

“Look Not on this Picture”:

Ambiguity in the Shakespeare First Folio

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Shakespeare scholars and editors contend, or simply assume, that the prefatory matter in First Folio of 1623 provides straightforward, valid evidence that William Shakspere of Stratford-on-Avon wrote the works of Shakespeare. They cite the dedication over the names of John Heminge and Henry Condell, former actors mentioned in Shakspere’s will, who state that they collected the plays “only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive, as was our Shakespeare, by humble offer of his plays, to your most noble patronage.” And they cite the allusions to “sweet swan of Avon” by Ben Jonson and “thy Stratford monument” by Leonard Digges as pointing to Stratford-on-Avon.

Unfortunately, Stratfordians take these passages at face value. What they have not considered, however, is that Ben Jonson, their principal authority, has a reputation for ambiguity, veiled truths and subtle self-contradiction, including in the prefatory matter of the First Folio. His testimony for Shakespeare’s identity must be interpreted.

Among those citing his testimony in the First Folio is Thomas Pendleton, professor of English at Iona College and co-editor of *The Shakespeare Newsletter*. In the winter 2003-4 issue, he says that “the evidence for Shakespeare of Stratford—preeminently the will, the Stratford monument and the First Folio—is so abundant as to make the search for a ‘real’ Shakespeare basically pointless” (104). In the fall 2006 issue Pendleton elaborates, arguing that Heminge and Condell say that the plays in the First Folio “were written by their ‘friend and fellow’ William Shakespeare in the most literal sense possible: ‘[We] have scarce received from him a blot in his papers’” (43-44).

In the abstract for his paper published in *The Tennessee Law Review* Alan Nelson, professor emeritus of the University of California-Berkeley, wrote: “the documentary

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evidence for Shakespeare [of Stratford], which survives most abundantly in the First Folio of 1623 but also in standard historical sources...demonstrates the traditional claims [for him]" (149). Non-Stratfordians, he says, must believe that the First Folio "is not an honest tribute organized by Heminge and Condell, but a tissue of lies supervised by William and Philip Herbert [earls of Pembroke and Montgomery to whom the First Folio is dedicated], with the voluntary or forced cooperation of Ben Jonson, who lied through his teeth both to his contemporaries and to posterity" (163).

Usually, however, biographers who believe that Will Shakspere was the poet-dramatist simply *assume* that the First Folio proves it. S. Schoenbaum, for example, devoted three pages in *William Shakespeare, a Compact Documentary Life* to the prefatory matter in First Folio. He takes it at face value without even bothering to cite it as proof of authorship (314-317). He would have considered it self-evident, straightforward testimony by Ben Jonson, Heminge and Condell and Leonard Digges (for "thy Stratford monument").

Two Stratfordian scholars who do mention ambiguity in the First Folio and elsewhere do not elaborate further. Gary Taylor warns in passing of "the ambiguous oracles of the First Folio" in his introduction to the Textual Companion to the Wells-Taylor collected works of Shakespeare (18). In answer to a query, however, he said he hadn't published anything more on the "ambiguous oracles" and hadn't thought about it since his 1997 Companion. Dennis Kay, a Shakespeare biographer, observed in an article in *Early Modern Literary Studies*: "As is now widely recognized, ambiguity was a feature of Elizabethan courtly performance" (25 online). But that's all he says.

Establishment Shakespeare scholars do not question whether ambiguity in the First Folio prefatory matter might invalidate it as evidence for the Stratford man as the author. They have not recognized the extent to which Elizabethan and Jacobean writers, and Ben Jonson in particular, used ambiguity to disguise their meanings and how their ambiguous writings, self-contradictions and veiled meanings have been identified by Jonson and other early modern scholars. The contrast in method, indeed, is striking.

Ambiguity is defined as double-meaning, an expression that is equivocal. (OED 3.a. b, 4) It can range from confused, careless writing that is unintentionally ambiguous to the simple pun that is relatively obvious and perhaps amusing to a more radical—and deliberate—ambiguity that elicits alternative reactions, or multiple reactions or even opposing reactions to the same piece of writing. *In Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson says, "We call it ambiguous, I think, when we recognize that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading" (x).

