

The Shakespeare Authorship Debate Continued: Uncertainties and Mysteries

by Luke Prodromou

This essay is a response to the fascinating collection of articles on the Shakespeare Authorship Question that appeared in the Winter 2019 issue of the journal *Critical Stages* (critical-stages.org/18/). Read together, those articles not only confirm that there really is a case for reasonable doubt about the Stratford man as the author of the works; they also suggest that pursuing this question can actually be an effective critical tool for a better understanding of those works.

As a graduate of the Shakespeare Institute, Birmingham, I have often wondered, from a scholarly point of view, why the eddies under Clopton Bridge in Stratford have seemed to arouse more curiosity as evidence linking the man from Stratford to the plays and poems of “Shakespeare” than do the growing number of details of a historical or cultural nature, which seem to me more enlightening. Scrutinizing Shakespearean texts for evidence of the author’s possible links to glove-making has consumed more scholarly energy than the abundant indications that our elusive author seems to have actually known Italy and Italian culture at first-hand and Elizabethan court life with an insider’s confidence.

Even Stratfordian scholars have noticed that “the extent and loudness of the documentary silence are startling” (Worden, 2006: 24). Indeed, the challenge of teasing out an explanation for this startling silence has been left to non-Stratfordians like Diana Price (see her volume, excerpted in *CS* 18,

Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography, 2012). This then is my attempt to make a modest contribution to an understanding of the significance of the silence to Shakespeare's unique status as our greatest and yet most elusive writer.

Let me begin by saying a few words about my own discovery of Shakespeare and, subsequently, my own contacts with the authorship controversy. I am a Greek Cypriot by birth, but I attended primary and secondary school in Great Britain, where I was introduced to the plays of Shakespeare by reading *Julius Caesar* at the age of 15. For me, it was an epiphany.

Living in Birmingham at that point, I soon became a regular pilgrim to Stratford, just down the road. I simply wanted to find more of this magic potion. I looked for the magic there and on the Stratford stage, where I would “with a greedy ear devour up the discourse” of the comedies, histories and tragedies. I looked for it in the streets of Stratford itself, and especially along Henley Street and under Clopton Bridge. I still remember the thrill of imagining that the eddies of the river Avon, seen from the bridge, were the same eddies that the young Shakespeare of Stratford gazed at, when he wasn't busy helping his dad in the family glove-making business or studying Ovid for school. Shakespeare himself was my Ovid, transforming life into something rich and strange.



Stratford staging of John Shakespeare's workshop as a glove maker, by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

I also looked for Shakespeare's magic in countless biographies of the poor lad who left Stratford—pursued apparently by accusations of deer-poaching—to

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make his fortune in London, holding horses outside the theatres until his big break and then taking the London stage by storm with his Marlovian *Henry VI* plays—all this to the chagrin of rival playwrights, university graduates all, envious of this mere actor who could write better than they could.

Soon, the biographies told me, he was writing courtly comedies for exclusive coterie audiences, as well as for the public stage. When the plague struck in the 1590s, he produced brilliant lyric poetry, outdoing even his courtly predecessors such as Sir Philip Sidney. The evidence showed me that he dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to his theatre-loving patron, the Earl of Southampton, who must have paid him significant sums, and he even wrote a sonnet sequence inspired, most probably, by the same young and beautiful patron.

It all ends, of course with William's death, an event that, strangely, went unremarked, and with his published will and testament, which left absolutely no trace of the great writer's skill and with no evidence of any kind, directly or indirectly, that he had ever owned or even read a book or written as much as a nursery rhyme for his (illiterate) daughters.

Yet despite this last disappointment, I couldn't stop looking for him. I continued my personal pilgrimage by working on a Master of Arts in Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Institute in Birmingham under the tutorial guidance of Professor Stanley Wells and numerous other distinguished Shakespeare scholars. Bliss it was to be at such a prestigious institute, one devoted to the exclusive study of every aspect of the great man's work—but to be doing it there in Warwickshire, less than an hour from the Birthplace, well, that was very heaven.

An Inadequate Biography

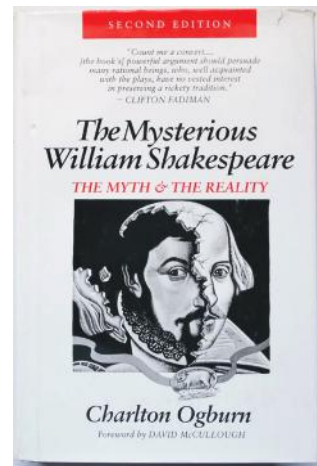
A few years later, with my MA thesis on *Timon of Athens* (by Shakespeare and Middleton!) in hand, I went out into the world with a will to teach the works and life of Shakespeare to future generations. As a lecturer for the British Council and at the University of Thessaloniki in Greece, I taught the Shakespearean rags-to-riches narrative enthusiastically along with the rest of the documentary paraphernalia I had inherited about the man from Stratford.

