

## From *Ben Jonson and Shakespeare* (1921)

Sir George Greenwood

**T**HE sheet anchor of the traditional belief with regard to the authorship of the plays and poems of Shakespeare is undoubtedly Ben Jonson. It is to the Jonsonian utterances that the apostles of the Stratfordian faith always make their appeal. That faith we are told is based on the “irrefragable rock” of Ben Jonson’s testimony.

Well, it was not so very long ago that we used to be told that the truth of a universal deluge and the preservation of mankind and animals of every kind and species, in Noah’s Ark, was established on the “impregnable rock” of Holy Scripture, and yet to-day we find even high Church dignitaries—with whom Mr. J. M. Robertson would certainly be in entire agreement here—disavowing any belief in this interesting mythological tradition. Is it not, then, possible that the Jonsonian testimony may prove no more “irrefragable” or “impregnable” than that of those old chronicles, which age-long tradition has ascribed to the authorship of “Moses”?

As a distinguished writer, well-known both in the political and the literary world, has written to me, the difficulties in the way of the orthodox “Shakespearian” belief seem to be insuperable. Are the Jonsonian utterances of such weight as to outweigh them all? I reply, put Jonson in one scale and all the difficulties and improbabilities — if not impossibilities — of the “Stratfordian” hypothesis in the other, and old Ben will kick the beam.

Now let us briefly consider this Jonsonian testimony. There are two utterances to which the orthodox appeal as conclusive evidence, viz.: the lines bearing Jonson’s signature prefixed to the Folio of 1623, and the much-quoted passage *De Shakespeare nostrati* in his *Timber or Discoveries*. Let us first consider the evidence of the Folio.

## *Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 62*

Seven years after the death of William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, it entered into the mind of somebody to publish a collected edition of “Mr. William Shakespeare’s” plays. Who that somebody was we do not know, but we do know that Ben Jonson was very closely associated with the undertaking. It cannot reasonably be doubted that Jonson was the “literary man” who, as the Cambridge Editors long ago suggested, was called in to write the Preface “To the Great Variety of Readers” signed by the players Heminge and Condell. That he did, indeed, write this Preface was, in my opinion, proved by that very able critic, George Steevens, in a masterly critical analysis. “After the publication of my first edition of Shakespeare’s works,” writes Steevens,

a notion struck me that the preface prefixed by the players in 1623 to their edition of his plays had much of the manner of Ben Jonson, and an attentive comparison of that preface with various passages in Jonson’s writings having abundantly supported and confirmed my conjecture, I *do not hesitate* now to assert that the greatest part of it was written by him. Heminge and Condell being themselves wholly unused to composition, and having been furnished by Jonson, whose reputation was then at its height, with a copy of verses in praise of Shakespeare, and with others on the engraved portrait prefixed to his plays, would naturally apply to him for assistance in that part of the work in which they were, for the first time, to address the publick in their own names...I think I can show the whole of the first member of this address, comprising eighteen lines out of forty, to be entirely his....a minute comparison of the first half of this preface with various passages in Jonson’s works will, I conceive, establish my hypothesis beyond a doubt.

It will be noticed that Steevens here speaks *without doubt* as to part of this Preface only as having been written by Jonson, but we need have no hesitation in saying that if Jonson is proved to have written part he undoubtedly wrote the whole of the Preface. It seems to me absurd to suppose that, having been called in to write in the names of the players, he would have contented himself with composing a fragment of a preface, and have left the rest to others. Least of all would he have left what he had written to be completed by those “deserving men,” Heminge and Condell, who were, as Steevens justly remarks, “wholly unused to composition.” That was not the way in which old Ben, of all men, was in the habit of doing things. I entertain no doubt, therefore, that the Preface “To the Great Variety of Readers” was wholly written by Ben Jonson.

But, further, there can be, in my judgment, no reasonable doubt that Jonson wrote the “Epistle Dedicatory” also. He was, doubtless (I use that often misused adverb with confidence here), employed as the “literary man”

to write the prefaces to the Folio, as, also, the poetical eulogium of the author prefixed to it. The "Epistle Dedicatory" contains many classical allusions, quite in the Jonsonian style. Some of it is taken direct from the dedication of Pliny's *Natural History*, and there is an obvious allusion to a well-known ode of Horace.<sup>1</sup> Mr. James Boaden, amongst others, had no doubts about the matter. "Ben," he says, "it is now ascertained, wrote for the Player-Editors the Dedication and Preface to his [Shakespeare's] works."