Deliberate ambiguity allows the writer to leave the truth of the matter unstated and can provide immunity from blame, reprisals or prosecution for the writer who needs protection. The discerning reader is expected to see through the ambiguity and even appreciate how the writer has wittily avoided taking a public position while expressing something the reader knows or suspects to be true. See Empson, esp. 1, 192.

Jonson's works clearly contain passages, including many in the folio, that can be identified as deliberately self-contradictory and ambiguous, and that such ambiguity was a prominent characteristic of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature. It was often used in deliberately violating government and/or church censorship, or to avoid offending the powers that be. The purpose was to convey veiled meanings, to blur dangerous or inconvenient facts, and, in the words of one Jonson biographer, to create a "maze of seductive falsehoods," to enlighten and entertain the discerning reader or playgoer.

One of Jonson's favorite authors from antiquity was Quintilian, who wrote in *The Orator's Education* (9.2) on various uses of ambiguity, including:

Now it is time to come to the very common device, which I am sure the reader is especially waiting for, in which we drop a hint to show that what we want to be understood is not what we are saying—not necessarily the opposite (as in irony) but something hidden and left to the hearer to discover. . . . [And]

You can speak as openly as you like against . . . tyrants, as long as you can be understood differently, because you are not trying to avoid giving offense, only its dangerous repercussions. If danger can be avoided by some ambiguity of expression, everyone will admire its cunning.

It is worth noting that Quintilian insists in the first of these two passages that the teaching by cunning misdirection, involving covert clues accessible only to the initiate reader is "a very common device." Following his Roman mentor Quintilian, Jonson was especially cunning in his use of this type of ambiguity.

Unlike Shakespeare biographers and editors, Jonsonian scholars do recognize that Jonson cannot always be taken at face value. They discuss how he used ambiguity with wit and artistry when writing about forbidden and dangerous contemporary matters—and how, in consequence, he has left contradictions and puzzles for commentators centuries later to unravel and resolve.

In one of the most recent and probably most authoritative biographies of Ben Jonson,¹ David Riggs of Stanford University (1989) finds ambiguity throughout Jonson's work. He gives several examples from Jonson's poems and plays: In "Inviting a Friend to Supper" the menu "is tantalizingly equivocal" (230). The verse collection entitled "The Forest quietly but insistently addresses the tensions and ambiguities in Jonson's self-conception as a courtly amateur" (234). The poem "To Heaven" shows that "Jonson's [mental] state bristles with contradictions" (237). In *Catiline*, Jonson situates his own position on religion "beyond the reach of any recoverable meaning" (178).

Jonson's poem "A Speech According to Horace," says Riggs, is a "mock encomium" full of irony and ambiguity (299). Jonson's principal editor, George Parfitt of Nottingham University, wrote an article on the poem for *Studies in English Literature*, entitling it "History and Ambiguity: Jonson's 'A Speech According to Horace.'"

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Jonson's *Volpone* "is an ambiguous drama, with an ambiguous protagonist," says Mario Praz (183). And Riggs writes: "Like *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, *Volpone* forces its readers to work their way through a maze of seductive falsehoods; if they are any wiser at the end of the play, it is because they have withstood this assault on their moral bearings. . . . Just as *Volpone* gulls his clients, Jonson gulls his audience; but Jonson's falsehood has the capacity to educate as well as to delude" (136-137). By extension, unwary readers of Jonson's prefatory poems in the First Folio risk being gulled by a maze of seductive falsehoods or half-truths that disorient and make the reader easily lose his or her literary-historical bearings.

Jonson was a master of creative ambiguity, but he was not alone in his use of the strategy. A survey of Elizabethan and Jacobean writings is far beyond the scope of this research, but some examples would include *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, Henry Chettle's *Kind Heart's Dream*, Sidney's *Arcadia* and many passages in Spenser and Nashe.

The Elizabethan writer who made the greatest creative use of ambiguity to convey hidden meanings, however, was undoubtedly Shakespeare himself. The richness and complexity of Shakespeare's writing is owed in large part to his adroit use of poetic ambiguity. Scholars recognize many ambiguous passages in Shakespeare. For example, Wolfgang Clemen, A. P. Rossiter, Norman Rabkin, and Rene Girard discuss the dramatist's use of ambiguity and ambivalence in their articles in *Shakespeare, an Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*. Jonathan Bate, in his book, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, reports with great admiration on the work of William Empson, author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. "Shakespeare," says Bate, "gave Empson more examples of ambiguity than any other poet" (309).

