discoveries made by the author at the Library of Congress that clinch the identity of the “Grand Possessors” of the Shakespeare manuscripts. He posits, for the first time, a bi-authorship partnership of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (as primary author) and William Stanley, Earl of Derby (Oxford’s son-in-law) together writing under the pseudonym of William Shakespeare. Dickson offers a complex solution in which Oxford’s literary fate became intertwined with the Stanley family – the brothers William and Ferdinando of royal Tudor blood and their family’s equally strong involvement in the theatrical culture. In fact, it was their company, known as the Lord Strange’s Men and not Oxford’s Men, which supplied the key actors to form the new company associated with the name Shakespeare, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, in 1594.

Dickson hypothesizes that a key reason academics have suffered from astigmatism regarding the authorship issue is that there were not one, but rather three, distinct stages that comprised the Shakespeare “cover-up”:

1. The author(s) decision to adopt anonymity through public use of a pseudonym;
2. The decision of a coterie of Protestant Earls – Oxford, Southampton, Pembroke – to use the Shakespeare canon during King James’ reign in response to the Spanish Marriage Crisis while deceiving the public as to the author’s real identity, but not clearly identifying the alternate author; and

3. The decision of a coterie of Catholic courtiers during King Charles' reign to use the canon to definitively identify Shakespeare as William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon, including the installation of the monument bust in Stratford's Trinity Church with references to him in contemporary publications.

THE
Tragœdy of Othello,

The Moore of Venice.

As it hath bene diuerſe times acted at the
Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by
his Maiesties Seruants.

Written by VVilliam Shakespeare.



LONDON,
ſold by N. O. for Thomas Walkley, and are to be ſold at his
Shop, at the Eagle and Child, in Brittaines Burſe.
1622.

Figure One: 1622 edition of *Othello* bearing publisher's legend with Derby device of "Eagle and Child."

The vital link between the author's own anonymity and the posthumous decision by others to publish the canon of plays for political reasons are the Grand Possessors of the manuscripts themselves. In this, Dickson has discovered two pieces of archival evidence, both bibliographic.

The first is the title page of the *Othello* quarto published by Thomas Walkley in 1622, only a year before the First Folio. It contains no dedication but does state on the title page that is to be "...sold at his [Walkley's] shop at the Eagle and Child..." (Figure One). The depiction of an eagle in flight carrying a child in a basket is the insignia or heraldic device of the Stanley family, the Earls of Derby.

The second, and more compelling discovery, is the publication, also in 1622, of Jaun de Luna's picaresque novel, *The Pursuit of the History of Lazarillo de Tormez*. Walkley published with a dedication to Oxford's descendants and in-laws that is stunning for the inclusion of such a lavish and detailed expression of gratitude in what is obviously, in 1622, a highly charged political text:

To the right honorable
James, Lord Strange,
Mr. Robert Stanley,
And
The Lady Anne Carre

The hopeful issue of the truly noble
William, Earl of Derby, and his virtuous
Countess Elizabeth, a fruitful branch of
the Ancient and Illustrious House of Oxford.

As with the *Othello* quarto, this book was to be sold at Walkley's shop at the "Eagle and Child."

The *Othello* quarto appeared amidst the Spanish Marriage, in which King James attempted to secure a Spanish bride for his son and heir, Prince Charles. Dickson poses the question: Is there a connection between the Spanish Marriage Crisis of 1621-23, the imprisonments of Southampton and the 18th Earl of Oxford in 1621, and of Oxford again in 1622-23—and the late-starting and hasty printing of the *First Folio* of 1622-23? Dickson's answer is in the affirmative.

Dickson's rationale for the first institutional act of deception involved a "paranoid Protestant court faction," opposed to the proposed marriage between the son of King James and daughter of King Philip of Spain and the growing tyranny of the King's favorite, the Duke of Buckingham. Under the leadership of Oxford's son (Henry, the 18th Earl) and the Earls of Pembroke and Southampton, the crisis prompted a decision to publish the *First Folio* of Shakespeare's dramas "as a powerful expression of what it meant to be English as opposed to being Spanish and Catholic. The fear was that a dynastic union with Spain and a possible restoration of Catholicism might make that expression of national and religious identity more difficult to accomplish" (Preface, iii).

The Second Folio project, and the definitive identification of Shakespeare with Shakspeare of Stratford, was a form of retaliation against those men and the spirit which animated the First Folio project by a "clique of bitter pro-Buckingham royalists" who had been in favor of the Spanish Marriage. Dickson claims this faction exacted its revenge against the Protestant court group "by devolving the identity of the Bard(s) firmly around the apparent crypto-Catholic William Shakespeare from Stratford on Avon. They acted in conjunction with King Charles's desire to publish a *Second Folio* not long after he began in 1629 his eleven years of dictatorial rule" (Preface iv).

Dickson shows how these quasi-Catholic royalists, several of whom were from the South Warwickshire region, had the cooperation of the pro-royalist women within the family of the incumbent Bard to seal up the literary genius' identity around this surrogate. However, this successful identity theft was carried out in such a sloppy and contradictory manner that, even "after 400 years, the Stratfordians can no longer hide the fact that they cannot tell us with certainty where inside Trinity Church their incumbent Bard was really buried."

To evaluate Dickson's other evidence for Derby's participation in the writing of the plays, the issue of Shakspeare's actual burial in Trinity Church, Stratford, and other aspects of the case, readers are encouraged to read *Bardgate* in its entirety. It is a seminal publication that provides a comprehensive framework demonstrating how the various elements of the complex cover-up were carried out for 40 years – from the 1593 publication of *Venus and Adonis* to the 1632 publication of the Second Folio.

Bardgate is available directly from the author for \$35 at pwdbard@aol.com.