The Cambridge Editors—and the names of Messrs. W. G. Clark, John Glover, and Aldis Wright must always command respect—are at least so far in agreement that they tell us that "the Preface (to the Great Variety of Readers) may have been written by some literary man in the employment of the publishers, and merely signed by the two players." Nor would this be at all an unusual thing to do. For example, when the folio edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's Plays was brought out in 1647, by the publisher Moseley, there was a dedicatory epistle, similar to that of the Shakespeare Folio, prefixed to it, and addressed to the survivor of the "Incomparable Paire," viz.: Philip, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, who was then Lord Chamberlain. This was signed by ten of the players of the King's Company, but nobody, I imagine, supposes that they wrote it, or any one of them. "The actors who aided the scheme," says Sir Sidney Lee, in his Introduction to the Facsimile Edition of the Shakespeare Folio, "played a very subordinate part in its execution. They did nothing beyond seconding Moseley's efforts in securing the 'copy' and signing their names—to the number of ten—to the dedicatory epistle." From this I conclude that, in Sir Sidney Lee's opinion, the actors in this case, at any rate, did not write the epistle to which they so signed their names.

Now in the case of the Shakespeare Folio we know that Jonson wrote the lines facing the Droeshout engraving, subscribed with his initials, and the eulogistic verses signed with his name in full. Is it not reasonable, then, to conclude that he was the "literary man in the employment of the publishers," as suggested by the Cambridge Editors, and that he wrote the prefaces, which are entirely in his style? May we not go further and say that it is certain that he was the author of these prefaces? Let us see what the Professor of English Literature in the University of Pennsylvania has to say on the subject. Dr. Felix Schelling, who holds this position, is recognized as a high Shakespearean authority. He is, moreover, a man to whom any doubt as to the "Stratfordian" authorship of the plays is anathema. And this is what he tells us with regard to the preparation for publication of the Folio of 1623:—"Neither Heminge nor Condell was a writer, and, such a book ought to be properly introduced. In such a juncture there could be no choice. The best book of the hour demanded sponsorship by the greatest contemporary man of letters. Ben Jonson was the King's poet, the Laureate, the literary dictator of the age; and Jonson rose nobly to the task, penning not only the epigram 'To the Reader,' and his noble personal eulogium, but both the prose addresses of dedication. *Of this matter there can be no question whatever,*

*Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 64*

and if anyone is troubled by the signatures of Heminge and Condell appended to two addresses which neither of them actually wrote, let him examine into his own conduct in the matter of circulars, resolutions, and other papers which he has had written by skilled competence for the appendage of his signature.”

But, as every student of Shakespeare knows, the players, in the Preface “to the Great Variety of Readers,” which bore their signatures, say, or rather, are made to say, that the readers of the plays who were “before .... abus’d with diverse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of injurious impostors,” are now presented with correct versions, “cur’d, and perfect of their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he [Shakespeare] conceived them.” Whereupon the Cambridge Editors justly remark, “The natural inference to be drawn from this statement is that all the separate editions of Shakespeare’s plays were ‘stolen,’ ‘surreptitious,’ and ‘imperfect,’ and that all those published in the Folio were printed from the author’s own manuscripts. But it can be proved to demonstration that several of the plays in the Folio were printed from earlier quarto editions, and that in other cases the quarto is more correctly printed, or from a better manuscript, than the Folio text, and therefore of higher authority. . . As the ‘setters forth’ are thus convicted of a ‘suggestio falsi’ in one point it is not improbable that they may have been guilty of the like in another.”

Jonson then, as writer of the prefaces, and closely associated with the preparation and publication of the Folio, was guilty of the *suggestio falsi* concerning the “stolne and surreptitious copies,” with which the Cambridge Editors justly charge the “setters forth,” or the “literary man” who, as they suggest, wrote the prefaces for them. And even if it may be contended, as Mr. A. W. Pollard contends, that, speaking strictly by the card, the statement was true, inasmuch as “not all but only *some* of the quartos ought to be treated as “stolne and surreptitious,” that cannot acquit the author of the preface, seeing that, as this learned writer admits, “with the sale of the First Folio in view it was doubtless *intended* to be interpreted” as it has, in fact, been interpreted ever since, viz. : that the plays were all now for the first time published from perfect author’s manuscripts, which certainly is very far from the truth.\*\*\*\*\*

