

# *A Contrarian View of the First Folio: Why Was It Published?*

by James A. Warren

In the four centuries since publication of the First Folio in 1623, most Shakespeare scholars have cited the Folio as the most important of three steps taken in and around 1623 that firmly established William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon as the poet and playwright known as William Shakespeare. The other two steps were the creation of the Shakespeare monument in Trinity Church near the Avon River in Stratford and the portraits of Shakespeare painted during that time.

During the past 170 years, however, other scholars, doubting that Shakspere was the real author, have cited those same three actions as evidence of his non-authorship. Many Oxfordian scholars—those who believe the real author of “Shakespeare’s” works was Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford—cite them as evidence of a deception designed to hide the identity of the real author. Professor Louis P. Bénézet, president of the American Shakespeare Fellowship in the 1940s, for instance, used the word “hoax” to describe the actions undertaken in 1623. He titled an article published in 1947 “The Shakespeare Hoax: An Improbable Narrative” (Bénézet, 1947); another, published in *The American Bar Association Journal* in 1960, was titled “A Hoax Three Centuries Old” (Bénézet, 1960).

I believe that the consensus views by Stratfordian and Oxfordian experts are both incorrect: I disagree with the traditional view that the three steps taken in and around 1623 prove Shakspere’s authorship, and I disagree with the

Oxfordian interpretation that they were designed to conceal Oxford's authorship. On the contrary, I now believe that the steps were taken to reveal his authorship.

During research for *Shakespeare Revolutionized: The First Hundred Years of J. Thomas Looney's "Shakespeare" Identified* (2021), I discovered an intriguing question posed in a letter published in *The Washington Post* in 1948: "If the aim was to conceal that Oxford was Shakespeare, by 'changing the head and obliterating all identifying details' [in the Ashbourne portrait], why should anyone start with a portrait of Oxford as basis for a Shakespeare forgery in the first place?" (Mumpsimum, 1948, B4). If the goal had been to bury Oxford's authorship, wouldn't the logical step have been preparation of a portrait of Shakespeare from scratch, rather than alter a painting of someone else? Why begin with a portrait of Oxford, of all people, and alter details in it so as to hide his identity?

As I considered these questions, I recalled that in the early 1930s the Reverend Charles Sidney de Vere Beauclerk prepared mock-ups of six of the best-known portraits of "Shakespeare." After superimposing them, he demonstrated that they were so similar in all key aspects that they were, in fact, images of the same person, and that that person was Edward de Vere. Portraits examined by Beauclerk included those known as the Ashbourne, Welbeck, Felton, Grafton, Hampton Court and Janssen, as well as the Droeshout engraving in the First Folio. As Bénézet noted, "All have de Vere's color scheme: hazel eyes, auburn hair, brown beard, [and] ruddy complexion" (Bénézet, 1947).

Later in the same decade Charles Wisner Barrell examined three portraits of "Shakespeare"—the Ashbourne, the Janssen and the Hampton Court—using X-ray and infra-red technology, which revealed images beneath the surface showing they were actually portraits of Edward de Vere. As he demonstrated in an article published in the January 1940 issue of *Scientific American*, de Vere's actual hair line, collar ruff and sleeve ruffs had been painted over, as had other distinguishing marks—such as the image on his thumb ring and crests—and inscriptions had been altered and the artist's monogram scraped out (Barrell, 1940).

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*Beauclerk's comparison of the Welbeck and Ashbourne portraits of Edward de Vere.*

Moreover, the Ashbourne portrait, now in the Folger Shakespeare Library, had remained in the possession of the descendants of Oxford's second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, at the Trentham Estates in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, until it was sold in 1910. It is the portrait of greatest value for the Oxfordian thesis for three reasons: (1) the sitter is clearly a nobleman who matches the appearance of Edward de Vere in all other known portraits of him; (2) it was labeled in Trentham family inventory records as of "Shakespeare" even though a portrait of Oxford of the same approximate size and date listed in the records was missing from the collection (Burris, 2002, 12); and (3) in it Oxford holds a small book bound up with crimson ribbons, a detail of inestimable importance. George Chapman, in his play *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (II.i), describes a poet who writes in a book, "Bound richly up, and strung with crimson strings" (Allen, 1931, 230–31; Burris, 2001, 1). Bringing the play and the portrait together firmly connects Oxford with Shakespeare.