Two eminent scholars of English Renaissance literature have examined Jonson's use of ambiguity in the First Folio. Neither is a member of the Shakespeare establishment. Neither has published widely on Shakespeare nor edited a Shakespeare play. Their findings may thus be taken as relatively objective.

Annabel Patterson, Sterling professor of English at Yale University, argues that Elizabethan and Jacobean writers frequently used ambiguity to convey hidden meanings. In the introduction to her *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (see also Stritmatter, "Puzzling Shakesperotics," this volume, 103-109), she says,

the unstable but unavoidable relationship between writers and holders of power was creative of a set of conventions that both sides partially understood and could partly articulate, conventions as to how far a writer could go in explicit address to the contentious issues of his day, and how, if he did not choose the confrontational approach, he could encode his opinions so that nobody would be required to make an example of him.

(12)

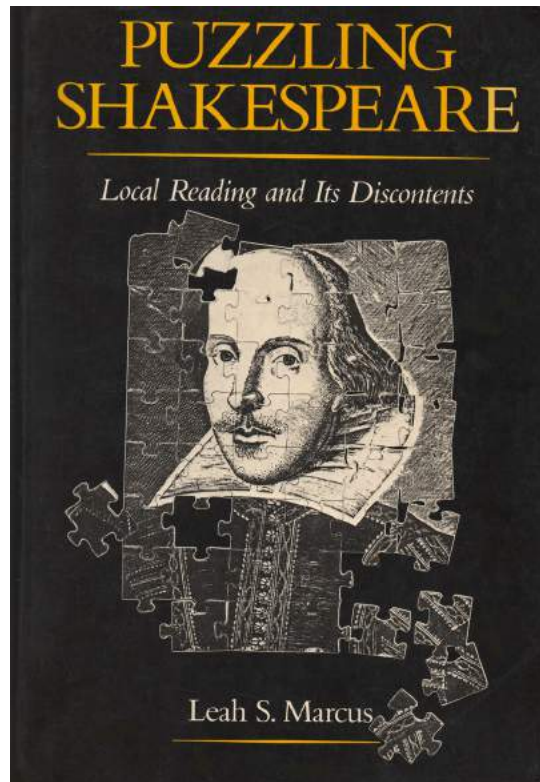
That is, he could encode his opinions in ambiguous language that could be understood by those in the know while preserving deniability.

According to Patterson, this ambiguity was ubiquitous: "What we can find everywhere apparent and widely understood, at least from the middle of the sixteenth century in England onward, is a system of communication ('literature') in which ambiguity becomes a creative and necessary instrument, while at the same time the art (and the theory) of interpretation was reinvented, expanded and honed. I call this phenomenon 'the hermeneutics of censorship'" (18). And later on, she says the "functional, conscious, textual ambiguity" was often used by writers who were divided against themselves or who found the "loyalties divided by events" (66).

Patterson's view of ambiguity is cited by Gail Kern Paster, former Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, in a guide to Shakespeare. "Shakespeare," says Paster, "was a master of ambiguity, and if his plays encode topical allusions to religious controversy, as scholars have sometimes argued, they do so without sacrificing their purchase on timelessness" (6).

Patterson describes Jonson as the most complex of authors and says that in his plays, "there is evidence, if we look carefully, [emphasis added] of a highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, of unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation" (53). Jonson was twice imprisoned for his share in two plays, and five times he faced accusations for other writings. Patterson says he "incorporated them [these 'harassments'] into a political and social theory of literature, a poetics of censorship" (57). The possibility of prison and torture was a real incentive for Jonson to hone his skills for cunning ambiguity.

