

# *Shakespeare: A Missing Author*

by J. Thomas Looney

with an Introduction by James A. Warren

**S**hakespeare: A Missing Author, was the last of the eighteen articles and letters that John Thomas Looney wrote for publication in support of Edward de Vere's authorship of Shakespeare's works. It was published in two parts, in February and April 1941, in consecutive issues of the *Shakespeare Fellowship Newsletter*, a publication of the American branch of the Shakespeare Fellowship.<sup>1</sup> It was, therefore, the only one of those eighteen articles or letters to be published originally in the United States, and the only one to appear in an Oxfordian publication; the previous seventeen had all been published in England in the mainstream media.

At the time Looney wrote the article, England was caught in the grip of World War II. The Blitz – the German effort to subdue England through heavy bombing raids concentrated on industrial targets and civilian centers through the British Isles – was at its peak. When the war began in 1939, Looney, age 69, “left the dangerous vicinity of Newcastle, and went to live with his married daughter, Mrs. Bodell, at Swadincote, in Staffordshire, near Burton-on-Trent.”<sup>2</sup> It was there he wrote his final article three years before his death. His only known later writing was one letter to Charles Wisner Barrell, the editor of the publication in which “Shakespeare: A Missing Author” appeared, which makes this not only his last article, but almost his final written thoughts on the subject of Edward de Vere's authorship of Shakespeare's works.

That being the case, it is startling to realize that nowhere in this 7,300-word article does the name Edward de Vere appear. Instead, Looney's objective is to prove that William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon could not have written the poems and plays attributed to him. He pursues two lines of investigation. The first shows the absence of any personal or emotional connections between the purported author from Stratford and the literary works. Looney goes right to the heart of the matter early in the article: “Plays and the personality of their authors are . . . complementary: their lives and characters form the natural key to the literature: the literature throws light into the obscure corners of the lives.” Then comes the most important point: “The importance of the personality of a writer is . . . in direct proportion to the recognized importance of his work.” In other words, the greater the work, the stronger the connection we should expect to find between it and the life and mind of its author. But such connections are just what Looney shows us are most missing

if the man from Stratford was the author.

Looney then points out that no one rising from humble beginnings to a prominent place in a hierarchical society could have done so without leaving a considerable trail of accomplishments and connections along the way. London was a pretty small place in those days; its population of 100,000 in the 1580s was still only 300,000 at the end of Elizabeth's reign. The higher levels of the nobility – the population that really mattered – was far smaller. Richard Malim has documented just how small the nobility was. By his count, it consisted of one old Marquess, 18 earls, two viscounts, and 37 barons, of whom three were women and one was a child.<sup>3</sup>

In such a small social world, Shakspeare's rise would have been noted and commented on. He would have been gossiped about in the manner portrayed by Shakespeare near the end of *King Lear*. In Act 5, Scene 3, Lear tells Cordelia that during their long days in prison they will “hear poor rogues / Talk of court news; . . . / Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out . . .”

Looney returns several times to the point of the impossibility of Shakspeare, if he was the author, having remained invisible.

If, moreover, one with such commonplace beginnings as are shown by the early Stratford records, had, merely by his acting and playwriting, won for himself access to the foremost company of actors. . . and used the position so rapidly gained to place himself immediately into intimate relationship with the people round the throne . . . he could not easily have been hidden. However rapid the ascent it could only have been accomplished by stages and through the active interest of suitable intermediaries.

[This] supposed achievement, under any circumstances, is highly improbable; without record of stages and means, it may be confidently regarded as impossible. . . . Not a single document has shown any aristocrat at all interested in the person of William Shakspeare. None wrote to him, received a letter from him, or so much as mentioned him in private correspondence. It is blank negation everywhere.

This is, Looney concludes, “extraordinary from every point of view.”

One point in Looney's article needs clarification. The “elaborate developments of

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Stratford-on-Avon” that he refers to in the third paragraph are the efforts to create in Stratford a Potemkin village to fool tourists out of their pounds and dollars and yen. Those developments are, Looney says, “a sufficient answer to the contention that the person of the writer matters nothing.” The person of the writer matters a great deal to most people, which is why so many are willing to travel long distances at great expense to see where, they think, the great dramatist lived, and why they are so susceptible to being deceived.

The effort to mislead visitors by presenting them with buildings, lands, and gardens purported to have belonged to William Shakspeare or his family also defeats itself in a second way. The ordinariness of those external props exposes the disconnect between them and “works so rich in thought and knowledge, and so varied in passion” that they “could only [have] come from an intense and many-sided genius.” The props in Stratford would be important if they helped visitors understand how the dramatist came to write his works. Instead they do the opposite. As Looney shows, their very ordinariness exposes the hollowness of the claim of a connection between them and the mind that created the great works.

[Note: The following reprint has been edited for consistency and to correct a few errors in the source documents.]