The passage in which the phrase concerning an unnamed poet occurs—

And as the foolish poet that still writ  
 All his most selfe-lov'd verse in paper royall,  
 Or parchment rul'd with lead, smooth'd with the pumice,  
 Bound richly up, and strung with crimson strings;  
 Never so blest as when hee write and read

The ape-lov'd issue of his braine; and never  
But joying in himselfe, admiring ever; —

ties them together in several ways, too. Here, and in other passages identified by Percy Allen in his *The Oxford-Shakespeare Case Corroborated*, Chapman is critical of Oxford-Shakespeare, at times appearing to be more a hostile opponent than a mere literary rival. In several plays and poems he describes Oxford as “selfe-lov'd,” as he does in the quoted passage about the unnamed poet. Also note the “never” and “ever” (E. VER) pun used in that context, as it was used in works by Shakespeare, Chapman and others, and in the preface to the quarto edition of *Troilus and Cressida* (discussed below).

And so, again the question: “If the aim was to conceal that Oxford was Shakespeare—why start with a portrait of Oxford as basis for a Shakespeare forgery in the first place?” In my view, the only explanation is that the over-paintings had been undertaken to connect the Earl of Oxford with Shakespeare; that is, the alterations had been made not to conceal Oxford’s authorship, but to reveal it.

## Deliberate Ambiguity I

Can we understand more fully the state of mind of those who undertook the three steps of the over-paintings, the Folio project and the monument in Trinity Church?

We know who was behind these actions—the family and descendants of Edward de Vere, two of whom are identified in the Folio. The “Incomparable Pair of Brethren” prominently mentioned in the prefatory materials refers to Philip Herbert, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Montgomery and a son-in-law of Edward de Vere, and his brother, William Herbert, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Pembroke, who had at one time been engaged to another of de Vere’s daughters. Other family members likely to have had a role in the Folio project were Oxford’s three daughters (one, Susan, married to William Herbert) and his son, Henry de Vere, the 18<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

I believe that Oxford’s family sought to preserve the plays through publication. Eighteen of these—fully half of the Folio’s 36 plays—had never been printed and might well have been lost had they remained in manuscript. It’s puzzling, though, that they left out of the Folio Shakespeare’s poems—his *Sonnets*, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*—that had the name Shakespeare on their title or dedication pages, while at the same time including plays that had never before been associated with the name. Among these were *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

It has also been proposed that through publication of the Folio, “The Most Noble and Incomparable Pair of Brethren” sought to promote English nationalism at a crucial moment in English history. Historian and authorship scholar Peter W. Dickson has demonstrated that the First Folio was as much a political statement as it was a literary publication.<sup>1</sup> England at the time was undergoing the “Spanish Marriage Crisis,” an attempt by King James to marry his son, Prince Charles, to the daughter of King Philip IV of Spain, and thereby create political ties between Protestant England and Catholic Spain that many feared would destroy England’s religious and cultural identity. Publishing the plays would thus enhance and strengthen England’s unique cultural heritage.

Did Oxford’s family also plan to attribute the plays to Edward de Vere? One reason for thinking so is that they included what Percy Allen viewed as “the most personal of the Shakespearean plays” (Allen, 1930, 379), among them the comedies of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*, and, among the tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Is it not, Allen asks, “intensely significant to note that, of the comedies named above, not one was printed before the Folio of 1623 with the single exception of *Merry Wives*, which appeared in quarto in 1602, minus the revealing William scene? None of the more personal comedies, then, were authoritatively published until 1623, nineteen years after their author’s death!” (Allen, 1930, 379). He goes on to show that in the case of *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well*, “the two most intimately autobiographical of all the comedies,” no record of any performance of the first exists prior to the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and of the second before the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