What, then, becomes of the supposed guarantee of” those “deserving men” Heminge and Condell ? What becomes of the dismal farce of the “unblotted manuscripts?” Let us listen to what Mr. Dugdale Sykes, himself, I believe, a quite orthodox “Stratfordian,” has to say on these points. In reply to the question how it was that Heminge and Condell came to include *Henry VIII* in the First Folio Shakespeare, and how it was that Waterson came to put Shakespeare’s name with Fletcher’s on the title-page of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, he writes, “I suggest as a possible answer to this question that neither Heminge and Condell nor Waterson possessed a higher standard of honesty than seems to have been prevalent among the publishers of their day: that in this respect there may have been little to choose

between them and Humphrey Moseley, who in 1647 printed as Beaumont and Fletcher's (from 'the author's original copies') thirty-five plays of which a large number were written by Massinger and Fletcher, while three (*The Laws of Candy*, *The Fair Maid of the Inn*, and *Love's Cure*) contain no recognizable trace either of Beaumont or Fletcher. When we find that two publishers issued spurious plays as Shakespeare's during his lifetime, and that a third put Shakespeare's name on the title-page of the early play of *King John* in 1623, there appears to me to be no reason why we should accept Heminge and Condell's attribution of *Henry VIII* to Shakespeare as decisive. And I submit that we *have* a solid reason for doubting their honesty, inasmuch as their assertion that all the plays in the Folio were printed from the author's manuscripts is known to be untrue.

So much then for the "deserving men," and the "True Originalls" and the "unblotted manuscripts." And what becomes of Jonson's testimony? Jonson was "in the swim." He was concerned "up to the hilt" in the publication of the Folio, and all these facts must have been within his knowledge.

The orthodox were wont to appeal to Messrs. Heminge and Condell as though it were blasphemous to doubt the truth of any word they have said. Now this bubble has been pricked, and soon, perhaps, it may dawn upon the critics that Jonson's testimony with regard to the Shakespearean Folio and its supposed author is not of much greater value. He knew that not all the plays included in the Folio were written by "Shakespeare"; he knew well enough that they were not printed from the "true originals"; he knew that the statement about the "unblotted manuscripts" was mere fudge.<sup>1</sup> It is not necessary to condemn him and the players as guilty of dishonesty in the same measure as we should do if we tried them by the standard of the present day, for we should remember that such aberration from the path of strict veracity was, as Mr. Dugdale Sykes truly says, looked upon as a more or less venial offence in those times when literary mystifications of this sort were of common occurrence, and when plays, and other works, were frequently published in the names of writers who were not really the authors thereof.

And now, in 1623, all "Shakespeare's" plays were to be published in collected form, "Truely set forth, according to their first ORIGINAL!" as the second title-page of the Folio informs the reader. But alas, they were far from being all Shakespearean work, and many of them far from being "set forth according to their first original." Jonson, however, was employed to give the volume a good send-off, not only by writing the prefaces, and making himself responsible for the statements therein contained, together with those on the two title-pages, but also by the exercise of his poetical genius. He accordingly wrote the very remarkable lines which face the paralysing Droeshout engraving and also the long eulogy signed by his name prefixed to the Folio.

Now, what was the state of the case, as I conceive it to have been? I conceive that the name of "Shakespeare," first given to the public on the dedicatory page of *Venus and Adonis*, in 1593, had been adopted as a convenient mask-name. That many subsequently wrote under that name besides the real "Shakespeare," whoever he was, is a simple matter of fact, and also that they did so unrebuked and unrestrained,

## *Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 66*

without let or hindrance. I conceive that several men of high position, but, more especially one man of high position and of supreme genius, wrote plays under that name. I conceive that Shakspeare, the actor-manager, who was probably himself able to “bumbast out a blank verse,” acted as “honest broker” for these plays. He received them, and put them on the stage if he thought fit to do so, and they became, presumably, the property of the Company. They became “Shakespeare’s” plays, and the authorship, about which there was no questioning—for who cared a twopenny button-top about the authorship at that date?’—was, I take it, generally attributed to him, though, as a fact, it must have been known that, whether he or somebody else were the real “Shakespeare,” many of these plays were not “Shakespearean” at all. But this was a matter in which but few people took any interest in those days.