Regarding the relationship between literature and historical events, Patterson points out that in his 1616 collected plays Jonson published his *Sejanus* and along with it a short, sardonic poem, "The New Crie," that seems to undercut the politically controversial play, creating "a record of ambiguity and interpretive difficulty," says Patterson, "in which texts and historical events are equally resistant to simple, settled meanings" (64). This ambiguity would seem to apply equally well to



***Puzzling Shakespeare* (1988): Truth in Stratfordian advertising.**

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Jonson's prefatory matter for the Shakespeare First Folio—ambiguity, interpretive difficulty, no simple, settled meanings. Patterson notes the importance of prefatory matter that addresses the reader and his or her expectations. "In general," she says, "late modern criticism has not paid enough attention to the interpretive status of introductory materials in early modern texts" (56).

Leah Marcus has paid close attention to the introductory matter in the First Folio. She is a chaired professor of English Renaissance literature at Vanderbilt University and in her *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*, she devotes the first fifty pages to the large portrait in the First Folio and Ben Jonson's poem on the facing page. She interprets the portrait as an iconoclastic image that contradicts itself and almost abolishes the pictured Shakespeare as the author. For contrast, she includes ten other frontispieces and title pages, including those for the works of King James and Ben Jonson, both published in 1616.

She finds the portrait odd and unsettling. That's mild. It has dismayed almost all Shakespeare commentators. Hugh Trevor-Roper, Oxford Regius Professor of History, styled it "the blank face of a country oaf" (41). J. Dover Wilson called it a false image that the world turns from in disgust (6). W. W. Greg wrote simply: "It is not pleasing and has little technical merit" (451). Schoenbaum blamed the engraver: "Droeshout's deficiencies are, alas, only too gross" (315). Biographer Katherine Duncan-Jones referred to the "childish clumsiness" that produced "an inept and witless-looking image" (280). Then there's the famous portrait painter, Thomas Gainsborough. When David Garrick asked him to paint a portrait of the poet-dramatist for his Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford in 1769, Gainsborough replied: "Damn the original picture of him (with your leave); for I think a stupider face I never beheld except D—k's" (1:328). He lost his commission.

Marcus's extended analysis of the portrait begins by noting that "if the First Folio is considered in light of other English folios of the period...there is something quite odd about the way it starts out." She notes the "unsettling size and directness" of the portrait, "stark and unadorned." Unlike most portraits on title pages, it has no frame, no ornamental borders, no allegorical figures and devices that might be expected (2).

Following Greg, she notes its "raw directness" and suggests that the portrait is saying "this is the Man Himself" and continues, "That, at least, is what the portrait seems to say; the verses on the facing page say otherwise. . . . The poem undermines the visual power of the portrait. . . . Shakespeare, the verses tell us, is not to be found after all in the compelling image opposite. The poem undermines the visual power of the portrait by insisting on it as something constructed and 'put' there" (18).

She goes on to argue that Jonson's poem is "in a precise sense of the term, iconoclastic, shattering the power of the visual image in order to locate Shakespeare's identity elsewhere [namely] in 'wit.'" And therefore, "Jonson's poem abolishes Shakespeare as an entity apart from his writings" (19).

She also finds a contradiction in the claim "Published according to the True Original Copies," which appears above the portrait on the title page. She asks, "If these are 'True 'originals,' what would a false one be? How can something be both

an original and a copy?" The claim contradicts itself "seeming at first to set forth something direct and immediately apprehensible, then undermining the authenticity of what it presents" (19-20). Summing up, she says, "The First Folio opens with an implicit promise to communicate an authorial identity, which it instead repeatedly displaces: Shakespeare is somehow there, but nowhere definitively there" (20). The title page, she says, "refuses to yield a clear message about the author" (22).

Turning her attention to the anti-Stratfordian interpretation, she says they "respond to Shakespeare's failure to possess a stable authorial identity by re-assigning his works to someone else, usually the earl of Oxford. . . someone less shadowy than the picture on the front of the folio, someone with a full and detailed life story and impeccable upper-class credentials, someone easier to assimilate to the honorable role of author" (34-35). She says that because anti-Stratfordians make the same use of topical allusions as does traditional historical methodology, they "wildly disrupt the efforts of Shakespearean historicism" in a way that "has been more corrosive than we have been willing to admit . . . casting a faint yet lingering odor of inauthenticity over all Shakespearean historicism" (35).