These plays contain sensitive personal references to Edward de Vere in the sense that many of the most prominent characters were modeled, in part, after family, friends and colleagues close to de Vere, and many scenes depict events from his life. More important, many of the plays’ principal characters possess traits or personalities similar to Oxford’s and express thoughts that someone caught up in the events of his life would naturally have felt in response to them. As J. Thomas Looney observed,

The personality and career of Edward de Vere permeates the whole of the Shakespeare literature.... [A] certain psychological unity, a single personality under different moods and aspects, with many variations of external detail, runs through outstanding characters like Hamlet, Othello, Romeo, Berowne, Bertram, Prince Hal, Timon, and King Lear, along with the general assumption that this personality represents “Shakespeare” himself. Now, the singular fact is that this personality corresponds psychologically with the mentality revealed in Edward de Vere’s poems; and the known details of Oxford’s life are

represented in such combinations in the plays that...he may be proved the actual prototype. (Looney, 1921, 12)

At the same time, the idea that the Folio's editors intended to attribute the plays to de Vere seems ludicrous. If that had been their intention, doing so would have been easy enough: simply announce his authorship in the First Folio and include his true image, not the Droeshout engraving. Instead, they went the other direction, deleting passages from plays that connected them with Oxford.

Two such passages were removed from the 1604 Q2 edition of *Hamlet* when it was reprinted in the Folio. One passage was deleted from Act I, scene iv, lines 17–38, which begins with the lines “So oft it chanceth in particular men, / That for some vicious mole of nature in them.” In the view of Colonel Bernard R. Ward, founder of the Shakespeare Fellowship, it was removed because it “might have drawn attention to Oxford and the scandalous accusations preferred against him by Charles Arundel and Lord Henry Howard in 1581” (Douglas, 1924, 11). The editors of the Folio, Ward speculated, felt that it was necessary to draw a veil over some hidden scandal in Oxford's life, and he called attention to Grosart's reference to an “unlifted shadow” that “lies across his memory” (Ward, 1923, 7).

Another passage, an important speech of 57 lines in Act IV, scene iv, that begins, “How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge”—a soliloquy praised by Charles Swinburne as the very finest in the play—was also removed. Colonel Montagu W. Douglas, later to serve as president of the Shakespeare Fellowship for 17 years, defined this speech as a “meditation on cowardice” and speculated that “However magnificent the diction of this speech, the editors of the Folio appear to have thought that it would too obviously...draw attention to a different figure from the one engraved by Droeshout on the title page of the First Folio of 1623” (Douglas, 1924, 11).

Col. Ward also noted changes to Hamlet's cry in the final scene of the play in Q2. “The lines

O, God! Horatio, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown shall I leave behind me?

had been toned down in the Folio to a much tamer expression:

O good Horatio, what a wounded name.  
Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me?

thus taking half the poignancy and all the reality out of the dying appeal that follows:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,



And in the harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story.” (Ward, 1923, 7)

A change for similar reasons was made to *Taming of the Shrew* in the Folio, as J. Thomas Looney explains:

Connecting the Christo Vary (alias Sly) episode with these matters, we have first a carefully carried out scheme to conceal the author of the great plays, and then a deliberate exclusion from the authorised edition of them, of the one and only passage that might betray the Earl of Oxford’s interest in them: a change so urgently demanded by the situation that an integral and characteristic element of the farce had to be sacrificed to it. Certainly, Oxford’s authorship of the play suggests a reason for the suppression quite simple and sufficient. (Looney, 1935, 176)

The change to which Looney refers is the removal of the second and third scenes with the drunken Sly that, along with the opening scene, comment on and disrupt the action taking place in the rest of the play. These two scenes, and a more extensive opening scene, had been present in *Taming of A Shrew*, but not in the revised version of the play published in the 1623 Folio as *Taming of THE Shrew*.

