

Robert Bearman's Shakespeare's Money

Reviewed by Richard M. Waugaman

At the conference on “Shakespeare and the Problem of Biography” at the Folger Shakespeare Library in the spring of 2014, Lena Orlin thought she had an explanation for Shakspeare’s great business success. It was Anne Hathaway. Yes, the Executive Director of the Shakespeare Association of America, and English Professor at Georgetown University, seriously claimed that Anne must have run the family business. No, she offered no evidence whatsoever. But no evidence seems to be needed when defending the True Bard from us heretics.

So, why did Orlin feel the need to defend Shakspeare from the charge of having earned too much money from his Stratford business dealings? She was probably reacting to a widely publicized paper delivered nearly a year earlier, that characterized him as a wealthy but unscrupulous businessman. An article in the online March 31, 2013 *Telegraph* states:

As well as writing many of the world’s greatest plays, he [Shakspeare] was a successful businessman and major landowner in his native Warwickshire who retired an extremely wealthy man. However, a new study has found that he was repeatedly prosecuted and fined for illegally hoarding food, and threatened with jail for failing to pay his taxes . . . Court and tax records show that over a 15-year period Shakespeare purchased grain, malt and barley to store and resell for inflated prices, according to a paper by Aberystwyth University academics Dr Jayne Archer, Professor Richard Marggraf Turley and Professor Howard Thomas. The study notes: ‘By combining both illegal and legal activities, Shakespeare was able to retire in 1613 as the largest property owner in his home town, Stratford-upon-Avon. His profits - minus a few fines for illegal hoarding and tax evasion - meant he had a working life of just 24 years.’”

The same day, the online *Daily Mail* reported that Jonathan Bate said of these findings that the scholars “had performed a valuable service in setting Shakespeare’s work in the context of the famines...of the period.”

Robert Bearman’s book *Shakespeare’s Money: How Much Did He Make and What Did This Mean?* (Oxford University Press, 2016) disputes nearly all of these assertions. The hagiographic mirror image of Alan Nelson’s character assassination of de Vere,

Bearman tries at every turn to rescue Shakspeare's reputation from such insinuations. For example, Bearman claims that Shakspeare "may be acquitted of any charge of deliberate hoarding" of grain (99). Bearman feels certain Shakspeare was simply trying to provide for his family. Bearman, former Head of Archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, seems to have divided loyalties to the truth and to the Shakspeare authorship myth. To his credit, Bearman writes that "David Ellis has recently and entertainingly drawn our attention to the limited value of much . . . so-called biographical work" (5).

Bearman is unable to explain convincingly why Shakspeare, as a presumably excellent grammar school student, was not sent to university, when promising but indigent students such as Marlowe were. Bearman discovered that Shakspeare's marriage at eighteen was unusual in Stratford. He was "one of only three known teenage bridegrooms from Stratford marrying during the years 1570-1640" (27).

Most of what is written about the Merchant of Stratford is tendentious in the extreme, forcing the facts of his life to fit the misguided if traditional authorship theory. One of many reasons that Bearman's book is so welcome is that he chooses to avoid that route to the exploration of Shakspeare's life. Here is one of his central conclusions: "Deservedly renowned though his career as a writer . . . in financial terms he achieved only modest success. More importantly, this fundamental issue in any assessment of his life is derived from those very documents which are barely considered as relevant by many Shakespeare biographers who prefer not to see their subject engaged in the more practical issue of making a living and providing for his family . . ." (175). Lena Orlin, who is currently writing yet another biography of Shakspeare, clearly fits this description.

Although Shakspeare died "a man of considerable means" (174), the picture is more complicated than a steady upward trajectory. "His purchases came to a virtual end in 1605 . . ." (174). That is, just one year after the death of Edward de Vere. "[H]is theatre income . . . may well have come to a virtual end when, in or soon after 1612,

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he surrendered his company shares.” Bearman finds it likely that “his stepping back from full-time theatrical work was something more or less forced upon him . . .” (175). Bearman further believes that Shakspeare’s “careful husbanding of his resources” after 1612 is consistent with a forced retirement. Not realizing that Shakspeare’s services as a front man were no longer needed, Bearman speculates that exhaustion or poor health was the reason for his retirement. Shakspeare’s father had a sharp decline in his fortunes in the 1580s, when his credit was withdrawn, leading him to mortgage, then lose some of his landholdings.

Despite his father’s financial reversals, and despite the financial problems of contemporaries such as Thomas Dekker, who was imprisoned for debt, “almost miraculously it now seems, Shakspeare appears to have steered his way through these troubled waters with no surviving evidence to indicate that he ever got into serious [financial] difficulties, albeit that problems of debt surface from time to time in his writings” (177).