I must admit that the biographies were particularly boring for my students. They found little of interest in the life and neither did I. Biographies of Shakespeare were all, without exception, potted histories of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages and there was little, if any, light thrown on the link between the man and his work. The specific life-story part was more or less left out, as there wasn't really anything substantial to report or, as in many cases, it was simply made up or imagined—as Stephen Greenblatt admitted when

he wrote his own biography of Shakespeare called *Will in the World* in 2004. The fact is, the creative imagination of a biographer can be much more interesting than the humdrum church records of birth, marriage and death of an Elizabethan author.

Without conviction, I dutifully regurgitated the scraps from such biographies to my students and moved on, with much relief, to the excitement of reading, analyzing and performing the plays. After all, the play's the thing, just as the poem is the thing. Not the life of the writer, be he Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot.

I first started what felt like sacrilegious doubting when I stumbled on Charlton Ogburn's 1984 study, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, in a bookshop while looking for yet another Stratfordian biography to bore myself with. Ogburn's book reignited a curiosity in me for all things Shakespeare. I started to read and even re-read Shakespeariana of all kinds, from both sides of the discussion. Thus, my fascination with the special section of *CS* 18 on the authorship controversy.



So, the real question for me is: what is lost when we avoid and even demonize research on any topic, especially one as significant as the Shakespeare authorship? Much important research has already been done by a surprising number of fine scholars—including historians and lawyers, professions interested in actually turning up facts—which has thrown light on the gaps and contradictions in the many so-called biographies. Yet this scholarly research is considered somehow taboo by academia. Perhaps we prefer to preserve our scholarly innocence or even our vested professional interests, but at the same time, we must acknowledge that we are failing to follow trails that may be relevant to the origin and meaning of the works we love.

Moreover, traditional Shakespeare scholars, in rejecting even a possible case for reasonable doubt, often engage in extremely tortuous arguments, evasions and distortions to keep a wall of such taboos in place, thus betraying their supposed professional *raison d'être*: scholarly impartiality and the pursuit of truth.

Let me offer a few examples of data that has made me personally think skeptically about the official story, and then try and provide an explanation as to the apparent lack of curiosity about these facts shown by academia. As someone who graduated from the Shakespeare Institute—surely the heart of the Stratfordian academic establishment—I am puzzled by the sheer lack of curiosity on the part of mainstream Shakespeare scholars in the fascinating details thrown up, often serendipitously, by the skeptics.

For example, the man from Stratford never seems to be where we would expect him to be in terms of the historical and cultural implications of the plays and poems; on the other hand, we do see him turning up in places we would not expect to find him were he the man behind these texts. Any evidence we have for the actual existence of the Stratford man as Writer (as opposed to him as Man-of-the-Theatre) always seems to be hedged with both doubts and ambiguities. He is both silent and invisible.

Thus, if it is true, as most Stratfordians say, that the Lord Chamberlain's Men were investigated for performing *Richard II* just before the Earl of Essex's botched *coup* against Queen Elizabeth in 1601, where was Shakespeare the author during these investigations? (See Worden, 2006 for a dissenting voice on whether Shakespeare's play is, in fact, the one referred to in the documentary records.)

And if, as Stanley Wells—the dean of Stratfordian scholars—suggests, Shakespeare is “our first great literary commuter” (Wells 37), what is he doing commuting back and forth to Stratford, managing his property, grain and real estate businesses, when he is supposed to be in London working for a theatre company by writing a very large number of plays in a very short time?

If we take a date in Shakespeare's career at random—say 1596—we find Shakespeare, literally, all over the place. His son Hamnet dies and is buried in Stratford in August; in London, he moves from Bishopsgate to Southwark, and is pursued for 5 shillings in taxes; a writ is issued in Southwark for William and three others to keep the peace; while in Stratford he is making investments and shopping around to buy a new house. At this same time, he is completing the *Sonnets* and is writing several plays (depending on which of the many conflicting chronologies we take, they would include *King John*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV part 1*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*).

He is also in London pursuing a gentleman's coat of arms at this time which, as Duncan-Jones observes: “is a strange sequence of events...just after the death of the only child who could carry his name” (Duncan-Jones, 2001:91). Shakespeare's busy life in both London and Stratford has always impressed me. But where did he find the *time*?