Four other commentators who have addressed Jonson's ambiguity are listed by Diana Price in her chapter on the First Folio in *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (191). Analyzing Jonson's use of ambiguity, Price suggests that "if the commoner Shakspere was the author, there was no need for ambiguity. If Jonson's tributes were entirely complimentary and sincere, there was no need for ambiguity. On the other hand, if an aristocrat was the author there was every reason for ambiguity" (192-193). For whatever reason, Price does not mention Marcus. She cites Patterson in only one sentence on Jonson's ambiguity and Riggs several times but not on Jonson's ambiguity. Marcus, Patterson and Riggs are probably the most important and most respected university scholars to have identified the ambiguity in the First Folio that has been overlooked or deliberately ignored by Shakespeare establishment scholars, who routinely consider Jonson, taken at his most superficial, as a reliable witness.

As if to set the tone for what follows, Jonson opens the the prefatory material of the First Folio with purposeful ambiguity. The first two of the eleven pages contain several instances of ambiguity—indicators that the entire prefatory matter may well be "a maze of seductive falsehoods." Jonson's contemporary readers would be immediately on the alert for sly falsehoods, veiled meanings and especially the ambiguous passages that could convey hidden meanings.

As Marcus points out, Jonson contradicts himself in his poem on the portrait when he says that it is not *of* Shakespeare but made *for* him and that the reader should not pay any attention to it. The opening two lines of Jonson's poem "To the Reader" on the page facing the title page with its extremely large portrait says, "This figure...was for gentle Shakespeare cut." But a frontispiece portrait in any book should be *of* the author, not *for* him. If it is for Shakespeare, it's not of him, and if it's not of him, it's not Shakespeare's likeness. The poem contradicts itself. Then, after several convoluted lines about the engraver's aborted effort "to out-do the life" the poem closes by exhorting the reader to "look / Not on his picture, but his book." This could be just a conventional poetic conceit, but it reinforces the poem's opening lines,

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which say that the engraving that should be the image of the author is not really the image of the author.

Stratfordian biographers rarely comment on the poem. One who did was Schoenbaum, but the best he could say was that “an over-subtle reader will detect a latent irony in Jonson’s conclusion [to look at the book, not the picture]...but the advice is sound enough” (315-317). He does not, however, give the text of the 10-line poem so the reader can judge whether, or how, the advice is sound enough.

Leah Marcus also notes that the headline on the title page, “Published According to the True Original Copies” is either extravagant puffery or a falsehood given the obvious disparity of sources for the play texts. And, as she argues, the engraving itself is an iconoclastic image that contradicts itself and Jonson’s portrait poem.

Three more instances of ambiguity in the First Folio, which have not received the attention they deserve, might be cited: the use of “figure” for the portrait, the description of Shakespeare as “gentle,” and a grammatical construction favored by Jonson. Stratfordian scholars have not analyzed any of them.

The first line in the First Folio is, “This figure that thou here seest put,” referring to the “figure” in the big portrait on the opposite page. “Figure,” of course, has many meanings. The first is the bodily form, shape or appearance of a person or thing, which readers would readily apply to the depiction of a man in a portrait, although the OED does not give “portrait” as one of the meanings of “figure.”

Another early meaning of “figure” is “an imaginary form, a phantasm” (OED 9.b, obs.). The OED gives just two examples: from Chaucer, “Or if the soule . . . warneth al and some . . . Be avisions or be figures;” and from *Merry Wives of Windsor*, “To scrape the figures out of your husbands’ braines” (4.2.231). In Shakespeare’s day then, “figure” could have called to mind a phantasm as well as a portrait or a portrait that was a phantasm, an “illusion, a deceptive appearance,” according to the OED (I.1.a).

The word “gentle” would also have had an alternative and special meaning for perceptive readers of the First Folio in the early 1600s. It occurs three times in the prefatory matter. Jonson says in his portrait poem, “This figure . . . was for gentle Shakespeare cut” and in his long eulogy he again refers to “my gentle Shakespeare.” The Heminge-Condell letter addressing the reader says Shakespeare was “a most gentle expresser” of Nature. No one before had ever called Shakespeare gentle.

The ostensible authors of the letters, Heminge and Condell, were almost certainly not the authors, and Jonson almost certainly was. Citing Greg (17-21) Marcus says the language in the Heminge-Condell prefatory address “so strongly echoes the Induction to Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* that many are convinced Jonson wrote the preface himself” (22).

