

The Curious Incident of the Shakespeare Paper Trail _____ ❧



FANTASY, *absurdity, nonsense, sheer conjecture*; such are the terms we hear whenever orthodox scholars refer to the Oxfordian thesis. Even within the Oxfordian community, advocates of a strict interpretation of known facts condemn in similarly dismissive terms those they perceive as straying beyond perceived scholarly limits. Certainly no serious scholar would dispute the value in setting, and remaining within, agreed-upon limits of discourse; still, we must ask, Can anything of lasting value be achieved by remaining bound to a paradigm that continues, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, to yield no results? Sooner or later, someone has simply got to damn the torpedoes.

When art historians work to piece together the remains of an ancient mosaic uncovered by an archeological dig, and, laying it all out on some big table or floor, find that the earth has yielded roughly a third of the original piece—perhaps a fragment of a warrior’s shoulder, his face, his shield and spear, perhaps the head of his horse and the horse’s hindquarters, plus parts of one foreleg and some of the background—they will usually strive to complete the image, chiefly for the benefit of those of us who don’t bring the kind of knowledge and experience to the image that they do. A lifetime of research into the period when the mosaic was made goes into the choices they make, of shape, line, and color, but ultimately they must rely on that extra sense, their own innate, though informed, sensibility. When we look at the completed piece, or see a photograph of it, we have no problem grasping the fact that those parts that are painted on a flat surface are places where the historians have had to guess, while the parts done in little tiles show what remains of the original. Were they to adhere to a “conservative” position, insisting that we be satisfied with just what they dug from the earth, we would be denied their informed insights, their years of experience, their educated guesses as to what the original might have looked like. We see the broad spaces of flat reconstruction; we understand what they mean, we “get it” that no one knows exactly what the original looked like, that this is something that we simply cannot know for sure; but most of us are grateful to have the benefit of their informed opinion.

During his investigation into the theft of the race horse in Conan Doyle’s *Silver Blaze*, the great Sherlock Holmes draws the attention of his friend Watson to “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.” “The dog did nothing in the night-time,” responds Watson. “That,” says Holmes, “was the curious incident.” The fact that the dog did not bark when the horse was stolen convinced Holmes that the suspect, a man whom no one remembered

ever seeing before, could not have been the thief. That the dog, whose job it was to bark at strangers, did not bark showed Holmes that the thief could not have been a stranger, or, at least, not to the dog.

Similarly, a brief history of the lives of the other important and prolific writers of the period, both English and continental, tells us that were Shakspeare of Stratford the author of the Shakespeare canon, his signature would have been firm, legible, consistent in spelling, clearly and indisputably the autograph of one who used a pen to earn his living. Were Shakspeare of Stratford the author of the Shakespeare canon, we would have, as we have for all the important writers of his day, letters in his hand to his friends and patrons; we would have anecdotes in the letters of John Chamberlain referring to the great playwright, as he referred to all the foremost individuals of his day, including his fellow writers and the actors that made his works famous; we would have records of his involvement at Court; and if not all of these, we would, at least, have some. In other words, from this greatest of all writers, we would have a written record of his life *as a writer*, as we have a written record for every other important writer of his time (every real writer, that is). In short, the curious matter of the missing paper trail is every bit as potent a clue to the truth about the authorship as the curious behavior of the dog in the night was a clue to the theft of the horse. Both are “negative evidence”—not as convincing, perhaps, as positive evidence, but evidence nonetheless; particularly in this case where the negative evidence achieves the astronomical dimensions of a black hole.

In his role as England’s most brilliant detective, Holmes had time and again to withstand the patronizing scorn of the orthodox constabulary. “I find it hard enough to tackle facts, Holmes, without flying away after theories and fancies,” sneers Lestrade, the man from Scotland Yard, when once again he sees the Great One flying in the face of everything he was taught at the Police Academy. Shall we allow the orthodox Shakespeare constabulary to hold us to a method that may work for the common writer, but that clearly does not work for this one? Or shall we take a leaf from that other great English writer, Conan Doyle, and just as Doyle’s hero broadened his perspectives on crime with a host of other studies, of forensics, of soils and tobaccos, of criminal psychology, of the history of specific crimes, and of the biographies of hundreds of criminals, similarly broaden our perspectives?

NOR should the fact that Holmes was a fictional being deter us from following in his footsteps. If the author of the Shakespeare canon is, as we suspect, a fictional being himself, one compounded of the slightly altered name and modest biography of Shakspeare of Stratford, combined with such items as the dates of the plays’ publications, the peculiar rhetoric of the Stratford monument, the ambiguous panegyric of Ben Jonson’s Forward to the First Folio, stray references to the writer “Shakespeare” in legal and theater records, and other bits of real fabric, fleshed out with straw, and shaped into a form to frighten away such “crows”

as might wish to disturb the placid Stratford fiction—if such a figure, seen from the heights of an ivory tower, can be so thoroughly mistaken by worthy souls for a real author, why should we hesitate to choose an equally fictional being as a role model; one, moreover, that bears a far greater family resemblance to his creator than does the retiring playwright of Stratford to any of his creations.

WHO was this man, this Will Shake-spear? Was it he of whom Spenser, in his dedication to the Earl of Oxford, claimed that “under a shady vele is therein writ” his family history in *The Faerie Queen*? Was it his poetry that was that “orientst pearl,” extruded, oysterlike, layer by layer, in an unavailing effort to protect his soul from the gritty invasions of the world? Was it his personal friendships with the great musicians of his day, composers like William Byrd, that bathed his comedies in melody, his verse in song? Did he at twenty-three, sorrowing for a princely childhood, a home forever lost, and finding personal comfort in Cardan’s philosophy, suffuse his works with it? Was he, in *Henry VIII*, not having known Wolsey personally, describing one of his own role models (his childhood tutor perhaps, the brilliant but much maligned diplomat and Principal Secretary, Sir Thomas Smith) when he had one of his characters defend the fallen Cardinal as “a scholar, and a ripe and good one; exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading: lofty and sour to them that loved him not; but, to those men that sought him sweet as summer”?

Let us seek him out, this Renaissance man, this pearl of great price, this scholar, this repository of his culture’s wisdom and song, this source of our culture’s language and ethos, this writer of deathless poetry and lyric prose. Let us peer at him with the magnifying glass of close and painstaking research into his family ties, his tutors, his friends, lovers, rivals and enemies. Let us place him in perspective in a broad and inclusive view of his nation, class and period, swept by floods of literary renewal from the continent and from the past. Let us study him through his own works by means of the tools of modern psychology, through case histories of artists, studies of the pathology of poets, and the insights of scholars of imagination, finally to set all in place against a fixed grid of recorded and accepted dates and real events. And last but not least, let us never forget to keep handy at all times that most necessary of the tools of inquiry, our own God-given common sense.

As Shakespeare met the challenge of the Armada by way of his own creation, the half-real, half-fictional King, urging his countrymen: “*The game’s afoot!* Follow your spirit and upon this charge cry—God, for England, Harry, and St. George!” So did Sherlock Holmes—who, despite his notable lack of interest in anything but *The Police Gazette*, had clearly read his Shakespeare—urge his friend into action at the outset of one of his best-loved tales, “Come, Watson! Come! . . . *The game is afoot!*”

The game is afoot, indeed, and so we urge you all: read, take notes, make photocopies, ponder, conjecture, discuss; write and rewrite, speak and publish, and *damn the torpedoes!*