Another question. In Quarto 1 of *Hamlet* (Q1), Polonius is named “Corambis,” which echoes the family motto of the most powerful man in England: Lord Burghley, William Cecil, the Prime Minister of the day. In other intriguing respects, too, Burghley seems to be the inspiration behind the character of the “rash, intruding fool” who gets stabbed behind the arras. But if this were the case, one would not expect the working-class actor-writer William of Stratford to have dared lampoon Lord Burghley in this way—and to get away with it! So what's going on here? What's “Corambis” doing in Q1?

Question three. One would certainly have expected the writer Shakespeare to be present at his own death in 1616! Yet the passing of the most prolific writer of the age goes by unnoticed: nobody said anything in writing to mark his death. We would expect to find a trace at least, if not clear footprints, of this giant of the English literary Renaissance, in the dead “Shakespeare’s” last will and testament. But in that most personal of documents, he left “not a rack behind.”

What we find in Duncan Jones’s brilliant *Ungentle Shakespeare* is a much different character than what we would expect—a Shakespeare immersed in the Elizabethan/Jacobean underworld and a tight-fisted usurer in partnership with the woman-beater and pimp, George Wilkins. Surely this is not the same man who created Rosalind and Beatrice, the same man who wrote with Ovid, Plutarch, Montaigne and Castiglione on his desk. Where was that Shakespeare?

I really wonder why there aren’t more such questions being asked by University English Departments. Don’t they want to know? And are they not curious about *how* we know what we know? Yes, Stratfordians *have* demonstrated some interest in the authorship question but only to try and refute it or attack it (see Edmondson and Wells, 2013). In a nutshell, they explain the so-called “incongruities” in the official narrative by applying two broad strategies: first, they demonstrate that Shakespeare’s education in the Stratford grammar-school which they assume he attended, without evidence, was perfectly adequate to the task of producing the works we know; second, they attribute Shakespeare’s remarkable achievements simply to “genius.”

Some of their arguments are certainly substantial and I do take many of them seriously, but others are little more than vague and circumstantial. The fact is, Doubters have tried to engage with them many times, in numerous publications (samples are available in *Critical Stages* 16). But these arguments are rarely answered directly and even more rarely with actual evidence.

An Epistemological Puzzle

Let me put some flesh on this epistemological puzzle by referring specifically to one of the articles in *Critical Stages*, the only one in French, “Pourquoi John Florio, alias Shakespeare,” written by the Secretary-General of the International Association of Theatre Critics, Michel Vaïs. In that article, we learn that Florio, the great Elizabethan scholar, teacher and lexicographer, left in his will a considerable treasure of books to William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, one of the dedicatees and sponsors (the other was his brother) of the First Folio (“on apprendà qui il lègue ce trésor: à William Herbert, troisième comte de Pembroke, dédicataire et commanditaire du *First Folio*”).

Certainly, William Herbert is himself well-known and is often seen as a serious candidate for being the so-called Fair Youth of the *Sonnets*: W.H. He was

also the son of Mary Sidney (later the Countess of Pembroke) who was herself the sister of Sir Philip Sidney. Florio's gift of books to Herbert confirms his proximity to the Sidney/Pembroke circle, either as a tutor or as one who sought patronage from the Sidney family by dedicating many of his works to members of the group.

Vaïs tells us further that Lamberto Tassinari, an Italian-Canadian scholar, is now arguing that Florio himself was the man behind the works of Shakespeare. Leaving aside for the moment the whole idea of Florio-as-Shakespeare, let's note in this the appearance of the Sidney circle in the Shakespeare authorship narrative and continue with our puzzle, hoping, as Polonius puts it, by indirections to find directions out.

In a recent interpretation of *Love's Labour's Lost*, a play I have always felt was somehow at the heart of the Shakespeare authorship mystery, H.R. Woudhuysen, (editor of the Arden Shakespeare, 1998) explores the fascinating links between this comedy and the work of Sir Philip Sidney. He refers to Sidney as the "presiding spirit" behind the play and says that it seems to be written "as if Shakespeare were replying to Sidney....and as Coleridge observed ... imitating Sidney's style" (Woudhuysen, 1998:6).

Indeed, a work by Sidney that Woudhuysen feels Shakespeare drew on in writing *Love's Labours Lost*, called *The Lady of May*, was actually unpublished at the time Shakespeare would have needed to consult it and therefore, "Shakespeare could only have read Sidney's text in manuscript." This occurrence of sources or written influences on Shakespeare, which only those who had access to the original manuscripts could have known about, is actually a motif running through the whole Shakespeare puzzle. Shakespeare, in *Love's Labours Lost*, says Woudhuysen, seems to be showing off his skill in turning into drama "the stuff out of which Sidney's life and art were made."

But why would the Stratford man, the hard-nosed businessman and practical man of theatre, choose to write about the life and culture of Sidney and his circle, which would be obscure to anybody but members of that circle? And where would he get such material from (not to mention his ability to obtain detailed information on the Elizabethan and French courts that also appears in *Love's Labours Lost*)? Mainstream criticism says the play is saturated with such stuff. Indeed, where did William of Stratford get it?