### ***Notes to Introduction***

- 1 *The Shakespeare Fellowship Newsletter* (American) was published by the American branch of The Shakespeare Fellowship and edited by Charles Wisner Barrell. Looney’s article appeared in Vol. 2/2, pp. 13-17 and Vol. 2/3, pp. 26-30. A long condensed passage drawn from the first half of the article was reprinted in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Spring 1977 (Vol. 13/1, pp. 1-6), edited by Gordon C. Cyr. That passage was reprinted again in *Building the Case*, Vol. 6, pp. 112-118, of the ten anthologies of Oxfordian materials collected by Paul Altrocchi (volumes 1-5 were co-edited with Hank Whittemore). A different excerpt was reprinted in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* in Summer 1988 (Vol. 24/4, pp. 1-7). Much of the second half of the article was reprinted in *Building the Case*, Vol. 2, pp. 144-55.
- 2 Percy Allen, “Obituary: J. Thomas Looney,” *Shakespeare Fellowship Newsletter* (English), May 1944, pp. 2-4.
3. Richard Malim, “Southwell and Oxford,” *De Vere Society Newsletter*, January 2017, p. 20.

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**A**lthough mankind certainly has to face in these days graver and more pressing problems than that of the authorship of the Shakespeare plays, this question has a claim, if only a secondary one amongst the serious interests of life, and deals with matters that are destined to endure when the special problems of today<sup>1</sup> will have passed out of mind. Centuries hence, when the entire world will have changed, socially, politically and religiously, the works will be read with wonder, and the personality behind them will command the admiration and even the affections of readers.

Truly great dramatic literature can only come from the pens of writers who are accustomed to look closely into their own souls and make free use of their secret experiences; it may be doubted whether a single line of living literature ever came from pure imagination or mere dramatic pose.

Plays and the personality of their author are therefore complementary: their lives and characters form the natural key to the literature. The literature throws light into the obscure corners of the lives. The importance of the personality of a writer is therefore in direct proportion to the recognized importance of his work.

As, then, the Shakespeare plays hold first place in the world's dramatic literature, an acquaintance with the personality behind them – a prime factor in its right understanding – must be a matter of some concern to those who regard these great creations of the human spirit seriously. Works so rich in thought and knowledge, and so varied in passion, could only come from an intense and many-sided genius; all the elaborate developments of Stratford-on-Avon are a sufficient answer to the contention that the person of the writer matters nothing.

In further justification for inviting attention to this problem, we would urge the duty which the present generation owes to the great men of the past. What has certainly sustained many of these in their labours, through frequent obloquy and neglect, has been their confidence that posterity would eventually do them justice. If, then, the Shakespeare plays were not written by the man who has hitherto borne the honour, some other Englishman, one of the greatest of the sons of humanity, still awaits his rightful place in history. To make good such a defect is no unworthy aim, and no higher justification need be urged for grappling boldly with a problem that has vexed the literary world for nearly a century.

The consciousness that there was a distinctive personal element running through the dramas, one quite out of harmony with the records and traditions of William Shakspeare of Stratford, was one of the principal results of the discriminating admiration with which, in the nineteenth century, the works came to be studied. With penetrating sagacity Emerson remarked "I cannot marry (him) to his verse." To wrestle with baffling problems has, however, always been the lot of the Shakespeareans: in itself clear evidence that there was something wrong somewhere.

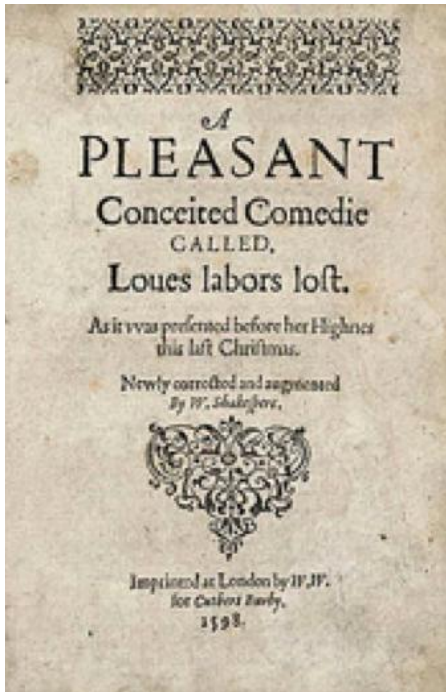
However decisive such a sense of discord may be to the person who feels it instinctively, it does not supply the kind of material that can be easily pressed into service as evidence in an argument. On the other hand, experience has proved that scholars, equally equipped, can wrangle endlessly respecting the classical knowledge shown in the plays, whilst lawyers and pseudo-lawyers argue inconclusively respecting their legal contents. Something more palpable and measurable is needed to settle the issues raised by these psychological, classical and legal difficulties – and it is to evidence of this concrete practical nature, such as can be weighed without special scholastic preparation, that I shall try to confine myself.

At the outset I shall state definitely, in the form of a proposition, what it is the special object of this essay to prove, namely: that the William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, who died in that town in 1616, cannot have written the poems and plays attributed to him, but was used as a cover for some great poet-dramatist who did not wish his own name to appear on the published works – and that, therefore, the author of the plays is missing.

It is generally known that there are many converging lines of evidence pointing in this direction. To rest a case, however, on the cumulative effect of separate and varied lines of proof demands a weighing of complex probabilities, and becomes, to some extent, a matter for the experts. We shall, therefore, not attempt such a task of general survey and coordination, but shall confine ourselves within very restricted limits, and shall find, I believe, a case as cogent as it is simple.

We shall, moreover, discard altogether that vast mass of Shakespeare lore which passes as authenticated fact, but which is in reality mere inference based upon the assumption that William Shakspeare of Stratford wrote the plays. We shall narrow the argument down to the bedrock of facts, taking as a general basis the aristocratic connections of the original publications.

