

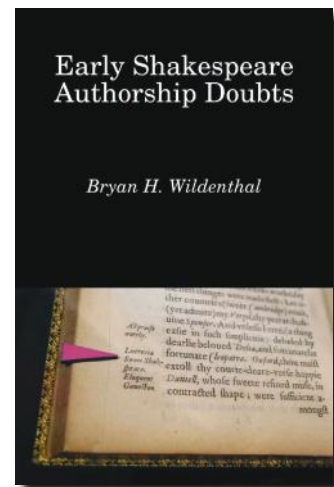
Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts

Reviewed by Chris Pannell

Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts. By Bryan H. Wildenthal. Zindabad Press, 2019, 412 pages (hardcover \$43, or paperback \$26.95).

Often, the evidence of early doubts about the authorship of poems and plays by Shakespeare has been examined in passing by authorship skeptics. Instead, the lengthier books about the Shakespeare Authorship Question and Oxfordian theory usually address the larger questions in the authorship debate, such as:

- the mysterious *Sonnets*;
- *Hamlet* as a revelation of the author and his position at court;
- the relationship between de Vere's travels in Europe and references in the Italian plays;
- the links between Edward de Vere's education and the knowledge of Greek and Latin languages—and the medical, scientific, and legal expertise—demonstrated in the plays.



But taken collectively, early doubts about the authorship of the plays and the poems that would form what we understand as the Shakespeare canon began in 1589. They are richly deserving of our attention. Bryan H. Wildenthal's well-written book helps us focus on them and thereby see how important these early authorship doubts are to the case against William Shakspeare of

Stratford. In short, we have a Shakespeare authorship question prior to 1616. With thirty items of evidence, Wildenthal argues against the notion that Shakspeare of Stratford was the author of the body of literature known as Shakespeare.

This book's longest section—Part 4: A Survey of Authorship Doubts Before 1616—gives us the core of the thesis. First, we begin with introductory comments in three parts.

- Part 1: The Stratfordian Theory of Shakespeare Authorship and the Denial of Early Doubts as the Central Stratfordian Claim
- Part 2: The Central Stratfordian Claim: Did Doubts Not Arise Until the 1850s?
- Part 3: Refuting the Central Claim: Doubts Arose by the Early 1590s

Wildenthal sets the scene with his view of the problem in Stratford.

The dominant “Stratfordian” theory concerning the Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) is that the literary works credited to “William Shakespeare”... were written (at least mainly) by William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon (1564-1616). In defense of that proposition, Stratfordians make various supporting arguments, of which the two most important may be summarized as the “ample early evidence” claim and the “no early doubts” claim (1).

He challenges in particular the “no early doubts” claim.

Not nearly enough has been written about this... nor about the fascinating evidence it denies. Julia Cleve aptly described “this all-too-familiar claim” as a “stock Stratfordian meme.” It is often the most emphatic and reflexive response to those who propose other authorship candidates.... (2).

Wildenthal's introductions treat a number of important, but relatively tangential issues, perhaps in order to sweep them away. Most of the first three parts

Chris Pannell *has published six books of poetry. His latest collection, Love, Despite the Ache, won Poetry Book of the Year from the Hamilton Arts Council in 2017. His collection A Nervous City (2013) won the Kerry Schooley Book Award. A former treasurer and board member for the gritLIT Writers Festival, Pannell also helped manage the Lit Live Reading Series in Hamilton, Ontario for more than ten years.*

explain and dissolve weak arguments by orthodox academics such as Stanley Wells and James Shapiro:

Orthodox scholars often try to have it both ways by making broad assertions that seem to imply there is ample early evidence for the Stratfordian theory. But they also, without blushing too much at the inconsistency, deploy an alternative fallback claim: even if the early evidence for Shakspeare's authorship is very sparse, well, it was a long time ago, that's typical for surviving records of the time, and we have even less contemporaneous evidence documenting the careers of other writers of that era.

The latter fallback claim is a blatantly false diversionary tactic. It has been resoundingly disproven. As Diana Price demonstrated in her 2001 book, we have *far less* contemporaneous and *personally identifying* evidence of Shakspeare's supposed literary career than for other Elizabethan or Jacobean writers, most of whom were much less important, yet somehow much better documented. In fact, we have almost none before 1623. It is not even remotely a close call (5).

It is in the nature of writing about the authorship question that one must deal with many pre-existing assumptions, inaccuracies, and misleading arguments.

Wildenthal is a gifted writer and meticulous compiler of both the skeptical and orthodox arguments. He addresses two of the main arguing points between investigators of the SAQ and defenders of the authorship status quo. On the discrepancies between the spelling of the Stratford man's last name and the name of the public author (i.e., Shakespeare), Wildenthal says Stratfordians' refusal to even argue the problem [of the name] is Orwellian.

It is hypocritical of Stratfordians to criticize non-Stratfordians for sometimes overemphasizing the spelling issues. Orthodox writers themselves place heavy emphasis on the purported identity of the Stratfordian and authorial names, while often... rewriting the historical record by harmonizing the spellings to fit their theory.

One cannot help but recall the goal of "Newspeak" in George Orwell's *1984*—to make it difficult (if not literally impossible) to articulate or even think unorthodox thoughts (46).

He illuminates the contradiction in the Stratfordian argument between the numerous anonymous publications that would many years later be credited

to William Shakespeare and the Stratfordian claim that the Stratford man was keen to make his fortune from writing.