Because the official Stratfordian narrative doesn't lend itself to any easy explanation, traditionalists simply ascribe it to the vagaries of a common literary background that Shakespeare must have shared with his fellow writers. Then they move on to trails that can more easily be linked with their man: those eddies under Clopton bridge, the birth and death of a son named Hamnet, the significance of Shakespeare's second-best bed mentioned in the will, and so on. So Woudhuysen, aware of the incongruity, then reminds

us that “Shakespeare did not need to be part of [the Sidney circle] to write about its life” (Woudhuysden, 1998:6).

Indeed reader, “discern’st thou aught in that”? We may discern at least the legitimacy of asking the kind of questions raised by non-Stratfordians regarding the implausibility of some of the traditional biographers.

The next piece in my own authorship puzzle has to do with the work of an unorthodox Stratfordian named Penny McCarthy. In her fascinating *Pseudonymous Shakespeare*, she does something few Stratfordian analysts have ever done—she puts forward, in an empirically-driven manner, an explanation for where William of Stratford might have gotten his inside knowledge of the court, and a plausible, if not wholly convincing, rationale for why Shakespeare might have chosen subject matter inspired by the Sidney circle and written it in a style which may be a response to Sidney’s work.

McCarthy’s rich and complex data can’t easily be bound in a nutshell, but the core of her book provides intriguing “evidence” for the Stratford man’s back-story, his juvenilia and “lost years.” In an ingenious reading of various pseudonymous writings, McCarthy believes she has located the young poet in the Sidney circle where, she hypothesizes, he was educated not only as a poet but in the Italian language and the life of the court. McCarthy sensibly sees the culture of the Elizabethan court not only in the milieu of the monarch in London but in the houses of great lords such as Sidney to whose faction, she argues, young Shakespeare might have belonged (McCarthy, 2006: 22-23).

If McCarthy’s hypothesis could be proven correct, it would go a long way toward explaining the gaps and inconsistencies in the work of traditional Shakespeare biography and would provide support for Walt Whitman’s intuition that the plays are shaped by the world view not of a working man from Stratford but by “the medieval aristocracy” and the many “wolfish earls” jockeying for power throughout Elizabeth’s reign.

In this spirit of untrammelled and serendipitous searching for meaning, let me add one more piece to my Shakespearean puzzle, this time from the anti-Stratfordian side of the wall. This item is more outlandish than the rest but has fascinating points in common with the previous pieces. Could a woman have written Shakespeare?

The scholar Robin Williams in her study, *Sweet Swan of Avon*, wrote one of the most eccentric books in the whole authorship saga. In her 300-page analysis, she argues that the works of “Shakespeare” were actually written by a woman. This is the kind of claim that the orthodox find easy to dismiss and ridicule. Williams’s claim, however, may look less ridiculous when that “woman-as-Shakespeare” turns out to be the aforementioned Mary Sidney Herbert,

Countess of Pembroke. The Sidneys and the Herberts do indeed seem to be constantly appearing in the Shakespeare story, whether in employing John Florio, or in the writing of *Love's Labour's Lost* and the *Sonnets* or with the publication of the First Folio.



In traditional biographies, Mary Sidney always has a walk-on part. She is also mentioned as the author of a letter in which she refers to meeting “the man Shakespeare.” If this letter ever existed, then it is one of the few items of written evidence from contemporary sources that indicates that anyone had ever met the writer or actor in the flesh. In this (sadly, lost) letter, Mary is said to have written to her son (Philip Herbert, later Earl of Montgomery and dedicatee of the First Folio) telling him that “the man Shakespeare” was visiting the Pembroke family at their country house in Wilton on the occasion of a performance of *As You Like It* to entertain King James.

Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke; (1561–1621) by Nicholas Hilliard.

The Need for Cultural Context

My point here is not to prove or disprove the existence of the letter or even to argue the merits of Mary Sidney as the author of Shakespeare’s plays and poems. It is to underline the serendipitous light that can be cast not only on the life of our elusive author, but on the rich cultural context which seems to have shaped the works. In addition, Mary Sidney, like several alternative candidates for the authorship, always seems to be where you would expect Shakespeare to be, whereas William of Stratford is always, like Eliot’s Macavity the cat, disappearing from the scene of the crime, leaving no trace behind.