To 17th century readers of the First Folio, however, “gentle” did not primarily mean *kind* or *tender*; it was a secondary meaning. The OED places first “that sense...which was actually the earliest in the language; others follow in the order in which they appear to have arisen” (xxix). The earliest and primary meaning of “gentle” was “of persons, well-born, belonging to a family of position; originally

used synonymously with noble” (from 1225 to 1625 [OED 1.a]). Only later in the 16th century did “gentle” begin to take on the secondary meaning of “mild of disposition or behaviour, kind, tender” (OED 8). Jonson used “gentle” to describe the Shakespeare of the First Folio as a nobleman, but ambiguously, since “gentle” was beginning to take on the secondary meaning of “kind and tender.” In today’s parlance, Jonson sought deniability.

That “gentle” in Elizabethan times primarily described someone of superior birth and rank, an aristocrat, is confirmed by the word’s use in several Shakespeare plays in contexts where it could not mean *kind or tender*. Charlton Ogburn found several, including one in *Richard II*. When Henry Percy, the earl of Northumberland, tells the king he has sent the severed heads of four men to London, the king says, “We thank thee, gentle Percy, for thy pains” (5.6.11). Ogburn notes that Northumberland was gentle in that he was “of superior birth, certainly no other sense” (225).

Two additional examples can be cited. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio, a kinsman to the prince of Verona, quarrels with Tybalt, he calls him a rat-catcher and draws his sword, Romeo says “Gentle Mercutio, put thy rapier up.” (3.1.84) Mercutio is anything but mild in disposition. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Agamemnon tells his warrior commander, “Go, gentle knight, / Stand by our Ajax” in his combat with Hector (4.5.88). He surely does not mean for his warrior to be tender and mild in behavior. Shakespeare uses “gentle” almost four hundred times. A survey of all of them would no doubt turn up more examples of “gentle” used in its earliest and primary meaning of well-born and noble.

Today’s meaning of “gentle” is so pervasive that readers can be easily and understandably be misled into thinking the word simply describes the dramatist as a nice guy. Marchette Chute believes that this gentleness “came from his natural courtesy of mind” (111). The well-regarded biography by Park Honan ignores the primary meaning of “gentle” and paints a strikingly sweet and gentle Shakespeare of Stratford: He “lack(s) a quirky egotism” (18). He has a “habit of mind of courtesy. . . humane, receptive and alert to tenderness” (21). He is “self-abnegating. . . (having) daily self-effacing duties” in the theater (207). His “behaviour was easy and companionable” (235). Biographer Dennis Kay refers to the “habitual references to him as ‘sweet’ and ‘gentle,’” although he cautions against taking those characterizations at face value (164).

The Stratfordian biographer Katherine Duncan-Jones also embraces today’s usual meaning of “gentle” retrospectively for the First Folio. But she reads it as mockery. “Jonson,” she writes in *Ungentle Shakespeare*, “characteristically drew attention to his ‘beloved’ Shakespeare’s ‘gentle’ status so persistently and knowingly as in effect to mock it” (281). She finds Jonson describing Shakespeare “living up to the flamboyant aggression suggested by his surname in writing [the] lines of verse, ‘he seems to shake a lance / As brandished at the eyes of ignorance.’” And she points to Jonson’s lines that “it is with rage,” rather than with gentleness, that he [Shakespeare] is implored to admonish the theater of latter days” (277-278). The lines she cites are from Jonson’s longer poem: “Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets, and

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with rage, / Or influence, chide or cheer the drooping stage.”

In his eulogy to Shakespeare Jonson writes, “And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek, / From thence to honour thee, I would not seek / For names, but call forth thundering Aeschylus...” etc. The initial “though” seems to say, although you had small Latin and less Greek. But as in the lines in the song to Celia,² the First Folio lines might well be read, “*Even if you only had small Latin and less Greek,*” as first noted by the Stratfordian C. M. Ingleby (151-152). The similarity of the two ambiguous constructions in Jonson’s poems has not been noted by Jonsonian or Shakespearean scholars.

