

# *The Shakespeare Authorship Mystery Explained*

Reviewed by David Haskins

---

*The Shakespeare Authorship Mystery Explained.* By Geoffrey Eyre. Mardle Publications, 2017.  
(\$15.50 US)

---

You're right from your side and I'm right from mine,  
We're both just one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind.  
Bob Dylan, "One Too Many Mornings"

Mr. Dylan, whose own name is a pseudonym, might have been talking about the Shakespeare Authorship Question in those lines. I've seen video of a Stratfordian academic dismissing the opposition with a supercilious shrug as being not worthy of his attention. I've seen an Oxfordian driven to tears on camera by the injustice of his candidate's not being recognized for the achievement accorded to Shakespeare. People take this debate seriously indeed.

Into this dispute strides Geoffrey Eyre with his new primer *The Shakespeare Authorship Mystery Explained*. In clear language, free from bombast, he lays down for the beginner an introduction to the relevant historical background, the known facts of William Shakspere of Stratford's life, the probable dating of the plays, the alternative candidates, and a summary of what is not known about the bard. For every argument he presents, he includes its shortcomings.

Structurally, Eyre's book begins with a *Coles Notes* approach to the times, a study guide dividing the Elizabethan age into short passages of information which vary in length from a paragraph to two pages, affording the reader the pleasure of white space to catch his breath between sub-topics. In fact, the whole book is divided into mini-subjects within chapters, each given its own heading, and none longer than necessary to make the reading easy. The book is written in an unpretentious style that clarifies the many details in an otherwise overwhelmingly complex subject.

Eyre begins by exploring the historical context of the plays, starting with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which shut down the overland trading route and opened up the sea route to the Orient. Relevance? Sea navigation requires mathematics and astronomy, discreet areas of higher learning necessary for the writer of the plays to have acquired. Now the lack of evidence resonates; there are no records of Shakespeare ever having attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon, or any university. Neither is there evidence that he attended court, travelled outside the country, served in any military campaign, befriended high ranking members of the aristocracy, or did anything to gain the experience and learning some say the playwright would have needed. In this way, Eyre builds his argument, brick by brick.

Other historical factors Eyre discusses are trade with newly discovered America, the preeminence of London, the conflict between Catholic and Protestant factions, and the developing supremacy of the English language. As interesting as these are, they are background, and how they affect authorship is largely unresolved. Again, Eyre brings up what didn't happen to shed light on what might have happened; for example, why were Protestant executions of some sixty women burned to death under Mary Tudor (1553-1558) not used by the writer as plot points? Any answer to this question requires a level of conjecture beyond the bounds of reasoned argument.

Eyre can also indulge his expert knowledge of British history perhaps excessively. Piling on historical fact after fact creates an impressive weight of apparent evidence that may do little more than provide context for the times but say nothing about who wrote the plays. That is, until the Percy family uprising of 1569-1570 in *Henry IV*. Was de Vere there? Did the author of the plays witness battles and war (Eyre notes that de Vere served in the campaign against Spain), or did he lift the knowledge of them from Greek and Latin dramas?

Could Shakespeare even read the obvious sources on which the plays were formed, from Plutarch's *Lives*, to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, to Boccaccio, to dated editions of the Bible? He would have needed Latin, Greek, Italian, and French to read them and a university's or an aristocrat's library to find them.

Evidence trumps supposition, and evidence is notoriously slight. Much has been

---

**David Haskins** emigrated from England to Canada in 1953 at a young age. He holds an Honours BA in English from McMaster University and a M. Ed from the University of Toronto. His teaching career spans thirty-five years, mostly in secondary schools with five years as the Department Head of English. His other writings include a creative writing text, theatre reviews for a Toronto arts newspaper and memoir pieces. His last book was *This House is Condemned*, which came out from Wolsak and Wynn (Hamilton, ON) in 2013. He is currently preparing three books: of poems, short stories, and a children's fantasy novel. He is the custodian and occasional driver of a red 1970 MGB.

made of the lack of Shakespeare's attendance records at the grammar school where Latin was likely taught to prepare boys for the civil service or the protestant clergy. However, saying there are no surviving attendance records is not evidence that neither he nor anyone else did not attend. Neither does the fact that his will never mentioned any books mean he did not possess any. (There is not one book mentioned in my will, though my house is insulated with books.) A lack of evidence is not in itself persuasive of one thing or another.