The name Shakespeare made its first appearance in English literature as that, not of a dramatist, but of a poet, when *Venus and Adonis* was published in the year 1593. The title page gave no author's name – in itself a significant beginning – but the dedication to Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, was signed: "William Shakespeare." The terms of this prefatory letter prove the poet to have been already on an intimate footing with the nobleman and both the dedication and the



text of the poem reveal a natural mastery of the cultured speech peculiar to the highest social circles. This, of course, clearly establishes the writer's free association with the aristocracy some years prior to 1593.

Not until 1598 did the name Shakespeare become known as that of a dramatist, when it was attached to an edition of *Love's Labor's Lost*. Here, again, aristocratic connections are stressed. The work was published "as it was presented before her Highness . . ." and the drama itself is exclusively one of court life, full of interior portraiture and having as its basis the distinctive manners, etiquette and intercourse of people in familiar touch with royalty.

After this came a succession of plays with the same general stamp.

*2 Henry IV*: "As it hath been sundrie times acted by the right honourable the Lord Chamberlaine his servants." (That is, the Queen's special company of players.)

*The Merchant of Venice*: "As it hath been divers times acted by the Lord Chamberlaine his servants."

*Hamlet*: "As it hath been divers times acted by his Highnesse servants" (King James' players).

*King Lear*: "As it was played before the Kings Maiestie."

And so [it is] with other published plays from 1598 to 1609.

The year 1609 saw the publication of the Shakespeare *Sonnets* and, whatever perplexing problems respecting this work may have divided scholars, upon one point all are agreed – namely, that many of the poems are addressed to a young nobleman, with whom the poet is here seen on terms of close intimacy and strong personal affection.

In the same year an unauthorized edition of *Troilus and Cressida* appeared, with a bold assertion that the "grand possessors" of the manuscript had been defied in the publication of the work. Who these "grand possessors" may have been we cannot tell. The terms, however, clearly point to aristocrats.

In 1623 the authentic publication of the Shakespeare plays culminated and closed



with the issue of the famous *First Folio*. This work is dedicated to the two brothers William and Philip Herbert, the Earls respectively of Pembroke and Montgomery, who are there stated to have followed “the author living with much favour.” In the introductory poem contributed by Ben Jonson special emphasis is laid upon the personal interest both of Queen Elizabeth and King James I.

From first to last, links of a perfectly unique kind connect these plays and the person of their author with royalty and the aristocracy and so surely are such intimacies implied, that it is usual to speak of them as established facts. Sir Sidney Lee, for example, refers quite confidently to the “personal interest, which he had excited among the satellites of royalty,” and adds: “Queen Elizabeth quickly showed him special favour.” For no less than thirty years (1593-1623) the published works therefore declare him to have been acquainted with or honourably remembered by the greatest people in the land and, if we take into account the necessary antecedents of the 1593 debut, the period of aristocratic connection must be considerably extended beyond the thirty years.

We must now see how these facts bear up on the person hitherto credited with the authorship.

When *Venus and Adonis* was published, William Shakspeare of Stratford was a young man of twenty-nine. To have worked himself by that age into such a society, and to have acquired the literary and social culture shown by the poem and its dedication – much of which could not have been learned from books – to have produced so lengthy and elaborately finished a poem and carried through its publication, he must have had his feet firmly planted on the social ladder in his early twenties, at the latest. Since he lived to the age of fifty-two, and the chief business of his life would be to produce this literature and meet the social obligation which it would entail, we may say that the whole of that effective part of a man’s lifetime which fixes permanently his place amongst his fellows would be passed in the open light of royal and aristocratic favor.

If, moreover, one with such commonplace beginnings as are shown by the early Stratford records, had, merely by his acting and playwriting, won for himself access to the foremost company of actors, without a trace of youthful apprenticeship or experience in an inferior troupe, and used the position so rapidly gained to place himself immediately into intimate relationship with the people round the throne, he must have possessed not only extraordinary intellectual powers but wonderful initiative, enterprise, ambition, personal address, and social tact. His aims must have been settled early, and his efforts to realize them direct and resolute. This was not the kind of man to allow himself to be pushed into the background and, following a public vocation, he could not easily have been hidden. However rapid the ascent it could only have been accomplished by stages and through the active interest of suitable intermediaries.

The question before us then, is whether these published pretensions and necessary implications of his connection with the literature can be subjected to an effective test.

A hundred years ago it is probable that no conclusive test was possible. Nineteenth century historical research<sup>2</sup> has, however, completely changed the outlook in respect to this, as to so many other hoary misconceptions. Painstaking workers, officials and unofficial students, have toiled in regions of dust and mould, to pierce mists of imaginative traditions, and to come face-to-face with the realities of the past in its contemporary documents and formal records. The contents of long neglected archives, in obsolete writing undecipherable to the ordinary reader, have been microscopically examined, summarized, indexed, and placed within reach of the more general student and this material has furnished tests that have given the *coup de grace* to more than one cherished illusion.

Naturally the public archives chiefly disclose public events, with an emphasis upon the doings of the governing classes, national and local. Private collections, being mainly the property of old families, throw light also upon their *private* affairs and interests.