These instances of ambiguity and self-contradiction identified by Jonsonian and English Renaissance scholars, along with several others documented by anti-Stratfordian scholars, cast grave doubt on the reliability of the evidence in the First Folio for Shakespeare’s identity and character. The others include the unsettling anomalies in the portrait image, Jonson’s allusion to “Sweet Swan of Avon” and three pages later Leonard Digges’s allusion to “thy Stratford monument” that point ambiguously either to Stratford-on-Avon, or to the Earl of Oxford’s two properties on the Avon River and near the London suburb of Stratford. “Monument” could mean the stone monument in the Stratford church or the plays themselves metaphorically as a monument to Shakespeare’s genius. The OED gives as the earliest usages for monument “a sepulchre” (1, obs.) and “a written document” (2.a). See Whalen, “Stratford Bust.”

Jonson’s use of ambiguity in the First Folio gets indirect support from his prior publishing experience and his close connections to the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, to whom it was dedicated. No one was more qualified to see the First Folio through the press than Ben Jonson. Six years earlier, he had been the editor and publisher of his own *Workes of Benjamin Jonson* (1616), the first English collection of plays in a folio. At the time, King James granted him an annual pension of sixty-six pounds for unspecified services. Jonson was personally involved in all aspects of his own thousand-page folio from beginning to end, revising both its contents and presentation: “Jonson was tinkering with the folio text until the very last minute,” says Riggs (226). Thus, Jonson was eminently qualified to shape and control the prefatory matter in the Shakespeare First Folio, the second English collection of plays, also about a thousand pages long. And he was in a perfect position to introduce as much ambiguity and seductive falsehood as he judged necessary and appropriate, especially given his connections with the Herbert family.

Jonson’s close association with William Herbert, the 3rd earl of Pembroke, Lord Chamberlain and Jonson’s patron, reinforces the conclusion that Jonson was using ambiguity to obfuscate the identity of Shakespeare. The Herberts were the most important and influential literary patrons of the time. Riggs says that with publication of his Works in 1616, Jonson “makes his way into an extended circle of blood relations and family retainers that revolves around the Herberts and the Sidneys. The central figure in this network is Pembroke. His brother Montgomery was married to Susan Vere, a cousin of Horace Vere” (230). Riggs doesn’t mention that Susan’s father was Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford, and the leading candidate

today for authorship honors, but he does detail how Jonson in prison sought Pembroke's aid, how several of his masques supported Pembroke's political ambitions and how he dedicated several of his most important works to Pembroke (179, 215, 226, 230, 232).

As Lord Chamberlain, Pembroke oversaw the theater, and plays performed in public and at court and their publication. He had the government position and the family wealth to authorize and finance the very expensive publishing project.

If Oxford indeed was the dramatist writing under the pen name William Shakespeare, the brothers Pembroke and Montgomery, the latter Oxford's son-in-law, had the means, motive and opportunity to sponsor the First Folio of thirty-six plays—eighteen of which had never before been printed and might well have been lost to posterity. And if Oxford was Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, knowing his patron's close family connections to Oxford, would have had the means, motive and opportunity to employ artistic ambiguity, subtle self-contradiction and seductive falsehoods in the prefatory matter to the First Folio.

Thus, a knowledgeable and perceptive Jacobean reader of the First Folio might well divine that Jonson wrote the dedication to the two earls and the letter to the readers ascribed to Heminge and Condell (they were not scholars and writers) and that he was describing the late 17th Earl of Oxford as his "friend and fellow," that is, his fellow poet and playwright, whose plays were collected in the First Folio.

Jonson was not lying; he was practicing the art and politics of selective ambiguity. His use of equivocal, self-contradictory, veiled language and seductive falsehoods has not been sufficiently recognized. Indeed, it is ignored by nearly all Shakespeare establishment scholars. Their reading of the prefatory matter to the First Folio has been literal and uncritical. Jonsonian scholars, however, are well aware of his penchant and talent for ambiguity. The First Folio can be properly interpreted and understood only in light of Jonson's reputation for deliberate ambiguity in its many forms and in light of the prevalence of such deliberately ambiguous writing during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. The prefatory matter in the First Folio is unreliable as testimony and therefore should not be cited as valid evidence that William Shakspere of Stratford wrote the works of Shakespeare.

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