Mary Sidney, though, like some of the other alternative candidates for the authorship, is often, directly or indirectly, at the scene of the plays’ and poems’ matrix of references: reading the right books, knowing the right people, involved in the events that shape the texts. So many of Shakespeare’s sources are on her bookshelf or that of her brother Sir Philip, texts which, we are often told, “Shakespeare” would have had to have read in manuscript. Indeed, many were dedicated to her or her brother (Williams, 2006: 97-113). Her friends, relatives and protégés actually sound like a roll-call of the characters who appear in conventional Stratfordian biographies: Philip Sidney himself, William Herbert and his brother Philip, Essex and Leicester, John Davis of Hereford, Samuel Daniel, Arthur Golding, John Dee...the list goes on.

Let me round off my visit to the Sidneys at their Wilton home with a final example of this pattern of coincidences from Williams' *Sweet Swan of Avon*. Here are Hamlet's memories of Yorick, the court jester:

I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? (*Hamlet*, V.i)

If Yorick, as many Stratfordians suggest, was inspired by the real-life Richard Tarlton, clown of the Queen's Men and servant of the Earl of Leicester (Mary Herbert's uncle), then we find this amazing lady once again, in the right place at the right time, in the great houses of the aristocracy, watching plays or roaring with laughter as the court jester worked his magic.

What all this means is not that I am convinced that Mary Sidney wrote all or indeed any part of Shakespeare's work; I am an agnostic in these matters. I do, however, believe, that all the writings on the authorship question, especially those that try to base their hypothesis on data from the historical and cultural record of the times, throw light, often inadvertently, on the circumstances which seem, by general consensus, to have shaped the works.

That is, while I am not convinced we have yet really found the true author of Shakespeare's plays, I do find the milieu in which these alternative candidates lived often contains uncanny echoes of the plays and poems which need to be explored further by scholars of the period.

What these many pieces of the puzzle I have proposed here have in common is certainly the shaping influence of an aristocratic coterie on the works of the great author.

This is not a new viewpoint: the anti-Stratfordian argument has, since Thomas Looney's *Shakespeare Identified*, probably even earlier with the Baconian tradition, located the solution to the mystery of the authorship in the Elizabethan court. In this respect, the anti-Stratfordians, the doubters, have provided a service to all lovers of Shakespeare's works, irrespective of which side of the fence they sit. McCarthy, writing from a mainstream scholarly position, has the generosity to acknowledge that the authorship skeptics are certainly asking some of the right questions. As she put it:

I think their doubts about the consensus story—doubts about Shakespeare's education, knowledge of things Italian and sympathy with the aristocratic viewpoint—were justified (McCarthy, 2006:226).

This open-mindedness seems to me to be very much in the spirit of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition's online Declaration of Reasonable Doubt that many thousands have already signed. It is arguably the best way forward for confirming or contradicting the traditional attribution of authorship. Beyond the debate surrounding the identity of the author, which many people, scholarly and otherwise, say doesn't really matter—"the play's the thing"—I feel the exploration of the puzzle, however "flat-earthish" it might seem at times—helps us to throw light on the actual contexts in which the plays were written and thus, potentially, can increase our knowledge of the plays themselves and the historical, personal and cultural matrix in which they were written.

Scholarly Engagement

I would like here to go on to explore something more arcane—what I will call the scholarly deficit in this area—that strange lack of curiosity in academic circles about the evident mismatch between the man from Stratford and the works themselves. I believe it is this lack of scholarly engagement with our greatest literary puzzle which most directly leads to a tendency to distort the little data we have about the author.

I am sure that many scholars of the period are familiar with Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), a modest work which commands almost universal agreement now that William of Stratford (and not say, the actors Richard Burbage or Edward Alleyn) was in fact the "upstart crow" accused of plagiarism, theft and taking advantage of playwrights through moneylending practices. But the follow-up text by one Henry Chettle, *Kind-Hearts Dream* (1592), has provoked contradictory reactions from establishment and independent scholars alike.

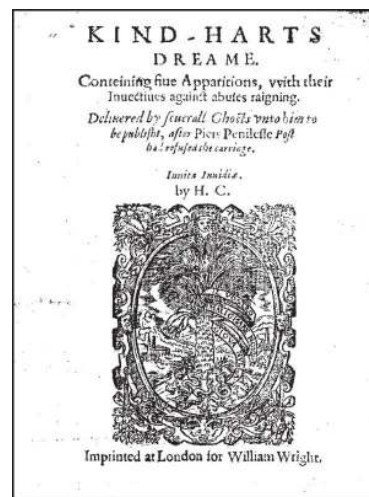
The question here is did Chettle apologize to Shakespeare following Greene's attack on him? The answer to this has far-reaching implications for the whole authorship question and for academia's stance on this issue. Greene's initial accusations show a Shakespeare perfectly consistent with Duncan-Jones's "ungentle" portrait: a plagiarist and usurer; a snapper-up, for paltry sums, of other people's plays, which he would revise and then appropriate for himself. Apparently, he was the person who would submit these texts—the property of the Lord Chamberlain's Men—to the Stationer's Register.