The Shakespeare question, on the side from which we are now viewing it, is therefore one which is especially open to the test of historical research, and no workers have been more thorough in their investigations, or more unsparing to themselves, than those who, during many years, have hunted for particulars relating to William Shakspeare of Stratford. Additional details may yet come to light, but sufficient has already been made out to pronounce quite definitely upon the general result of all this research work.

The first fact which stands out boldly is the complete absence of even the slightest relevant link between William Shakspeare's sordid beginnings at Stratford, traceable right up to the time when he was a married man with three children, and the exalted social and cultural intimacies of his early twenties implied in the publication of the first Shakespeare poems. In those days even scholars from the universities could, as writers, only penetrate the outer fringe of that uppermost circle by means of aristocratic patronage, graciously bestowed, and paid for by public literary compliments. Shakespeare reaches its centre without academic send-off and by a single stride, without leaving traces of an upward struggle or of assistance from any aristocrat or other likely helper. The supposed achievement, under any circumstances, is highly improbable; without record of stages and means, it may be confidently regarded as impossible.

What is true of his reaching these heights is even more emphatically true of his keeping them. The records for all the years which lie between *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and the latest date ever suggested for his final retirement to Stratford (1612)



– the most eventful years in the history of the English drama – have been ruthlessly searched in one supreme quest: to find out more about William Shakspeare. With what result?

We now know that he sold some malt to one Philip Rogers, lent his customer two shillings, and afterwards prosecuted him for repayment. When he died he left only his “second best bed,” merely as an afterthought interlined in his will to the woman whom he married under unsavory compulsion – and, through years of affluence, he neglected to pay a shepherd a debt of £2 incurred by his wife in days of poverty – the creditor having so lost hope of ever seeing his money again that, with grim humour, he bequeathed it to the poor, while nothing remains to show whether it reached the intended beneficiaries.

These, and other irrelevancies relating to houses, lands, tithes, and false claims respecting his coat-of-arms, have, with infinite pains, been dug up, to teach the humblest of us how unfortunate it may prove to excite the curiosity of posterity. But in no single instance during the many years of his supposed fame do we find in his private records traces of a personal friendship with an aristocrat.

This is extraordinary from every point of view, for even in the capacity as a mask for another man, marks of such contacts might be looked for, since the person engaged for one purpose might very well have been employed on other business. This is not an unlikely explanation of the fact that after the time of his final retirement to Stratford the Earl of Rutland’s secretary coupled the name of “Shakespeare” with that of Burbage in respect to a quite irrelevant cash payment. Even this reference has been disputed by its discoverer;<sup>3</sup> but not even a trifle like this has, directly or indirectly, connected him with an aristocrat during all the years of his reputed immersion in literature and high class friendships. If ever he lived in touch with such people the meetings must have been jealously guarded and their traces carefully covered.

During these years he was evidently kept generally out of sight, in as yet undiscovered quarters. Brief glimpses of semi-clandestine lodgment is all that we can catch of him in London; for there, even the tax gatherers, who wanted him, went wrong by a matter of years as to where he could be found – the very years during which, on orthodox assumptions, he was living in a blaze of royal favor. On the other hand, Thomas Greene, a lawyer, resided in his Stratford house, and along with Shakspeare’s brother Gilbert, seems to have attended to any important business there – so that no one, either in Stratford or elsewhere, ever received a note from his hand, and no business of his in town has left a specimen of his signature. Even his Stratford domiciliation, so much more traceable than anything found in London, is not without its strangely elusive phases.

As might have been foreseen, the lesson of the special researches directed towards him personally has been amply borne out by more recent enquiries directed from the

other side – that is, into the lives and correspondence of the aristocrats themselves, particularly those who, by name, were implicated in Shakespeare publications. Up to the present none of these labours has yielded the slightest fruit. Not a single document has shown any aristocrat at all interested in the person of William Shakspeare. None wrote to him, received a letter from him, or so much as mentioned him in private correspondence. It is blank negation everywhere.

The distinctive way in which “Shakespeare” has selected the Third Earl of Southampton for immortality, in connection with his great poems – and also, it is believed, in the *Sonnets* – has naturally focused attention upon that nobleman, and what is probably an exhaustive investigation has been made into his life and correspondence. In Mrs. Stopes’ biography of him the materials collected fill two very substantial volumes; but, at the close of a long task, conscientiously carried out, the biographer has to admit failure so far as her main object was concerned. She has not discovered those traces of Shakspeare that she hoped to find: which she undoubtedly would have found had Shakspeare been the writer of all the “Shakespeare” poetry dedicated and addressed to Southampton.

A similar unrelieved failure has attended such enquiries as have been made into the affairs of the brother Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, whose interest was proclaimed in the *First Folio*. Indications of a warm practical interest in other men of letters, like Ben Jonson, exist, but not a trace of lifetime contact with Shakspeare has been found.

It cannot, of course, be claimed that all possible sources of information have now been exhausted, but the presumption against anything turning up to show us William Shakspeare in the presence of an aristocrat amounts to a practical certainty. A prolonged intimacy is, however, quite out of the question. One delusion that modern research has positively shattered for all time is that he enjoyed frequent and easy access to the nobility and the undisguised favour of royalty, whilst living, as a popular journalist has claimed, “as well known in London as the Globe Theatre.” Such a life and such publicity are however the necessary implications of the literature.