The text of *Richard II* was changed, too, in order to hide Oxford’s association with the play. The early quarto of *Richard II* contained a reference to de Vere’s ancestor, Robert de Vere, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. The reference to him was replaced in the Folio with “Salisbury,” thus, Looney explained, “completely wrecking the versification” (Looney, 1935, 176),<sup>2</sup> for no other reason than to cut the connection with the ancestors of the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

Further, the epistle printed in some copies of the quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* was omitted from the Folio edition because it too obviously revealed Oxford’s connection with the Shakespearean corpus, with the phrase “A never writer to an ever reader: news” easily seen as an Elizabethan pun on de Vere’s name, as in “An E. VER writer to an E. VER reader: news.”

To get the plays published and hence preserved, the sponsors of the Folio appeared to be willing to risk identification of the plays with Oxford but only if the connections were not too obvious. They eliminated from the plays the passages most likely to lead readers of the time to suspect Oxford’s authorship, while leaving untouched much content which linked the plays to his life and personality.

They also took additional steps to make the connection with Oxford less likely. One was adding allusions to Shakspeare as the author in the Folio itself through Leonard Digges’ reference to, “thy Stratford monument” and Ben Jonson’s

phrase, “Sweet Swan of Avon,” thereby connecting the author with the town of Stratford on the Avon River. Another was a more complicated gambit that largely erased Oxford himself from the historical records, making it less likely that anyone who had not known him personally would make the connection between his life and personality on one hand, and characters and events depicted in the plays on the other. This salient point will be discussed further.

## Deliberate Ambiguity II

Indications of Shakspeare’s authorship are also ambiguous, with indications in all three steps taken in 1623 that both support and cast doubt on it. If those who undertook them had wished to present convincing evidence of Shakspeare’s authorship at the monument in Trinity Church, they could have shown exactly where he was buried, included a clear statement that the person buried there was a writer and installed an effigy of a writer rather than someone holding a sack of grain with both hands. They did none of these. Instead, they placed on the tomb some doggerel —

Good friend for Jesus sake forebeare,  
To dig the dust enclosed here.  
Blessed be the man what spares these stones.  
And cursed be he that moves my bones.—

that undercut the very impression the monument seemed designed to make. Richard F. Whalen has described other odd things about it and documented the history of the “repairs” that transformed the original figure of a dour man with a down-turned moustache clutching a large sack into the man with an up-turned moustache with hands holding pen and paper and resting on a cushion that is seen today.<sup>3</sup>

The prefatory material to the Folio is even more illogical. It contains no straightforward biographical information about Shakspeare: nothing about his life or acting and writing careers, no dedicatory poems by other writers; not even his Coat-of-Arms is included. The two phrases that appear to tie him to the Folio—“Sweet swan of Avon” and “thy Stratford moniment”—are located several pages apart and written by two different people. Whalen provides many other examples of “deliberate ambiguity that draws the reader into a maze of contradictions, equivocal language, and veiled meanings” (Whalen, 2013, 133)<sup>4</sup> that need not be itemized here.

Other parts of the prefatory material go beyond ambiguity to outright deception in ways that undercut the validity or honesty of all other statements made in it. Even most traditional scholars today acknowledge that the letter signed by John Heminges and Henry Condell was written by Ben Jonson.



Their statement that they had taken it upon themselves to collect and publish the works in the Folio is also incorrect, as is their claim that the Folio was printed from “True Originall Copies,” “absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them,” written out by the author “with scarce a blot,” and then, apparently, handed over by him to his friends the actors to be published, but not until seven years after his death.

For close to a century, scholars have demonstrated that the actors’ statement was written by Ben Jonson alone and that they had no editorial role in preparing the Folio. Scholars have also shown that most of the plays in the Folio were not printed from “True Originall Copies.” As Bénézet noted almost eighty years ago, “There is not a ‘responsible Shakespeare scholar’ who believes it. What is more, they take no pains to conceal their skepticism” (Bénézet, 1944, 2). He cited three respected scholars who “admit that [the prefatory material in the Folio] cannot be taken literally. In other words, *it is not the truth*.” Stratfordian scholar Bruce Danner, nearly 70 years after Bénézet, writes of “the text of the First Folio[’s prefatory material], whose omissions, errors, and outright lies have long been common knowledge” (Danner, 2011, 147).