Eyre sows the seeds of doubt to set us up for the big reveal in the penultimate chapter given over to Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford, as the candidate most favoured in the twentieth century. It's a progression that works: establish the historical circumstances that make possible the writing of the plays, cast doubts on William Shakespeare's identity, set up and tear down the straw men alternates one by one, and then give us what emerges as the most likely candidate with only the weakest of objections, concluding with a reminder list of everything we don't know about William Shakespeare just to let us know we should not go back there once we've left.

He does this in a style that is clear, accessible, and erudite. He neither panders to the various cheering sections, nor rails against the entrenched traditionalists or noisy revolutionaries. He writes without sarcasm or invective, and shies away from personally engaging the fanatical voices that are out there. His overview is comprehensive and believable, presented from both supportive and critical points of view. It is also free of footnotes, but fully indexed for quick reference. The book may be appropriately included on reading lists of freshmen Shakespeare courses, but not cited in doctoral theses. Tailored for more of a public market than an academic one, it leaves us with a bibliography of 44 titles by the main proponents of both sides, should the reader wish to pursue the debate further. The book is closely organized into short sections readable in short time limits that yields interesting points to ponder but may tend to lose the trajectory of the larger argument Eyre is building.

There are occasions where Eyre pads his points with the rhetoric of debate. He may introduce a position he supports with a phrase like, "Without deducing too much from too little..." (Isn't that for the reader to judge?), or "Few would disagree..." (Taken literally, this would support Shakspeare of Stratford as the writer, which is opposite to Eyre's intention), or "the only explanation which serves..." (serves whom and to what end?) These lapses are as far as he will go in inferring a hypothetical truth from an absence of direct evidence. They are rare, however, and do not erode the integrity of his argument.

At times, the details fail to connect with the question of authorship. Much is made of the problem of dating the plays. Eyre states that Shakspeare's first visit to London was in the 1590's, and traces acting companies through deaths and ownership mergers (the Warwickshire businessman owned a share in the Globe theatre in 1599), but leaves us to do the math to figure out what this proves. What is not discussed is that

play scripts of the day mostly did not exist in numbers, but were truncated to hold only an actor's lines and cues for quick study.

To give his argument weight, Eyre lists facts which individually may be coincidences but taken collectively seem something to be reckoned with. Questions of identity abound everywhere: in the six surviving signatures with their different handwriting and spellings, in the altered images and busts, one exchanging a trader's sack of wheat for a writer's quill pen, and so on. We have no authentically sourced portrait of Shakespeare. Not one manuscript page from the plays and poems has survived. There is no mention of any literary bequests in his will, nor any literary claim upon it by members of his family. Upon his death, not one of some twenty contemporary playwrights acknowledged his genius in a tribute. There is no recorded mention of his death in either Stratford or London. Nothing of a literary nature has ever been found in Stratford-upon-Avon connecting the man to the work. He could barely write his own name. He is not named in the cast of any play in any theatre. There is no record of payment to him as either actor or writer. And so on. What academic would risk her career arguing for a pseudonym based on these oddities of circumstance?

It is of course possible to attribute to the writer all kinds of talents from genius to specialized expertise in areas as diverse as legal, medical, courtly protocols, weaponry and battle, languages, customs and cultures of other places, familiarity with historical sources, and so on, and still not have posited a word about William Shakspeare of Stratford., but about the person who took his name as a pseudonym. Supporting such a hypothesis are the need for protection from censorship and persecution for treasonous or unflattering portrayals of the monarchy through comparison with parallel histories of earlier times. Subjecting one's identity to such threats would be reckless. A pseudonym whose secret was kept would solve the problem.

Can it be proven that Shakespeare had never been to Italy, did not learn Latin or Greek at grammar school, was never invited to the royal court, and so could not have acquired the knowledge required to write these plays? Or are there other explanations for each of these problematic points?

In the next section, much space is given to the dating of the plays. The relevance of this exercise to the authorship question is not always clear. Could *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* have been written by anyone who had not visited northern Italy? How did Shakespeare acquire the legal terminology used in *The Comedy of Errors*? Did he find work as a law clerk during his so-called "lost years" between Stratford and London? Can a play be dated as early simply because it uses a high proportion of rhyme? And when a play shows similarity with another play, how does one tell which play came first, which play borrowed from the other? *Much Ado About Nothing* and John Lyly's *Endimion*, seem to have been an influence on each other. Similarly, *As You Like It* and Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, *Richard II* and Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* all present

this dilemma of mutual influence.