We have therefore an irreconcilable conflict between the authorship pretensions and the findings of modern research: a proof that this man was the personal centre of a cunning scheme for deceiving people respecting the source of these great works. We speak of deception, of course, without implication of censure, for one way of concealing authorship seems as legitimate as another. The method in this case has proved more effective than an avowed anonymity would have been – and, if the writer had decided definitely upon his own self-effacement, it is certainly preferable that the works should have been preserved in this way than lost to mankind forever. As, however, Shakspeare was not the author, he must have been used as a cover for someone else and until that man is discovered and acknowledged, the works are anonymous and the writer of them is still missing.

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In fixing the Shakespeare plays onto one who was not the author, steps would naturally be taken to give such semblance of genuineness as was possible to the deception, and to furnish the pretender with appropriate credentials: something that might seem to account for his producing work so distinctive in character. The danger of false credentials, however, always lies in the impossibility of making them complete. Gaps are inevitable, and when these become exposed, conviction of fraud is overwhelming.

The credentials presented in the case of Shaksper of Stratford were: (1) a leading place in the principal company of actors, called, in Elizabeth's reign, the Lord Chamberlain's players, and, in the succession of James, the King's company, and (2) the personal testimony of Ben Jonson, the most commanding figure in drama during the late Shakespearean period.

(1)

At the time of the change of dynasty [1603] advantage was taken of the rearrangement to insert the name "Shakespeare" at the head of two copies, slightly varied in the order of names, of a list of nine players submitted for official approval, one for their licenses, the other for a coronation gift of cloth – the licenses were not, however, to become immediately operative. This, although the first *bona fide* appearance of the name in such a connection, occurs at about the time when, according to Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, and other recognized authorities, Shakspere was on the point of retiring to Stratford.<sup>4</sup>

Twelve years later, Ben Jonson, in publishing a folio edition of his own plays, again placed the name prominently in two lists of members of the same company who had performed in these plays many years before. These two lists were published in the actual year of Shakspere's death, 1616.

Finally, in 1623, in the "Shakespeare" *First Folio* the name takes precedence over the other "principall actors in all these Playes."

In all these cases the name is given in the foremost positions, in specially drawn up lists of the company – never standing alone. The published lists are in two identical situations: the Jonson and Shakespeare folios respectively. They were not published until many years after the performances, and they refer to actors of bygone days, some of whom were already dead. This manner of dramatic commemoration is moreover altogether exceptional: probably unparalleled in published plays, suggesting that the sole object was to place on record the name Shakespeare as a leading actor. Here the name stands associated with famous names like Burbage and Kemp, in keeping with the extraordinary fact that nothing Shakespearean, either in the matter

of printed plays or of play-acting, was ever put forward contemporarily associated with any other but the royal players, a glory enjoyed by no other man.

If, therefore, these references are to William Shakspeare of Stratford, a very deliberate attempt was made to pass him down to posterity as one of the most eminent players of the age.

Again the question of an effective test arises. As actors were not then the class of people about whom biographies were written, the likelihood that, centuries later, tests would or could be applied to the claim, would hardly occur to anyone. Modern research into formal play-acting records and scattered references in literature, diaries and letters, has, however, revealed rich mines of information, the piecing together of which has given interesting scope to ingenuity and imagination. Consequently, figures like Burbage and Kemp – the two names with which Shakespeare's is constantly associated – have emerged as living personalities in dramatic history.

On the other hand, it is safe to say that Shakspeare, as a known actor on the Elizabethan stage, has no existence whatever. Some kind of obscure connection with the theater business was probably arranged for him, his personality being kept severely out of evidence, but Shakspeare as a popular figure on the boards, has been relegated beyond recall to the domain of pure fiction.

The municipal archives of no less than seventy towns and cities have been carefully inspected, and although much interesting information respecting the company and its members has been brought to light, never once has the name of Shakespeare been discovered.

The Lord Chamberlain's books, which would certainly have preserved some exact information respecting the company's court performances, have, mysteriously but significantly, been destroyed for just those years that cover the Shakespeare period – the most vital in its history.

The Treasurer of the Chamber's accounts, which record money payments made to the actors, are silent respecting him for the whole of the time during which plays purporting to come from his pen were being published.

Most striking of all, however, is the single occasion upon which his name appears in the earlier accounts. Three years before "Shakespeare" appears in print as a dramatist<sup>5</sup> (15 March 1595) – about the time therefore when that name was becoming known as that of an exceptionally clever poet – he is recorded to have received, along with the actors Burbage and Kemp, payment for performances by the company, "before her majestie in Christmas tyme last past" (Christmas 1594).

In so prominent and auspicious a way he enters upon the Elizabethan stage, taking at once a position such as his two talented co-payees had required years to reach. This

entry has, however, other unusual and suspicious features:

- (a) It is inserted<sup>6</sup> in a strange break in the accounts of no less than eight years; all other particulars being lost, presumably destroyed.
- (b) It was not made at the date recorded (March 1595) nor by the official then in charge, but at some time after his death, which took place in the following October, and by his widow, the Dowager Countess of Southampton, the mother of the young man to whom the Shakespeare poems had been dedicated.
- (c) It introduces a new series of items, which show that *when the company required payment for specified performances* the normal business course of having one regular payee was followed. During the entire Shakespeare period their responsible agent was John Heminges, who occasionally associated with himself, probably as a kind of surety, a second actor, but never one of these three; this is the only occasion upon which the unlikely course was adopted of having three payees named, whilst none of them afterwards appeared in this identical connection.

