

## Letters to the Editor

### The Sonnets at Four Hundred

Sir—

‘A booke called Shakespeares Sonnettes’ was registered for publication on May 20, 1609, by publisher Thomas Thorpe. That much we know for sure. It is assumed by most scholars that the book—bearing the rather bland title *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*—was published shortly thereafter.



It’s fair to say this book, which contains 154 sonnets and a short narrative poem, ‘A Lover’s Complaint,’ has perplexed casual readers and expert commentators alike over the past four centuries. Winston Churchill’s famous 1939 description of the Soviet Union as ‘a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ can aptly be applied to the publication of Shakespeare’s Sonnets.

Questions and uncertainties abound regarding just about everything associated with what is arguably the most famous collection of poems in the English language, perhaps in any language. While I am fascinated by all of the mysteries surrounding the Sonnets—including such things as the identity of the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady, and the Rival Poet—I want to focus on one specific issue: the hypothesis that this book of Sonnets was published posthumously in 1609. What follows is something of an interim report based on the ongoing project I have referred to as the ‘Posthumous Sonnets Project.’ In recognition of the 400th anniversary of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* the Shakespeare Oxford Society’s Board of Trustees has declared 2009 to be ‘the Year of the Sonnets.’

Our goal is to call attention to the authorship implications of the Sonnets generally, but also to focus on the posthumous hypothesis in particular. I talked about the posthumous Sonnets project during my presentation at the annual conference in White Plains in October 2008 and encouraged SOS members and others to undertake a cooperative research effort. Since then I have launched a somewhat basic (at this stage) posthumous Sonnets blog ([www.ShakespearesSonnets1609.wordpress.com](http://www.ShakespearesSonnets1609.wordpress.com)) and formed an informal posthumous Sonnets group (PSG) to brainstorm ideas, compare notes, and test out hypotheses and possible scenarios. For the most part, I think the deliberations of the PSG have been quite useful and I want to thank participants for their valuable input.

We haven’t completed our work but I believe we have hit on many key pieces of evidence and supporting arguments that buttress the hypothesis that the book of Shakespeare’s Sonnets published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609 went to press *after* the poet’s death. This is not a totally new idea, of course.

The idea of this project, ultimately, is to initiate a complete PR/communications effort behind the posthumous Sonnets hypothesis before the end of this year (this letter being part of that effort). The most important element of the communications plan is the publication of a research paper or monograph that lays out a compelling case for posthumous publication. We also expect to issue a series of press releases, craft several shorter articles for publication in various newspapers and magazines, circulate our findings online via blogs and even YouTube videos, conduct interviews with the media, and go forth aggressively to deliver presentations and lectures on this topic at Shakespeare-related conferences and seminars, not to mention community organizations, libraries, high schools and colleges. I plan to present the findings of the research at our annual joint conference scheduled for this November in Houston.

I believe this research, and the PR effort behind it, has enormous potential for positively transforming the Shakespeare authorship debate in the years to come. It's essential that we take advantage of the news 'hook' provided by the 400th anniversary to make the best case we can for posthumous publication.

In looking into the posthumous publication topic, I have been somewhat surprised that the posthumous case has not yet been more fully developed, especially by Oxfordian

scholars. Several writers have touched on the posthumous publication topic—in-

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cluding Thomas Looney in his landmark *Shakespeare Identified*. But it is often treated in an offhand manner, almost as a throw-away item worthy of only a few supporting arguments. In effect, I think the posthumous publication issue has been given short shrift over the years and deserves much more scholarly attention.

Biographers of the Stratfordian persuasion, of course, cannot even contemplate the idea that the 1609 book of Sonnets was published after the death of the poet—no matter how much compelling evidence is staring them in the face. Nor have many Stratfordian skeptics over the years been motivated to compile the strongest possible case for posthumous publication.

In point of fact, the notion of posthumous publication is anathema to Stratfordians and most anti-Stratfordians for one simple reason: establishing that the poet William Shakespeare died before 1609 would eliminate just about every serious (and not so serious) authorship candidate with two glaring exceptions—Marlowe (died 1593) and Oxford (died 1604). Considering the totality of the available evidence, Oxford's death in 1604 fits the posthumous publication theory like a glove, and vice versa. Marlowe—although dead by 1609—would appear to have died

much too early to be the author of the Sonnets, not to mention many other works of Shakespeare.

Every other major (and minor) authorship candidate was still very much alive in 1609 and for several years thereafter: Roger Manners, 5th Earl of Rutland (died 1612); Henry Neville (died 1615); William Shakspeare of Stratford (died 1616); Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (died 1621); Francis Bacon (died 1626); William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby (died 1642); Amelia Bassano Lanier (died 1645). The 1609 posthumous publication theory, if proved and accepted, would eliminate all of these other candidates from consideration.