Then came the crux of Bénézet’s argument. “After a man is caught in one lie he is never believed again.... If we admit one lie, then what becomes of the authority for the rest of the story?... Not one of the ‘recognized Shakespeare authorities’ defends the Jonson-Heminges-Condell fiction. Yet, in the last analysis, this is the foundation stone of the whole Stratford edifice” (Bénézet, 1944, 5). In other words, if those statements were deliberately false, why would anyone believe the other statements pointing toward William Shakspeare as the author? Where does that leave the narrative of traditional authorship? Without any foundation whatsoever, says Bénézet.

Then there is the Droeshout engraving in the Folio cut “for” Shakespeare, not “of” him. Barrell had shown that the Ashbourne portrait had been altered to more closely resemble the Droeshout engraving. A rough comparison of the two suggests that the Ashbourne had served as the model for the engraving. If one of the images is reversed so that the sitters both face the same direction and if the images are resized, the size and distance between the eyes of the two are exact matches, and the size and shape of Oxford’s head exactly matches the mask shown in the Droeshout engraving.

Having presented reasons for believing that all three steps—the Folio, the Monument and the portraits—represent a deliberately ambiguous statement as to authorship of “Shakespeare’s” plays, we are confronted with the question of motive: why was this carried out?

## Why the Deliberate Ambiguity?

Two explanations for the ambiguity present themselves. The first is that Oxford's family wanted the attribution to Shakspeare to be permanent, but in 1623 was prevented by external conditions from making stronger statements in support of it. In this view the best that could be done at the time was the creation of an ambiguous story of Shakspeare's authorship that could be strengthened later as conditions permitted.

Why might Oxford's family have wanted his authorship hidden permanently? Relatives might have wanted him remembered primarily as the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain of Her Majesty's court. Perhaps, as senior members of a hierarchical, class-conscious society, that was of primary importance to them. Oxford had employed the pseudonym only during the last 11 years of his life, beginning in 1593 when the name William Shakespeare was attached to *Venus and Adonis*. They wanted the plays preserved, as well, or they wouldn't have gone to such great effort and expense to produce the Folio, but that was of secondary importance. The best solution, given this line of thinking, was to have the plays preserved but not attributed to Oxford.

Among the factors creating difficulties for attribution to Shakspeare was that, in 1623, nobody in London or Stratford considered him to be the dramatist William Shakespeare, and if the attribution had been too blatant, people might have publicly disagreed. Shakspeare had never claimed to have written any plays, and no documents exist today showing that anyone during his lifetime had ever said that he had. English scholar A.J. Pointon concluded that "William Shakspeare was never Shakespeare and was never thought to be so during his lifetime" (Pointon, 2011, 1). Even professor Stanley Wells acknowledges that no document during William Shakspeare's lifetime directly connects him with the literary works. He admits that "among the allusions [to the writer Shakespeare by his contemporaries] that I have cited so far...there is none that explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies him with Stratford-upon-Avon" (Wells, 2013, 81). "There is no 'air' of the actor in anything we know of Shakspeare," writes Charlton Ogburn, Jr. "He was a mercenary businessman, and the only known remarks attributed to him by contemporaries (apart from his deposition in the Mountjoy case) concerned the enclosure of the common lands of Stratford.... His name is missing from records of actors in which it would certainly have appeared had he been one.... Only posthumously did Shakspeare acquire the guise of an actor" (Ogburn, 1992, 193). English scholar Richard Malim goes so far as to declare Shakspeare a "nonentity," writing that he "was no sort of actor or impresario, and indeed was seldom in London after 1599" (Malim, 2015, 14).