From every conceivable point of view this particular entry is exceptional and irregular. As evidence in support of William Shakspeare's play-acting claims it possesses about the maximum of disqualifications, and in a lawsuit would be ruled out immediately. The antedating of testimony, a perilous expedient at any time, is quite fatal when written up by an interested party after the decease of the responsible agent. In this case, however, it does serve to drive home the fact that, while William Shakspeare was most certainly not an eminent Elizabethan actor, a great deal of ingenuity and foresight was exercised to palm him off as one upon future generations. In charity we may suppose that an abortive attempt may at one time have been made to turn him out a real actor. But why the great fiction of his success?

Jonson had tried this vocation, but when he became a leading playwright he did not include his own name in lists of actors and certainly Shakespeare's literary reputation had nothing to gain from these exaggerated claims. Beneath it all evidently lay some deeper purpose: to furnish doubtless a basis for the larger but more vulnerable play-writing pretensions. By a natural recoil, however, the quashing of the unreal credentials, betraying deliberate imposture, involves the whole case in a collapse, complete and irreparable.

(2)

It remains, then, to consider the other credential, the witness of Ben Jonson.

To understand Jonson's part in the business, the leading facts of his career must first be grasped. His permanent connection with the Lord Chamberlain's company was established by the performance of his play, *Every Man in His Humour*, in the year 1598 – the identical year of the first issue of plays attributed to “Shakespeare,”

performed by the same actors – and his association with the company remained unbroken at the time of Shakspere’s death in 1616.

During the greater part of these eighteen years, that is, until Shakspere’s final withdrawal to Stratford, so uncertainly dated, the two men would be, on orthodox assumptions, in frequent cooperation; for Shakspere is never, in the plays or records, attached to any other troupe. On the other hand, if anything in the nature of an authorship imposture was being arranged, Jonson would have to be taken into confidence and his cooperation or connivance secured. There were, therefore, only two alternative lines upon which Jonson could have been working: either honest dramatic cooperation with Shakspere, or cooperation with others in a scheme for concealing the true author of the Shakespeare plays – and the question of which of these he was actually doing must be decided on the evidence of the facts.

Two features of Jonson’s personality must first be borne in mind. The first is the strongly aggressive and egoistic temperament shown throughout life. Not only did this keep him constantly in the public eye but forced into view those who had dealings with him whether as friends or foes. To know Jonson was therefore to be known in Jonson’s world. The second was his special fondness and aptitude for writing complimentary verses to the people about him, and obituary notices of them when they died. As one biographer remarks: “There are no epitaphs like Jonson’s.”<sup>7</sup>

The biography of Jonson during these eventful eighteen years is, consequently, a very real and living thing. We follow his movements, we see the people with whom he associated, we share his griefs, we listen to his quarrels, and the one to whom we are most indebted for information is Jonson himself. As another biographer puts it: we are “not driven with the Shakespearians to conjectural reconstruction from the shards of records and anecdote. Even his personality stands forth fresh and convincing beside the blurred portrait of . . . Shakespeare . . . .”

We venture to say that we have here presented one of the most glaring paradoxes in literary history. Jonson himself “stands forth fresh and convincing” on a living background of literary personalities called forth by his own forceful presence; on the other hand, the one with whom he is presumed to have been on intimate terms and in most prolonged and active intercourse never appears by his side or even in the surrounding crowd. Though liberal in the use of his pen and voluble in speech, no single recorded word of Jonson’s so much as recognized the existence of his great colleague whilst they were presumably working together; and at no time did letters pass between them.

Most extraordinary of all is Ben’s concurrence in the universal silence with which the entire literary public passed over Shakspere’s death in 1616. It was in this year that Jonson brought out that folio edition of his own plays in which the name Shakespeare is inserted in the actors’ lists. Yet, not a word of Jonson’s suggested that the



great actor-playwright and poet had just passed away: no epitaph, elegy, or complimentary verse came from the most profuse expert of the times in such matters. The whole world was allowed to remain ignorant of Shakspeare's death, and a full seven years passed before the silence was broken by the first literary tributes. These were in the Shakespeare *Folio* of 1623.

Between the publication of the Jonson and Shakespeare folios, however, another event, with a vital bearing upon these matters, took place.

In 1619 Jonson stayed for some time with the Scottish poet and scholar, William Drummond of Hawthornden. During the visit he talked much of himself and of leading personalities in literary and public life. By a strange chance his host was moved to keep a full account of the great man's talk, and thus the substance of it has been preserved, probably for all time. Most importantly of all, Ben gave a lengthy and detailed account of his own career, laying bare with extraordinary freedom even the darker patches of his private life, and introducing personal reminiscences of men like Francis Bacon, Inigo Jones, Sir Walter Raleigh, [John] Marston and [William] Camden.<sup>8</sup> Never once, however, in giving these autobiographical confidences did he so much as refer to Shakespeare the dramatist or Shakspeare of Stratford: making no allusion therefore to the death three years before.