Oxfordians, in particular, should be keen to make the posthumous publication of the Sonnets a central plank in the case for Oxford's authorship—hence this posthumous *Sonnets* project. One of the arguments we are developing (again, this is still a work in progress) relates specifically to the Stratfordian paradigm. My observation about the

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Stratfordian authorship theory for many years is that

most so-called Stratfordians are emotionally—almost religiously—attached to this particular authorship theory. For most, if not all, Stratfordians there simply is no doubt whatsoever. This strong belief in the theory prevents Stratfordians from even seeing, let alone seriously considering, the substantial evidence that contradicts their theory. Theirs is a firmly held belief, similar in many respects to religious faith and to the widely held, but ultimately incorrect pre-Copernican geocentric model of the solar system.

Given this firmly held belief in the Stratfordian theory (let's call it Stratfordianism), there are many 'scotomas' or blind spots that simply prevent Stratfordians from seeing evidence that tends to undermine their theory. (Yes, Stratfordians accuse Oxfordians of a similar inability to see and appreciate what they consider to be obvious evidence against Oxford. But that's a topic for another time.) The point I want to make here is simply this: Stratfordians will see it when they believe it. That is to say, they will see the evidence against the Stratford theory only when they believe there truly is some ground for reasonable doubt. Until then, I'm afraid they will continue to ignore any and all countervailing evidence.

Which gives rise to the following imaginative 'What If' scenario. Imagine, if you will, that this 'booke called Shakespeares Sonnettes' had been registered and published exactly as we have it today but ten years later—in 1619 instead of 1609. I present this 'What If' scenario in the spirit of opening minds so the evidence compiled for posthumous publication has at least a fighting chance of not being reflexively resisted and ignored.

What would have to change about this book of sonnets if it had been published in 1619 instead of 1609? Clearly, if published in 1619—three years after the

death of William of Stratford—those of the Stratfordian persuasion would readily accept this as a posthumous publication. Every argument, every piece of evidence that Oxfordians present for posthumous publication in 1609 would be admitted without objection by Stratfordians for a 1619 publication.

Let's just consider the litany briefly. Posthumous publication in 1619 would explain, for Stratfordians and Oxfordians alike, all of the following:

The absence of a dedication by the poet himself, even though William Shakespeare wrote dedications for his two narrative poems *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Shakespeare knew how to write a dedication. There truly is no convincing Stratfordian explanation for the absence of a dedication by the poet himself. The absence of a poet's dedication raises all kinds of problematic questions for Stratfordians. How did Thorpe get his hands on the manuscript of these very private and in many ways embarrassing (even scandalous) poems and why would he publish them without the involvement or approval of the author if the author was still alive at the time of publication? Surely Thorpe would be concerned about public criticism, if not outright retribution, from the abused poet and his very powerful friends and patrons (including, as the Stratfordian theory surmises, King James himself and the wealthy and powerful earls of Southampton, Pembroke, and Montgomery). Stratfordians don't like to admit this but it is virtually inconceivable that a pirated manuscript of Shakespeare's Sonnets could have found its way into print if the poet was still alive at the time. The posthumous publication theory (in 1609 and in the What If scenario of 1619 publication) would remove this very serious question completely.

If the publication was not pirated (as some Shakespeare scholars allege without any real proof) and if he was still alive at the time, it's almost impossible to explain why there was no dedication from the poet. This would have been the normal practice. It's highly unusual for there not to be a dedication from a then-living poet in an authorially approved publication of his very personal poetry. Again posthumous publication solves this particular problem.

The generic title of the book, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, suggests that this is the complete set of sonnets by Shakespeare, and that we should not expect to see any more sonnets from this poet. Why would Shakespeare want to intimate by such a title that he would never again put pen to paper and scratch out even one more sonnet? This title sounds very much like the one-and-only collection of sonnets by a dead poet. Again, the title itself points to posthumous publication.

The apparent absence of the poet from the entire publication process, which helps to explain the number of errors contained in the text, including, for example, the inexplicable repetition of the phrase 'My sinful earth' in Sonnet 146 and the absence of a concluding couplet in Sonnet 126. These apparent mistakes could easily be explained by posthumous publication or perhaps by pirated publication,

but it is difficult to see how these and other errors would be allowed to stand if the project had the blessing and involvement of the poet himself.