Many scholars today cite the Folio itself as the principal reason for believing in Shakspeare's authorship, but of course the Folio did not exist before it was published. As scholar H. B. Simpson wrote in 1935, "One of the strongest arguments against the orthodox view is the fact that the first association of

the one name with the other [i.e., Shakspeare with Shakespeare] was made in the Folio of 1623” (Simpson, 1935, 32). Half a century later, Edward de Vere’s biographer Mark Anderson agreed: “Without these two posthumous memorials [the inscription on the Stratford monument and the introductory material to the First Folio]...it is scarcely conceivable that anyone would ever have thought of the Stratford Shakspeare as the writer” (Anderson, 2005, 41). And again, “If the professors can point to a single reference to Shakspeare of Stratford during his lifetime that links him with authorship of Shakespeare’s works or to a single reference in those years to the poet-dramatist that suggests he was the Stratford man—or, for that matter, identifies him with any actual person—they will do what no one else has been able to do” (114).

Another factor was that Oxford’s authorship appears to have been an open secret in literary and court circles. Courtiers certainly remembered that many of “Shakespeare’s” plays had been presented in the court or in private theaters, as entertainment created by Oxford, long before they appeared on the public stage or were published as by Shakespeare. They, too, might have publicly disagreed. So the attribution to Shakspeare had to be carefully executed. It had to be significant enough to imply his authorship, but not blatant enough to motivate those in the know to express public doubts about it. The idea of his authorship could be strengthened later, building on the foundation laid in 1623.

Efforts to hide Oxford’s authorship can, in fact, be seen as falling into three phases: before, during and after the years around 1623. Charlton Ogburn, Jr. holds that the decision to permanently conceal Oxford’s authorship was made and put into effect in 1597. “Everything falls into place...if we take it that in 1597 the persons in whose hands the matter rested decided that the authorship of the plays...would be lastingly concealed” (Ogburn, 1992, 194). The idea was floated that Shakespeare was Will Shakspeare, a tactic that “necessitated getting Shakspeare out of sight so that his glaring disqualifications for the role of the dramatist would not queer the game.... This he did, and in Stratford, except for perhaps an occasional visit to London and a brief sojourn in the city in 1604, he appears to have remained in affluent obscurity” (194–95).

The second phase was the three steps taken in and around 1623. As Bénézet explained it, “Oxford’s family decided that the plays must be released to preserve them for posterity. However, the authorship secret must not be betrayed.... [It recruited] a London monument-maker to plant a memorial in Stratford; two retired actors to pose as sponsors; Ben Jonson to forget his jealousy and to write both verse and fiction; [and] four printers to pool their resources.... A false Folio portrait and false clues in Ben Jonson’s dedicatory verses perpetuate the hoax compelled from on high, but preserve the Shakespeare plays for all time. A well-planned hoax” (Bénézet, 1947).

A.J. Pointon agrees with this scenario, writing that, “When this writer’s [Oxford’s] collected plays were published thirty years later, in 1623, in what would become known as Shakespeare’s ‘First Folio’, someone had the idea, not entirely original, of setting up a decoy for him, with hints that the pseudonym hid some other known real person. This person, most probably originating with those who planned the publication of this great book, cleverly used as decoy an actor-businessman from Stratford-upon-Avon with a name similar to “Shakespeare”—William Shakspeare—who, being dead, was not in a position to object” (Pointon, 2011, 1).

The problem that Oxford’s family faced in 1623 was that they had succeeded all too well in pre-1623 efforts to hide Oxford’s authorship. That is why, Pointon shows, the publication of Shakespeare’s collected works had been delayed year after year since it was first planned in 1616. Even in 1623, publication of the Folio came about only when the “grand possessors” were “forced by the threat of Jaggard and Pavier’s rogue publication. They knew that, if they published a full collection of Shakespeare’s great plays, a burst of curiosity about their author was bound to follow: for, whatever may be said to the contrary, it is obvious that the name Shakespeare was a pseudonym. There was simply nobody of that name operating in the literary circles of England” (Pointon, 2011, 113–14).

That is the reason there could be no outright statement that Shakespeare was Shakspeare of Stratford. They could provide only the weakest of hints, the “Sweet swan of Avon” and “thy Stratford monument” phrases three pages apart in the Folio’s prefatory material. The hints had to be “subtle and ambiguous” to avoid provoking a reaction “from those who knew Shakspeare and knew he could not write.” Even those subtle allusions required construction of a monument of some kind in Stratford “to give credence to the hints that were soon to be published about him. If readers of the First Folio had gone to Stratford and found nothing there to commemorate William Shakspeare, with at least some suggestion that he was a writer, suspicion must have been aroused” (Pointon, 2011, 117). “The Monument,” Pointon concludes, “was designed, not as a memorial to Shakspeare, but as part of the scheme to steal his identity” (131).