"Shakespeare" literature had already been before the world for twenty-six years (1593-1619) and with a man of Drummond's literary tastes some discussion of it was inevitable, particularly as the rest of their talk turned mainly upon books and authors. Even here Jonson seems to have been curt if not deliberately evasive. "Shakespeare wanted art" was his first observation and Shakespeare (in *The Winter's Tale*) has a shipwreck in Bohemia "where there is no sea nearby 100 miles." These two summary and not too friendly criticisms of the work were all that was elicited in a confidential chat. Of other writers Jonson narrated incidents and current gossip, and furnished a picture, coloured vividly by self-importance, of the literary life of his day.

The outstanding fact in these conversations, however, is that he told a circumstantial story of his own career without introducing any kind of reference to Shakespeare, living or dead.

We now come to the point at which Jonson enters as chief witness for William Shakspeare. During all the years that the latter had resided at Stratford, and the seven years that had elapsed since his death, he had never been associated there with playwriting. Judged by its variant spellings, his name seems to have been pronounced locally: Shaxper or Shagsper, while the name William Shakespeare was itself not so uncommon then as it now is. The first indications of a Stratford connection were given publicly in the *First Folio* of 1623, and the slight references there made were not calculated to arouse much local interest. That had to wait for another half century.

Our immediate concern, however, is with Jonson as chief usher to the *Folio*. We shall not discuss the possible *doubles ententes* with which, in this capacity, he may have chosen his words, but shall accept what he says at full face value as a tribute intended for the reputed author. His exact words are: “To the memory of my beloved the Author.”

Certainly no more unqualified profession of affectionate regard can be found in all that poetry of friendship wherein his best work lies, yet the verses which follow his address are noticeably artificial and quite lacking in true personal ring. Indeed, he forgets to even simulate the regret and glow of emotion announced at the start. All the inspiration which personal attachments gave to his pen at other times, and does so much to redeem his writings from commonplace, deserts him at this critical moment. Albeit, we accept his first avowal as it stands, and add to it a later statement that he “loved the man and do honor his memory” – a simple paraphrase of the earlier phrase. Sincere or otherwise, the obvious intention was to proclaim an ardent friendship by way of personal testimony to the announced author.

The words quoted, with all that they imply of bygone comradeship, must first be contrasted with the very striking fact that, four years before this, he related to Drummond at considerable length, the story of his own literary career without so much as mentioning Shakespeare (or Shakspeare). Read, moreover, as genuine tributes to Shakspeare of Stratford, it is certain that, both men being such eminent writers, the retirement to Stratford would involve no real breach, and Jonson could not remain for any length of time in ignorance of his “beloved’s” death.

Is it in any way possible, then, to reconcile so warm and lasting a friendship with the previous twenty-five years’ silence (1598-1623) of so self-assertive a talker and writer as Jonson – with the obituary neglect of so remarkable a poet of epitaph and personal epigram – or with the complete absence of letters from so ready and graceful an epistolist?

Faced with the two alternatives of whether Jonson actually cooperated for many years with Shakspeare in the activities of the royal companies of actors, or, at a later time, cooperated with others in carrying out a scheme of concealed authorship, there can be no doubt, on a review of the facts, as to where the choice must lie. Quite obviously it was all a made-up business and Jonson did what was expected of him.

Behind him, as is well known, there were always powerful social influences that he was compelled to respect. His dramatic compositions, as he admits, had brought him little profit. He had been supported for years by Lord Albany. He had received generous gifts from the Earl of Pembroke and his recent appointment as poet-laureate had brought him welcome material relief. Unflinchingly truculent with literary antagonists, he was ever complacent if not servile towards those who were socially eminent or politically powerful. The capacity for setting his sails to prevailing winds

was a valuable asset to a man forced to live by his wits, and made him as fit a tool as could have been found for those entrusted with completing the scheme of Shakespeare publication begun thirty years before by the poet himself.

We need not concern ourselves with Jonson's later references to "Shakespeare." The questions of how much of these applied merely to the writings, how much was intended for Shakspeare, and how much for some unknown writer, may fittingly be left to literary disputants. But the more that is made of them, as references to Shakspeare of Stratford, the more do they bring into relief the earlier Jonsonian silences, and confirm our conclusions.

The only hypothesis, it seems, that will fit all the facts is that, in deference to the behests of people whose wishes were to him commands, he lent his name to a great literary fiction, and had to adjust all his subsequent utterances to the secret. The 1623 *Folio* gave to the Shakespeare literature such importance that Jonson, as the great doyen and dictator of letters, could not preserve silence without exciting suspicion, and importunate inquiries from a new generation of playwrights and litterateurs must often have proved embarrassing.

With our present knowledge, we are able to detect the flaws in the scheme, but its success during more than two centuries shows that Jonson did not play his part amiss. He might, no doubt, have done better had the undertaking matured earlier or if he had suspected that Drummond was making a record of his talk, and could have foreseen that this would be called in as evidence three centuries later. Such, however, are the fatal gaps that invariably turn up in concocted evidence and complete the ruin of failing causes.

All the departments and aspects of truth must of necessity harmonize, and it is therefore not surprising to find that, closely examined, the play-acting credentials and the testimony of Ben Jonson are marked by the same self-contradictory features shown by the aristocratic implications. Into any other of the numerous departments of the case against Shakspeare we cannot now go – much as we should have liked specially to show how the *Sonnets*<sup>9</sup> contain direct confirmation of our central contention. The point is that, viewed under any aspect, the same disturbing inconsistencies are revealed; the only solution of which is that William Shakspeare of Stratford did not write the Shakespeare plays.