The total silence of the poet after the publication of the Sonnets. If they were pirated—the consensus view among Stratfordians—surely a living poet who was as famous and favored by powerful patrons as the Stratfordians insist would be in a position to complain and/or correct the record about the Sonnets. The total silence of the poet after publication speaks compellingly to the posthumous theory. (Note: some modern scholars such as Katherine Duncan-Jones gamely try to make the case that Shakespeare approved the publication and was even involved in the publication process to some degree. But these scholars are hard-pressed to provide any evidence to support this notion. Duncan-Jones suggests that Shakespeare had fled to Stratford to avoid a plague outbreak in London and therefore couldn't contribute a dedication. This strikes me as a feeble attempt to rationalize the obvious absence of the poet from the entire project.)

The dating of the composition of the Sonnets also lends support the posthumous theory. Sylvan Barnet writes in his prefatory remarks to the Signet Classic Shakespeare Series that there is 'something like a scholarly consensus' on the dating of Shakespeare's plays and poems, including the Sonnets. This 'scholarly consensus' maintains that the Sonnets were written between 1593 and 1600, when William of Stratford was still in his early-to-mid 30s.

There is strong evidence that at least some, if not all, of the Sonnets were written in the 1590s. Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* (1598), makes an oft-quoted reference to Shakespeare's 'sugared Sonnets among his private friends.' (It would be interesting to know just who these private friends were.) We also know that two sonnets by Shakespeare made their way into print in a 1599 volume called *The Passionate Pilgrim*. These two poems were later published in the 1609 Sonnets, appearing in slightly edited form as Sonnet 138 ('When my loves swears that she is made of truth') and Sonnet 144 ('Two loves I have, of comfort and despair').

Despite this broad consensus on the dating, the Sonnets themselves refer to the poet's advanced age and impending death. Even Katherine Duncan-Jones, to her credit, acknowledges that at least six sonnets deal with the poet's 'ageing and impending death.' This is a remarkable admission considering the considerable gap between sonnet composition and the death of William of Stratford in 1616. Duncan-Jones offers this insightful explanatory note regarding Sonnet 146 (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, page 408):

Addressing his soul, the speaker questions the rich and expensive adornments it bestows on the earth, or body, in which it is housed, exhorting it to prepare for death by consuming spiritual riches and repudiating earthly ones. The sonnet has been very extensively discussed, both because of its status as Shakespeare's only explicitly religious poem...As far as the religious connotations go, the sonnet is perhaps not quite

so extraordinary as has been claimed, *but can be linked with other sonnets on the speaker's aging and impending death*, such as 63, 71, 73-74 and 81.

Emphasis added. Support for the posthumous-publication thesis can also be found in a most surprising source: the prefatory epistles by Heminge and Condell in the First Folio collection of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623. Referring to the plays, these two 'friends and fellows' of William Shakespeare make it plain that the death of their friend Shakespeare prevented him from 'having the fate, common with some, to be exequutor (executor) to his owne writings.' In their epistle to the great variety of readers, Heminge and Condell elaborate on this point that death prevented their friend from setting forth and overseeing his own writings:

It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to have bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liv'd to have set forth, and overseen his owne writings; But since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to have collected & publish'd them.

It's abundantly clear from these statements that Heminge and Condell could not possibly be referring to William of Stratford, who died in 1616 after spending several years, perhaps many years, in restful retirement in Stratford-upon-Avon without demonstrating any interest in setting forth and overseeing his own writings. The question arises: Just when did Shakespeare, the playwright and poet of the Sonnets, actually die? Just when was he 'by death departed from that right' of setting forth and overseeing his own writings? We know that William of Stratford was engaged in a series of non-literary activities involving court cases and property transactions, including providing a deposition in the Mountjoy case in London in 1612. But there is no evidence that William of Stratford took any interest in the actual publication of his sonnets in 1609 or in collecting and publishing his plays between 1609 and his death in 1616.

According to Heminge and Condell, their friend and fellow was prevented by death from doing so. Their statements about his death can fairly be interpreted as suggesting that he may well have died before the publication of the Sonnets in 1609. This suggestion is strengthened to a near certainty when the next point is given the full consideration and weight it deserves. Heminge and Condell essentially spell it out for us in so uncertain terms if we would only listen: William Shakespeare died before he could collect and publish his writings. And since William of Stratford had plenty of time on his hands over the course of several years to do so but didn't lift a finger toward that end, it is reasonable to conclude that Heminge and Condell were, in fact, referring to somebody else entirely, somebody who died long before 1616.