In defending the traditional theory, Bearman claims that “there is no record of his ever having seriously [sic] run afoul of the law” (2). Bearman claims Shakspeare only twice was in trouble with the authorities, in 1597 and 1598, for failure to pay his taxes. Bearman thus ignores the evidence from Aberystwyth researchers. Tellingly, Bearman calls Shakspeare “a man who rarely emerges from the shadows” (2). Bearman makes the fascinating observation that there is more archival evidence of Shakspeare’s father than of the alleged Bard himself. Surprisingly, Bearman asserts that Shakspeare “was hardly ever involved in legal proceedings” (3). This appears to be an attempt to put a Stratfordian spin on the actual record.

Bearman concludes that “it was from his involvement as a sharer in the profits of his acting company that he derived the major portion of his income” (5-6). But he then admits, “an almost total lack of material evidence requires us simply to hazard estimates of what this [sharer income] might have been” (6). And Shakespeare’s income as a writer “remains undefined” (6). The only supposed record of his earning money for writing was his receiving payment in 1613 for devising a motto for the impresa for the earl of Rutland. But it seems to have been a John Shakspeare who designed impresas. The vast majority of surviving records are from Shakspeare’s affairs in Stratford, not in London – casting doubt on the assumption that he spent much of his life in London. It becomes apparent that, despite Bearman’s goal of sticking to the archival evidence, his interpretation of it is constantly distorted by his assumption that Shakspeare was the author.

Bearman never admits we have no record of Shakspeare ever being paid for his plays. But he does acknowledge that there is no record of Shakspeare acting after 1603. He also admits Shakspeare’s alleged literary productivity dropped after 1605. However, “Alongside this evidence of a dwindling [literary] output is Shakspeare’s surprising decision to part with his shares in both the [theatrical] company and its playhouses”

(151). These shares are not mentioned in his will. Bearman speculates he sold them in 1613. Bearman speculates that Shakspere's fellow sharers may have pressured him to withdraw. A central enigma for Bearman is why Shakspere gave up an estimated £200 pounds as sharer of the theatrical company and of the Globe, when his other income was only about £70.

How does this narrative of Shakspere's rising, then falling fortunes possibly relate to de Vere's life? We know he spelled his pen name "Shakespeare" in 1593 and 1594, when he first published his two long poems. But he used that pen name for a *play* for the first time in 1598. Uniquely for an undisputed work, he spelled his name "Shakspere" (without the final "a") for his 1598 *Loves Labours Lost*. (The 1612 third edition of *Passionate Pilgrim* attributed all its poems to "Shakspere" until protests led the publisher to remove this name). Thus, de Vere's first use of the pen name for a *play* suggests an effort to make it resemble the name of the Merchant of Stratford. Perhaps de Vere rewarded Shakspere with shares in the theatrical company for playing along as de Vere's front man.

The hyphenated pen name "Shake-speare" appeared with only the next three plays, after *Love's Labours Lost*. Subsequently, the notorious, winking hyphen may have been suppressed under pressure from Robert Cecil or Queen Elizabeth. With King James' accession in 1603, the hyphen reappeared in many publications during the ensuing decades, including Jon Benson's 1640 edition of the *Sonnets*. Since hyphenated last names were fairly rare in early modern England, I read the "Shake-speare" spelling as toying with a form of transparent pseudonymity. So Shakspere's peak years financially may roughly correspond with the period during which the strictest form of authorial anonymity was imposed on de Vere. Oxford's own preference seemed to be one of sprezzatura-like nonchalance about his pseudonym being recognized as such.

When people ask me the inevitable question, "What was de Vere's relationship with Shakspere of Stratford?" I usually say we can only speculate. But reading Bearman's book makes more plausible for me the conjecture that Shakspere was chosen as something of a front man for de Vere during his lifetime. Consider what Bearman says about the year following de Vere's death as a "turning point" in Shakspere's life. "The year 1605 [i.e., one year after Oxford's death] marks something of a turning point in Shakspere's financial dealings." During the previous eight years, he purchased some £900 of property in Stratford. "Thereafter, he made only one further, and rather odd addition to his portfolio" – the Blackfriars Gatehouse, in 1613 (122). Bearman suspects that purchase may have been part of a compromise with his fellow sharers when Shakspere sold his own shares. The purchase was designed so the Gatehouse would pass to its trustees on Shakspere's death, rather than to his family.

Once again, a book by a Stratfordian fails to support their authorship theory, but is instead consistent with Oxford's authorship. The timing of Shakspere's greatest financial success is also consistent with his having been paid to serve as Oxford's front man.