The story, then, which emerges from the facts considered, is that there lived in the reign of Queen Elizabeth a highly cultured dramatist in close and prolonged intercourse with the nobility round the throne, who wrote primarily for the entertainment of the court, and had considerable influence with those who controlled its amusements. Having decided upon giving some of this work to the world in permanent literary form, he resolved at the same time, and, for reasons of his own, to suppress his own name. To hide his identity more effectually he arranged to have his work

eventually attributed to another man, William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon, whose name lent itself to a punning corruption as “Shakespeare” – which, sometimes with the hyphen, and sometimes without, he used as his *nom-de-plume*.

In furtherance of the plan there was given to this Stratford person a less incongruous social position and some appropriate but fictitious credentials. Until, however, the worst dangers of publicity were past, the man himself was kept away from the kind of people who might have detected the imposition: everything that might have indicated who or where he was, being carefully avoided until seven years after his death.

Whatever others may have known or suspected of the true state of affairs, loyalty or indifference secured their silence. By the time that public attention was turned towards Stratford all first-hand knowledge had been lost of the elusive gentleman with a coat-of-arms who had been domiciled at New Place, but whose lawyer, the Town Clerk, had lived in his house and conducted his business.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the authorship of the plays – a doubtful honor in those days to people in certain walks of life – was fastened upon a man who had not written them, but to whom the attribution was, even then, a distinct gain. With the passing of time came a fuller recognition of their value, winning for the greatest of these dramas a place in the world’s esteem such as the poet himself could never have anticipated, and attaching to the authorship a distinction of which a person of any rank would certainly be proud. Meantime, for three centuries, the writer himself remained hidden, and a quite insignificant man received the world’s adulation.

Such is the first chapter of a story, as strange as fiction, which will one day doubtless find a permanent place amongst the more prosaic annals of literature. Immediately, however, a sense of the full significance of one unparalleled fact is needed – that we possess a set of invaluable dramas, a literature in itself, quite divorced from its producer: plays without their author.

Somewhere, therefore, in that faraway time, which modern research is bringing back to life, there lived and labored strenuously, if somewhat secretly, in the purview of Queen Elizabeth’s court, one of the greatest dramatic geniuses known amongst men, divorced for centuries afterwards from his writings: an author without his plays.

The research workers in those fields can therefore set themselves no more honorable task than to draw him from his obscurity and reunite him with his creations in the mind and affections of mankind.

## Notes

1. The Second World War. [JW].
2. We so describe the modern historical research movement, not because it either began or ended in the Nineteenth Century, but because its systematic development was the work of that period.
3. Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, "Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Apr., 1914), pp. 123-125.
4. Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke stated their belief that Shakspeare left London in 1604 in their book *The Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866), reprinted in 1869 by Bickers and Son in London. Looney had cited the Clarkes' belief in "*Shakespeare*" *Identified* (p. 424): "Not only does the time of the death of De Vere mark an arrest in the publication of 'Shakespeare's' works, it also marks, according to orthodox authorities, some kind of a crisis in the affairs of William Shakespeare. Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, in the *Life of Shakspeare* published along with their edition of the plays, date his retirement to Stratford in the year 1604 precisely. After pointing out that in 1605 he is described as 'William Shakspeare, Gentleman, of Stratford-on-Avon,' they continued: 'Several things conduced to make him resolve upon ceasing to be an actor, and 1604 has generally been considered the date when he did so.'" Looney also noted that "Several other writers, less well known, repeat this date; and works of reference, written for the most part some years ago, place his retirement in the same year: 'There is no doubt he never meant to return to London, except for business visits after 1604' (*National Encyclopedia*)." [JW]
5. The first appearance of the name "Shakespeare" in a published play was the quarto publication of *Love's Labour's Lost* quarto of the Fall of 1598. [JW]
6. Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage*, London: Alexander Moring, Ltd., 1913.
7. "There are no such epitaphs as Ben Jonson's" is from "Introduction," p. 24, to *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, edited by Felix E. Schelling. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Inc., 1910.
8. See Ben Jonson's *Conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden*, edited with introduction and notes by R. F. Patterson, London: Blackie and Son, Ltd. 1923 (pp. 22-34). [JW]
9. Some striking forecasts of more recent studies, marked by keen sympathetic

insight, are given in the last [of] Judge Jesse Johnson's "Testimony of the Sonnets" (N. Y. 1899). [Jesse Johnson, *Testimony of the Sonnets as to the Authorship of the Shakespearean Plays and Poems*, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899. [JW]

10. Thomas Greene was Town Clerk in Stratford-upon-Avon from 1603 to 1617. References to him can be found in many biographies of William Shakspere. See, for instance, *A Life of William Shakespeare* by Sir Sidney Lee, London: Macmillan Company, 1916, p. 474. Readers should be wary of assuming too close an intimacy between Greene and Shakspere merely because he resided in New Place at one time, just as they should be wary of assuming that Shakspere was a man of great wealth merely because he owned "the largest house in Stratford." New House could easily have been a boarding house – a business – not merely a personal residence. [JW]