Now, some six-and-twenty years ago Frances E. Willard wrote in the *Arena Magazine* (1893): “It seems perfectly reasonable to me that Lord Bacon and a number of other brilliant thinkers of the Elizabethan era, who were nobles, and who, owing to the position of the stage, would not care to have their names associated with the drama, composed or moulded the plays.” This fairly well expresses my own view, with the qualification that I make no assumption whatever with regard to the “Baconian” hypothesis. I would rather say, “it seems perfectly reasonable to me” that some men of high position, and especially one great man of transcendent ability, wrote dramas under the mask-name of “Shakespeare”—a name which had been already adopted by the author of *Venus and Adonis*—which were confided to the actor-manager to be put upon the stage.

If anybody asks why they should think it necessary to conceal their identity, I need do no more than advise him to study the social history of the Elizabethan age. “The period of the Tudors,” writes E. A. Petherick, in his preface to Edwin Johnson’s *Rise of English Culture*,

was not only a time of severe repression and of harsh government, but also a time when free speech was impossible. Able men could only dissemble and speak in allegory. The plays of Shakespeare and of other writers are doubtless a reflection of the period; the names but a disguise—the play-writers merely the spokesmen of those who would have been sent to the Tower and the Block if they had expressed their opinions openly.

This may be an exaggerated statement, but quite apart from any fear of punishment, to write dramas for the players was considered altogether below the dignity of a noble, or any man of high position in the community. However innocent might be the work, it brought him into ridicule and contempt, and might prove an insuperable obstacle to his advancement in the State. Even to publish poetry in his own name was unworthy of a man of high position. In these circumstances it was but natural that men in high place, who had in mind, it might be, to instruct and improve, as well as to entertain, the public, through the medium of the drama, should do so under the disguise of a pen-name; and “Shakespeare,” or, as it was so often written on title-pages, “Shake-speare,” formed an excellent pen-name.



But now the time had come when these “Shakespearean” plays—those of them which appeared to the editor, or editors, of the Folio to be most worthy of publication—were to be collected and republished (such as had already been published), and with them were to be given to the world sixteen dramas which had never seen the light in print before, including such masterpieces of literature as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*. These now, seven years after William Shakspere’s death, were to be rescued from that oblivion to which the actor-author (if, indeed, *he* was the author of them) was, apparently, quite content that they should be consigned.

And now Jonson was to write a poetical panegyric which should commend the Folio to the reading public, and give it a good send-off. And right well he did it, and fully does the world now recognize that he did not exaggerate by one jot or tittle the eulogy of that “Shakespeare” whose writings he held up to the admiration of all readers, as such

As neither Man, nor Muse, can praise too much.

The plays, I repeat, were the plays of the actor-manager; they were, it would seem, the property of his Company; they were “Shakespeare’s” plays, and the authorship was, we may suppose, generally ascribed to him, so far as anyone ever concerned himself about the authorship. It was, then, for Jonson to eulogize “Shakespeare,” and for the general public “Shakespeare” would, I imagine, be Shakspere of Stratford, the actor-manager.<sup>1</sup> The true Shakespeare’s real name could not be revealed, but some ostensible author there must be. Why, then, disturb the accepted legend? So Shakespeare would for the general public be the “Swan of Avon,” as he appears in Jonson’s poem.

But here the indignant critic will doubtless interpose. “What! Jonson wrote thus, though knowing all the facts. Then, according to you, Jonson was a liar!” Whereat we of the “heretical” persuasion can afford to smile. For we see no reason to suppose that Jonson might not have taken the course we attribute to him, and considered himself quite justified in so doing.

Nearly three hundred years sever us from the publication of the Folio, and, as I have already said, we know that at that date very much less strict views were commonly held as to the obligations of literary integrity. Literary deceptions—“frauds” we might perhaps call them at the present day—were constantly perpetrated. Works were not infrequently attributed by their authors to other writers, who were, in fact, guiltless of any responsibility for them. Moreover, nobody at that date could foresee that the authorship of the Shakespearean plays would be a matter of such transcendent importance as it has now become. Not having met Jonson in the flesh, and not knowing what his views may have been with regard to these literary deceptions, or by what constraining influences his action may have been governed, but knowing something concerning the practice of the times in this connexion, I see nothing unreasonable in believing that he acted as I have suggested, and I should no more think of calling him “a liar” on that account than I should

*Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 68*

think of branding Sir Walter Scott with that opprobrious epithet because he denied point-blank the authorship of the *Waverley Novels*. We know that he considered himself justified in so doing, and we doubt not that Jonson also considered himself justified in what he did.

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