This would certainly explain why so many plays, Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean, appeared at the time with his name on the cover. It is a picture of the Stratford man as theatre manager and playbroker and it is a portrait clearly painted by scholar Diana Price in *Critical Stages* 18.

In looking at Greene's slanderous accusations and Chettle's so-called apology, glaring inconsistencies begin to appear. In order for readers to judge this controversy for themselves, we need to recall that Greene warns three playwrights about the actor-writer-usurer-playbroker—in a word, this con-man—who is referred to as “the upstart crow...beautified with our feathers.” Greene tells these three fellow playwrights to avoid this “Shake-scene” like the plague. He says specifically:

there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a Players hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Iohannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country. O that I might entreat your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions. I know the best husband of you all will never prove an Usurer, and the kindest of them all will never seek you a kind nurse: yet whilst you may, seek you better Masters; for it is pity men of such rare wits, should be subject to the pleasure of such rude grooms.

There is near-universal consensus that in this attack, Greene made the first written reference to William of Stratford, now apparently a London man of the theatre. The problem is with the conventional Stratfordian claim that, in the same year, 1592, Henry Chettle, who was involved in some way in the publication of Greene's pamphlet—perhaps even as its author—takes the opportunity in his *Kind Heart's Dream* to apologize to Shakespeare and to the Stratford man's supporters. These latter include a number of important people such as aristocrats and members of the Privy Council. In this debate is actually born the “tradition” that Shakespeare was a polite, gentle man of great literary talent, with friends in high places who was simply being maligned by jealous rivals, the University-educated playwrights like Greene himself and wits such as Nashe, Marlowe and Peele (often identified as the three playwrights Greene was writing to).



Title page of Kind Hearts Dream by Henry Chettle.

But, contrary to orthodox scholarship, even a cursory reading of the original makes it clear that Chettle was not apologizing to Shakespeare at all but to two of the three playwrights to whom Greene's pamphlet was addressed.

Even Jonathan Bate, another leading Stratfordian scholar, identifies the traditional misreading of the text:

Chettle says that those who have taken offence are one or two of the playwrights to whom Greene's remarks were addressed and Shakespeare was not one of those (Bate: 2008).

Bate argues the apology was to Peele, not to Shakespeare. To confirm what Bate says, I quote some of Chettle's text:

About three months since died M. Robert Greene, leaving many papers in sundry booksellers' hands, among other *his Groatworth of Wit*, in which a letter written to divers play-makers is offensively by one or two of them taken, and because on the dead they cannot be avenged, they willfully forge in their conceits a living author....With neither of them that take offence was I acquainted, and with one of them I care not if I never be. The other, whom at that time I did not so much spare as since I wish I had, for that, as I have moderated the heat of living writers and might have used my own discretion (especially in such a case, the author being dead), that I did not. I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanor no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes. Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing that approves his art.

I assume the reader has not found any reference to the upstart crow and can only see references to the playwrights addressed by Greene. Yet from the beginning of the Shakespeare biographical industry to the present day, biographers continue to misrepresent what Chettle says to perpetuate the myth that Shakespeare was not only an outstanding writer but one who had a reputation for being civil, and cultivated, of impeccable credentials, whom influential aristocratic and government figures rushed to defend when he was accused (perhaps unfairly) of being a con-man.

An early believer in the non-existent apology was the prolific Shakespeare scholar, F.E. Halliday:

There had been numerous appreciative references to "friendly Shakespeare" and his work since the time of Henry Chettle's apology for Greene's attack at the beginning of his career (Halliday, 1957: 1).

From a book putting forward the case for Shakespeare and aiming to "end the authorship question":

Chettle wrote an apology...the two playwrights likely to take offense would have been Marlowe and Shakespeare—Chettle has had a

courteous conversation with the second (Shakespeare)...the phrase “quality he professes” which was often attached to actors identifies the polite second actor as Shakespeare...perhaps Shakespeare was nettled by the charge of usury which is why Chettle certifies his uprightness of dealing and his honesty... (McCrea 2005: 37-38).

From the otherwise totally reliable linguist and modern encyclopedist, David Crystal:

Chettle...apologizes for not moderating the attack on Shakespeare and adds a unique character note of his own: civil demeanor, divers of worship, uprightness of dealing, honesty, facetious writing that approves his art... (Crystal and Crystal, 2005: 19).

From the Stratford Birthplace Trust:

Chettle apologized... “divers of worship” (noblemen) called on Chettle and demanded an explanation for the “scurrilous” charges against Shakespeare...they can only have been noblemen from either the Privy Council or Cecil House or from Southampton himself (Weiss, 2007: 156-157).