How then to attribute the plays to such a person in 1623? With deliberate ambiguity. Then, slowly, in a third phase, in the years after 1623, build on the base established in that year.

## Why the Deliberate Ambiguity II?

A second explanation for the deliberately ambiguous identification of the author of the works in the Folio is similar to the first, but opposite in direction. Perhaps Oxford’s family wished to attribute authorship to him when the

Folio was published but was prohibited from doing so by external factors. In this scenario, publishing the works under a cover story of strategic deception was the best that could be done, so they used the flimsiest cover story they could so as to make it as easy as possible to abandon it later.

For a clue as to their actual intent, we can turn to Percy Allen, a professional theater critic in London who also wrote on French poetry and history and published extensively on the Shakespeare authorship issue. In discussing Elizabethan drama, Allen wrote of

the cunning skill of Elizabethan writers, in at once concealing and revealing interesting facts and identities beneath an innocent-looking, yet usually penetrable disguise; and the corresponding cleverness of readers—and...of the elite among theatrical audiences also—at penetrating such disguises, and perceiving accordingly the inner purport of the text. (Allen, 1934, 21)

Perhaps Oxford's family intended, with the steps taken in and around 1623, to perpetrate a real case of this Elizabethan literary practice, "at once concealing and revealing interesting facts and identities beneath an innocent looking, yet penetrable disguise."

Allen explained further that

Dangerous topicalities of course, had to be cunningly introduced; and the Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare among them, developed great skill at weaving contemporary allusions into a framework provided by well-known older plays, stories, sagas, or folk-tales, which were selected because their outlines, or plots, fitted conveniently in with the Elizabethan story that the playwright desired secretly to tell. (Allen, 1934, 21)

In the case of "cunningly introducing" Oxford's authorship through topical allusions to Oxford's biography in the plays themselves, no "framework provided by well-known older plays" existed into which the real story could be "conveniently fitted." The patrons of the three steps had to create their own legend, or cover story, out of thin air. This they did with the story of Shakspeare's authorship, told through the altered portraits, the monument in Trinity Church and the prefatory material in the Folio, taking care to make the cover story no stronger than was needed to get the works published.

What factors would have blocked Oxford's family from making a straightforward attribution of Oxford's authorship?

One factor sometimes suggested is the so-called "stigma of print"—the idea that members of Oxford's social class were prohibited from publishing their literary works. I don't find this argument persuasive. That social prohibition

had applied to courtiers publishing their own works during their lifetimes. However, by 1623 the precedent of courtiers' literary works being published after their deaths, with open attribution to them had long been established. The works of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and Christopher Marlowe—published either anonymously or not at all during their lifetimes—had been published with attribution to them after their deaths. Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* was published in 1590 and 1593, after his death in 1586, and his *Astrophel and Stella* was published in 1591. Among works by members of lower social classes, Marlowe's *Tamberlane* was published anonymously during his lifetime, but republished after his death with his name on the title page. The same presumably could have been done with Oxford's poetry with no loss of status.

A more substantive reason is that Oxford, a senior member of the nobility, had written plays performed on the disreputable public stage, and had, perhaps, even acted in them. This goes far beyond writing poems that could be published in his name after his demise. The theatrical aspects to his literary career had, perhaps, given his name a brand that his family in that class-conscious age wanted to purge. While more credible, I do not find this reason substantive enough to conceal his authorship in 1623, as it had already been 19 years since his passing, and the weight of that objection decreased with each passing year.