As John Shahan has noted, the unfolding of Shakespeare's literary career seems strange. The name [William Shakespeare] first appeared after dedications (not on the title pages) of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), which became wildly popular best-sellers. During the next four years, six Shakespeare plays were published—but only anonymously. Then suddenly, in 1598, Frances Meres identified “Shakespeare” in print as a playwright, listing twelve plays, and they started getting published under that name—but not always. For many years after 1598, several were still published anonymously, even a few of his most popular (such as *Henry V* and *Romeo and Juliet*). Then the First Folio was published in 1623, seven years after Shakspeare of Stratford died, containing thirty-six plays, half of which had never before appeared in print...

How does this fit logically with the Stratfordian theory that the author was a commoner seeking fame and fortune under his own true name? Why did he not cash in on the success of his early poems and use his name consistently thereafter? (55-56).

After sixty-five pages of introduction, we arrive at the main body of the book, Part Four, “A Survey of Authorship Doubts Before 1616.” Wildenthal cautions us he has limited himself to thirty items of evidence and that these are “published indications of doubt.” Readers are assured, “I have not strained to divide them up to artificially increase their number. On the contrary I have lumped them together quite a bit.” He treats the evidence chronologically: beginning with Thomas Nashe, Preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) and ending with Christopher Brooke, *The Ghost of Richard III* (1614).

Some of the evidence bends easily to his purposes. He begins with Nashe's reference to a play called *Hamlet* as early as 1589. This has always been a massive challenge to the Stratfordian chronology because William of Stratford was only twenty-five in 1589.

Orthodox scholars have long been uncomfortable with the idea that Shakspeare of Stratford wrote *Hamlet* by 1589, three years before the first (very shaky) evidence said to place him in the London theatre scene, and a full six years before the next piece of evidence to that effect. It all seems dubious, to say the least, that young Shakspeare... still in Stratford as of 1587, had not only written some version of *Hamlet* by then but had become well enough known in London and university literary circles as “English Seneca” to be referred to allusively that way and not by his actual name (69).

The second of the early doubts is embedded in *Groatsworth of Wit*, published with the authorial name “Robert Greene” in 1592. The Shakespeare authorship argument centers on how to interpret this key passage:

Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tyger’s heart wrapped in a Player’s hid*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country. (45–46)

There’s no doubt that *Groatsworth of Wit* has drawn a lot of attention from both sides of the SAQ. Wildenthal devotes forty-one pages to it. He undercuts the Stratfordian claim that the passage supports the orthodox authorship. He also argues that it is an indication of early doubt about William of Stratford’s connection to the early plays—in this case, *Henry VI, Part 3*.

Other early doubts take less time to establish. The Nashe/Harvey “pamphlet war” gets twenty-four pages and Wildenthal’s clear presentation of what might, in lesser hands, be a tangled narrative, is most welcome.

Several of the authorship doubts were unknown to me: for instance:

- (#6) Thomas Heywood’s poem *Oenone and Paris* as a parody which suggests a reason one should doubt the authorship of *Venus and Adonis*.
- (#7) a letter by William Covell, accompanying the anonymous publication of *Polimanteia* in 1595.
- (#23) William Barkstead’s *Myrrha, the Mother of Adonis*.

The other lengthy section is the twenty pages devoted to evidence of doubt voiced prior to 1616 by Ben Jonson, including his poem *Poet-Ape* and the characters of “Sogliardo” and “Puntavarlo” in *Every Man Out of His Humour*. To these relatively well-known doubts, Wildenthal suggests Jonson’s epigrams (e.g., *On Don Surhy*) also deserve attention and his footnotes in this section explore these ideas.

The book spends more than a few pages on orthodox scholars who have belittled the SAQ and misled the public over the real significance of many early authorship doubts. Terry Ross and David Kathman come in for several challenges from Wildenthal as do Edmondson and Wells, Alan Nelson, James Shapiro, Jonathan Bate, and Tom Reedy. (This is by no means a complete list of Wildenthal’s opponents. The jousting between Stratfordians and authorship skeptics has been very active since the 1984 publication of Charlton Ogburn’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*.)

Wildenthal's detailed approach will be helpful to scholars who would follow in his footsteps. Tracing the sources is remarkably easy and he must be praised for his encyclopedic knowledge of who said what—where and when—and whether it is significant, helpful or simply misleading. The footnotes are copious, detailed, and very well sourced. The footnotes also have the benefit of enabling Wildenthal to park authorship issues that are not early authorship doubts away from the main body of his text.

As with the introductions in three parts, the book offers two conclusions:

1) The extended final Doubt (#30) reads much like a conclusion of the book's true thesis: to examine thirty of the most compelling early doubts. Doubt #30 is augmented by a consideration of five "indications" in the decade between 1605 and 1615 that the true author of Shakespearean works was already dead. Readers can pursue this sub-thesis fully by reviewing Doubts 22, 23, 24, 29, and 30.

2) The section which follows—titled Conclusion—ranges over a variety of topics including:

- a new paradigm for considering early authorship doubts,
- a reframing of the history of Shakespearean studies (the Early Authorship Era, the Stratfordian Era, the Baconian Era, the Oxfordian Era),
- a refutation of the Conspiracy Charge and the Snobbery Slander,
- a discussion that touches on the frustrations of name-calling in the SAQ, and
- Wildenthal's statement of why the Authorship Question matters.

In the end, the breadth of the Shakespeare Authorship Question looms on-stage behind the deliberate efforts of the author to adhere to his carefully curated early authorship doubts. This book is a fine examination of those doubts. Wildenthal has produced an energetic and scholarly book and made a contribution that authorship skeptics were sorely in need of—one that deserves a place in every Shakespearean's library.