From the doyen of Stratfordian scholars and my teacher at the Shakespeare Institute, Stanley Wells:

Chettle published *Kind Heart's Dream* with a preface in which he offered an apology for not having ... toned down the criticism (Wells, 2013: 73).

Most worrying perhaps of all, is the entry in the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

Chettle prepared for posthumous publication Greene's *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592), with its reference to Shakespeare as an “upstart Crow,” but offered Shakespeare compliments and an olive branch in his own *Kind-Hearts Dream* (1592).

I could go on adding examples of the pretty obvious misreading of Chettle adopted by most traditional biographers (e.g. Bryson, 2007:84; Ellis 2012: 5-6). The point is that the error has passed into Shakespearean mythology and has shaped the way the world sees the greatest writer in the English language. The fraud is transformed into a budding Bard. The scholarly *faux pas* is, therefore, a wake-up call to the consequences of failing to do our jobs properly as academics and researchers. The truth is obscured and the truth matters.

One of the most highly-regarded of Shakespeare biographers, the restrained and scholarly Park Honan, is so carried away by the misreading of Chettle

that he writes with such a careless, unempirical, abandon that, if he were a first-year student of English, his paper would be covered in red marks, but Honan gets away with it because he is a reputable scholar. Honan paints a detailed picture of the man Shakespeare as if he knew him personally:

an agreeable, cautious person; not eccentric, picturesque or attention-seeking after rehearsals...modest and unpretentious...he believed in stability...he had a tendency to agree with the views of James I...he was characterized by emotional conservatism...he coveted the normalcy of being a group-member... (Honan: 1999).

It is from standard biographies such as Honan's that we have inherited the image of Shakespeare as a gentle, sweet, mild-mannered genius who was favored by important establishment figures. But the lack of data on the life of Shakespeare the writer, and the mismatch between the little we know about the life of the Stratford man in relation to the brilliant works, has shaped in important ways how we see the nature of his literary skills and even the nature of literary genius itself.

The Nature of Genius

The fact is, when Stratfordians are confronted with the incongruity between the life of the Stratford man and the words on the page, the response is usually, "well, that's the nature of genius." The roots of this view of genius as *immanent* rather than *empirical*—or based on experience—can be found in Shakespeare's contemporaries Jonson and Beaumont, for example; but they reach fruition in the Romantic movement, which has shaped in significant ways how we see not only Shakespeare's genius but also the artist and the role of the imagination.

Beginning with Jonson's "small Latin and less Greek" and Beaumont's describing Shakespeare as writing "by the dim light of Nature," we have the seeds of a tradition which sees Shakespeare as a gifted but relatively unsophisticated writer, of limited education, who wrote simply through inspiration and intuition. There is no sense, in this particular view of writing, of the processing and transformation of lived experience, because we simply do not have much of that experience to go by—and what little we do have bears hardly any relation to the works themselves—excepting the eddies-under-Clopton Bridge approach.

This disconnect between experience and inspiration became a source of intellectual significance for Romantics such as Coleridge and Hazlitt who, in turn, influenced Keats who, in turn, influenced us. I would argue that the idea of Shakespeare's so-called genius—a view which has dominated our thinking for the last two centuries—is inseparable from the significantly

incomplete view we have of who the man actually was. The Romantics tried to make sense of his achievement and they tried to integrate it with their own world-view.

As we know, the Romantic literary movement as spearheaded by Coleridge and Wordsworth, challenged the empirical approach to the mind and prioritized instead the power of nature and the inherent capacities of the imagination. Coleridge, in fact, argued for the importance of perception over facts. He saw the imagination as the sole sovereign creative power, a gift of nature, and he felt it was best illustrated in the impersonal genius of Shakespeare:

it is easy to clothe imaginary beings with our own thoughts and feelings...but to send ourselves out of ourselves to think ourselves into the thoughts and feelings of beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different from our own...who has achieved it? Perhaps only Shakespeare.(Coleridge, quoted in Holmes, 2005: 326)

Hazlitt echoes Coleridge in seeing Shakespeare as a chameleon—and an invisible one at that—and develops further the idea of Shakespeare as some sort of exemplar of universality, a being oddly detached from the real world.

He was nothing...the great distinction of Shakespeare's genius was its virtually including the genius of all the great men of his age...the peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was that it contained a universe of thought and feeling (Hazlitt, 1970: 273).

Shakespeare, says Hazlitt, was Everyman. Someone without an ego, “the least egotist that it was possible to be.”

John Keats's theory of the creative imagination is also consistent with and nurtured by the view of the author as an impersonal force of nature who obliterates all individuality as he or she becomes the people, the circumstances and natural phenomena of their poetry.

What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth...whether it existed before or not (Keats, quoted in Roe, 2012, 186).