This brings me to what I regard as the *coup de grace*, the one piece of evidence that clinches the posthumous publication thesis. This evidence has yet to be ade-

quately explained or refuted by Stratfordians. I'm referring to the reference in the Sonnets' dedication to the poet as 'our ever-living poet.' There really is no serious argument to be made against the obvious interpretation that 'our ever-living poet' means the poet, William Shakespeare, was dead by 1609. Stratfordians have been trying to explain this phrase away for centuries. If the Sonnets had been published in 1619 instead of 1609, Stratfordians would not have to twist themselves into rhetorical knots to rationalize this straightforward description of the immortal poet. They could accept the phrase as meaning what it so patently and clearly states: The poet is already dead by 1609.

Stratfordian Donald Foster admitted as much in his 1987 PMLA (102, pp. 42-54) article 'Master W. H.: R.I.P.' Here's what Foster wrote then: 'In a fairly extensive search, I have not found any instance of ever-living used in a Renaissance text to describe a living mortal, including, even, panegyrics on Queen Elizabeth ...though it does appear sometimes in eulogies for the dead.'

Jonathan Bate (*The Genius of Shakespeare*, p. 63) is even more concise. "Ever-living" was an epithet applied to dead poets, not living ones. The point was that they were dead, but they lived eternally through their work.'

The case for posthumous publication of the Sonnets could not be more clearly or conclusively stated.

The above does not include all of the evidence and arguments that will likely be included in a forthcoming monograph. Again, this letter is a preliminary attempt to pull evidence together and make the posthumous publication case as complete as possible. The ultimate goal is to assemble and organize sufficient evidence to make the following claim: Considering the totality of the evidence (some of which has been presented above), posthumous publication is the *only* viable explanation that explains it all. Some theories (such as pirated publication) can perhaps explain some of the evidence. But we can't cherry-pick. We need to lay it all out and come up with a reasonable and responsible explanation for *all* of the evidence. Indeed, Occam's Razor demands that we find the cleanest, simplest explanation for all of it.

All things considered, I believe posthumous publication of the Sonnets is the Occam's Razor explanation for all of the evidence associated with the publication of 'a booke called Shakespeares Sonnettes' in 1609. This letter is an attempt to take an interim step toward making the case for posthumous publication.

**Matthew Cossolotto**  
President,  
Shakespeare Oxford Society



### The Case for Fulke Greville

Dear Doctor Egan,

Firstly, may I thank you for your generous invitation to me to write a 5000-word article for *The Oxfordian*. I was very impressed by your offer but I could never fulfill such a task because a ‘mini-pitch’ for my theory just can’t be done.

The true situation is that no one can prove for sure who wrote the poems and plays, although a thousand different ways have been tried to do it. I used a (semi-) scientific method which could provide a conclusive test between the lives of the two Stratford candi-

dates, William Shakspeare and Fulke Greville.

The Grevillian ‘theory’ is based solely on a probability curve (the numbers), obtained by the method, and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. The Grevillian theory is a group theory or syndicate theory. There is strong evidence that Greville wrote plays with a syndicate of writers and he confirmed that in his *Life of Sidney*. The canon has room for work by Oxford and his collaborators. After all, it is a fact that Oxford was acclaimed as the best writer of comedy in his day. Where are these comedies? Any Oxfordian cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that the writings of Oxford and Greville crossed paths in 1609 at Kings Place, Hackney.

If it was possible to write a 5000-word pitch for the theory (which it isn’t), addressed specifically to the Oxfordians, the major fact I would wish them to see is that the probability curve (and odds running into billions to one), proves beyond any doubt that the Stratfordian Theory of Shakspeare’s biography is an elaborate fraud based entirely on the theft of Fulke Greville’s life.

I would like you to know that nearly all the living Stratfordian authors copiously quoted in my book received a complimentary signed copy and a very respectful letter from me asking them if they could knock down the findings. Not one author has claimed that they have been misquoted, misinterpreted or otherwise ‘spun’. I respectfully say to your readers that this is because the method is impregnable. The conclusion is rock-solid—the Stratfordian biographers, in order to support their theory, stole Greville’s life and they don’t answer because they can’t answer—nobody can.

I could only convince an Oxfordian to support the ‘stolen life’ theory if they studied the whole thing—every piece of evidence in the 354 profiles. Then they would be convinced. Anything else would just be a theorist’s ‘skeleton argument’.

Thank you again for your generous attitude towards ‘other candidates’

Yours Very Sincerely

**Alan Saunders**

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Anon: *Willobie His Avisa*

Thomas Watson: *Hekatom-  
pathia*

Robert Greene: *Pandosto  
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Richard Edwards: *Damon  
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This website, produced through the partnership of Oxfordian scholars Robert Brazil and Barbara Flues, provides scholars of the Early Modern period with important Elizabethan works in both modern and original spelling and punctuation, emphasizing authors central to the authorship controversy.

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