The following chapter on alternate candidates is not much help either. Obviously if a candidate were dead when the play was written, he must be eliminated. A table of plays dated according to Eyre's calculations might clarify this, just as a comparison chart of the eligible candidates along the lines of a consumer chart for comparing like products might eliminate at a glance those with poorer showings in the chosen categories. Eyre might be sympathetic to such illustrative aids since the book is peppered with lists of plays and their geographic locations, of contemporary writers, of plays grouped by genre or publication, and with graphics of the signatures, the portraits, and the paintings.

Now Eyre has us look at the alternate candidates to see if any one of them could amass the knowledge, skill, background in law and medicine, techniques of dramaturgy, sophistication of language, and all the rest, and still remain undisclosed for 400+ years.

Where the book shows its colours is in the chapter on Edward de Vere, separated out from the straw-men and also-rans of the previous chapter. Here Eyre expounds on the many congruent points between the plays and the man, the likelihood that de Vere possessed the knowledge a Shakespeare would need, the travel experience that would background the plays, ten of which were set in Italy, the time and wherewithal to write the canon, and so many coincidental matches that a bullet list might have made a more easily grasped presentation than the unbroken prose he chose for this section.

If the reason to doubt that William Shakspere of Stratford wrote these works is the almost complete lack of evidence that he did, then the reason to support Edward de Vere as the author is exactly the evidence that he had every advantage, experience and opportunity to do so. Just as Eyre piles up in point form the list of "there is no record of..." in his Summary page as his final salvo in establishing that the authorship is not known, so in the chapter on de Vere does he pile up fact after fact until we are, if not persuaded, at least sympathetic to him as the primary candidate.

At twelve years old Edward de Vere inherited the earldom, and office of Lord Great Chamberlain. He was summoned to London by Queen Elizabeth for his protection until he was twenty-one. De Vere spent nine years as a royal ward in proximity of high level contacts that would help him sustain a writing career. William Cecil, his guardian, spoke classical Greek, Latin, and French, and provided daily tuition for de Vere in these. Cecil's library contained many works cited as sources for the plays. De Vere revived his father's acting group. He commissioned an English version of the philosophical *Cardanus Comforte* in 1573 – Hamlet carries it in his "to be or not to be" speech. De Vere was attacked by pirates, as was Hamlet. Polonius could have been modeled on William Cecil. On his way to bankruptcy, de Vere lost 3000

pounds – Antonio borrowed 3000 ducats from Shylock which he could not repay. De Vere had one legitimate son Henry, and one illegitimate son Edward; in *King Lear*, Gloucester has one legitimate son Edgar and one illegitimate son Edmund. Lear has three daughters and parcels out his territories to them, causing his downfall; de Vere has three daughters and had to sell the 500 year old ancestral home of the Vere family to pay for their dowries. Family members, wealthy aristocrats, could have put together the *First Folio* edition after his death. And so on, making the autobiographical references to de Vere as author convincing.

One of the more interesting facts in support of de Vere is that the author of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) must have seen the only replica painting by Titian which portrays Adonis wearing the peaked cap mentioned in the poem. And de Vere could have visited Titian's studio in Venice and seen that very painting. There is no evidence that the Shakspeare of Stratford ever left England. De Vere, however, went to Florence, Genoa, Mantua, Milan, Naples, Padua, Rome, Sienna, Venice, Verona, and Palermo. Thirty plays are set in whole or in part outside England.

Not all interpretations of evidence weigh equally. The French translation of *The Winter's Tale*, a title for a play which is not about winter, is *Le Conte d'hiver*, which to some minds might echo the similar sounding de Vere name.

What we have here is a book about what is not known, what cannot be proven, what might have taken place. Geoffrey Eyre covers the ground, presents the arguments, does justice to the alternates, and makes it all seem possible in the doing. That the subject is so significant, namely, who was the greatest English speaking writer of all time, and that a lack of proof befalls both the Shakespeare name and the de Vere alternate theory, leads this reviewer to one conclusion. Wait and see.

Eyre assumes that the true identity of the man who was William Shakespeare is "irretrievably lost." I think that if the bones of Richard III can be discovered buried under a parking lot in 2012, five hundred years after he was killed, who can say what might yet turn up four hundred years after the plays were written?