Othello, Lear or Viola, of course, “did not exist before” in the life of the Stratford man, argues Keats, but only in the imagination of the poet who created them. Shakespeare's imagination is, therefore, like “Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.”

Keats says:

Shakespeare was “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...with a great poet

the sense of beauty obliterates all consideration...the poetical character has no self..." (Keats in Roe, 2012: 201)

My argument is that Shakespeare's mysterious invisibility was not only consistent with the view of inspiration expounded by Coleridge, Hazlitt and Keats, but actually helped to shape their understanding of *their own genius*. It, in turn, helped to shape our modern perception of Shakespeare. Indeed, the poetic text as something distinct and apart from the life of the author became a fundamental principle in the development of Practical Criticism in the 20th century, which says literary criticism is the search for universal human values through a careful scrutiny of *only the words on the page*.

For all intents and purposes, my own B.A. in English at Bristol certainly had as its working paradigm such practical criticism. This actively discouraged any resort to external biographical or historical knowledge in making sense of the text. We were not to confuse the poem with its origins by referring to personal, biographical information. This was particularly so with Shakespeare because of the mismatch between the man and the work. Any sort of biographical approach would, indeed, have been not only confusing but hopelessly unproductive.

However, things are different now. After post-modernism, our options for exploring meaning have become multiple and hybrid, admitting a kind of historical approach, though the place of biography is still considered largely taboo in the shaping of discourse. But at the end of the day, the view of Shakespeare as universal genius, someone standing aloof from the politics of his time—a being who gave us our view of what it means to be human for all time—has to be examined, even politically.

...the Right has tended to maintain that Shakespeare was above political commitment, that he subscribed only to timeless truths...truths which conservatives will always recognize... (Worden, 2006: 27).

In contrast to Sidney, Jonson or Milton—whom we comfortably read in terms of the beliefs and concerns of their time and place, and how their personal experiences shaped their engagement with those concerns—we seem to think that with Shakespeare it is perfectly natural to see him as a universal Everyman, everywhere and nowhere at once, but whose personal experience is irrelevant to his work.

This restricted view of Shakespeare's unique status as a myriad-minded impersonal genius has clearly shaped the very way we read creative texts. T.S. Eliot argued this very powerfully:

the man and the poet...are two different entities. The poet has no personality of his own....The experiences or impressions which are

obviously autobiographical may be of great interest to the writer himself, but not to his readers.
(Eliot, 1920: Tradition and the Individual Talent)

Joyce, too, has suggested that:

The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.
(Joyce, 1916: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)

I have tried to show that the critical thread that runs from Jonson to Joyce has its roots in our relative ignorance of who Shakespeare was. His genius seems embedded in his silence and invisibility. In this respect, I think the Shakespeare Authorship Question has certainly enhanced our way of seeing Shakespeare. For this reason alone, such investigations are valuable. By trying to place the author of the Shakespearean plays and poems in the contexts and currents of his times, I think we enrich our understanding and appreciation of the content of these works on multiple levels.

Most importantly, our view of the nature of his creative genius would shift from the Romantic-cum-modernist view of the impersonal, disembodied genius, conjuring characters and situations out of thin air, to one where creativity, at least to a significant degree, is a process of transforming lived experience. We would, in short, be challenging the tradition that sees Shakespeare as “detached from the squabbles of his time” (Shell, 2019: 11) and seeing him, instead, as engaging critically with the political and religious debates that so pre-occupied his contemporaries.

Today, 50 years after first looking into Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, I still find the works of the Bard—indeed whoever they were—more miraculous than ever. As for the man from Stratford, I think he may or may not have been responsible for the 37 or more plays attributed to him. In this area, I would call myself an authorship skeptic or agnostic. I am still curious to know why William of Stratford died with no contemporary mentioning his death in writing and why he himself, in his last will and testament, did not refer, in any way whatsoever, directly or indirectly, to his writing.

As a researcher who was trained to collect and examine data critically, I do feel I have an academic obligation to ask questions: I know one thing, said Socrates, and that is that I know nothing. Thus, I think I owe it to the writer who has been a source of infinite delight in all we see around us to be curious and critical about his works and what shaped them.

That said, let me note that I have never been concerned about Shakespeare's social class—whatever it was and whoever he was. If he was from the working classes, fine. I do not believe that only aristocrats can write like angels! I would be perfectly happy if the traditional rags-to-riches narrative did prevail beyond reasonable doubt (and thus added possibilities to my own modest roots). Yet, with the Stratford man, there is this strange, persistent non-alignment between the life and the work.

At the end of the day, sheer human curiosity makes us want to know more about the authors of our favorite texts. Like Auden, I really would like to know “what kind of guy inhabits” Shakespeare's poetics.

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