Some scholars have proposed that the sensitivities and political concerns of fellow courtiers and the nobility blocked attribution to Oxford. Characters in some of the plays had been based, in part, on powerful members of the court and government known to Oxford. They and their families would not be pleased to see themselves or prominent members of their families portrayed, often in unflattering ways, on the public stage. Whatever validity this theory might have had in the 1590s, when publication of Shakespeare's plays began, I do not find it compelling in 1623 because, by then, practically all those ridiculed in the plays had also passed on. Robert Cecil, Secretary of State and Privy Council member, had died in 1612, more than a decade before the Folio was published.

It is all too easy for scholars today to consider only literary reasons for the family's desire to conceal Oxford's authorship either permanently or temporarily. But the issue of Shakespearean authorship in itself was only a side show during the final years of Elizabeth's long reign and throughout that of James I. Political developments of great importance affected so many aspects of English history of the time that surely the issue of Shakespearean authorship was among them. It is to those political events we must look for weightier explanations of the steps taken in 1623.

Earlier I noted Peter W. Dickson's observation that England was wracked by the Spanish Marriage Crisis at the time the Folio was being prepared, in



which efforts were underway to marry King James's son, Prince Charles, to a Spanish princess. Drawing further on Dickson's theory raises the possibility that the political events which gave rise to the desire to enhance feelings of English nationalism through publication of the plays in the Folio also gave rise to political pressures opposed to public recognition of Oxford's authorship. As Gabriel Ready notes, "The Dickson hypothesis focuses on England's political environment of the 1620s [in which]...Henry de Vere, 18<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford,...Henry Wriothesley, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton, and the Herbert brothers William and Philip lead a faction opposed to the marriage negotiations between England and Spain" (Ready, 2021, 50). Ready notes that Henry de Vere "was imprisoned in the Tower of London from April 1622 to December 1623, which aligns with the dates of production of the First Folio almost exactly, February 1622 or later to November or December 1623." He notes further that "Dickson linked a rush to assemble the collection with two potential dangers, the destruction of the plays and the death of the author's son" (51). Perhaps the most that could be done in those dangerous political times was publishing the works but withholding attribution to Oxford.

Going a step further, the Irish scholar H. K. Kennedy-Skipton sensed back in 1932 that there was something to be uncovered in Shakespeare's works which modern scholars were overlooking. He made a penetrating observation about what Shakespeare's plays, if properly understood, might reveal about real-life events.

If we accept the life of de Vere and his relation to the times as told in the plays, we may find they form a historical foreground, and will in fact be a criterion of the truth of the background. There can be no doubt that the plays and the life of Edward De Vere conceal facts of vital historical import, compared with which the mystery of the authorship is of minor consequence. How otherwise can one explain the erasure of the name of such an important person from the pages of our history? (Kennedy-Skipton, 1932, 32)

Kennedy-Skipton did not know what those hidden facts were, but suspected them to be of such "vital historical import" that the authorship mystery itself is of only "minor consequence" in comparison. This was a compelling statement because it raised, first, the question of "literary evidence"—whether it is legitimate to cite events portrayed in works of literature as evidence of historical events—and, second, it brought to the fore the still unexplained fact that Edward de Vere had indeed been virtually erased from "the pages of our history." What events could possibly be of such import that they would require such an erasure of a courtier who had once been described as "the Queen's favourite?"

Four elements related to Oxford and the Shakespeare plays require explanation if we are to understand why the three steps taken around 1623 were executed in such an ambiguous way. They are:

- Why Oxford's authorship could not be openly acknowledged;
- Why Oxford himself was nearly erased from history.

Bénézet, echoing Kennedy-Skipton, notes that as a result of the "extraordinary job of falsifying literary history...engineered in 1623 by a group of English nobles,...Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, one of the most versatile geniuses of all time, remains practically unknown today" (Bénézet, 1947).
- Why so much evidence related to authorship of the plays—Oxford's or Shakspeare's—has vanished.

Charlton Ogburn, Jr. concluded that "a nearly clean sweep was made of contemporary documentation touching on the authorship.... The fact is that every contemporary document that might have related authorship of Shakespeare's plays and poems to an identifiable human being subsequently disappeared. Every last scrap of paper that would have told who Shakespeare was—whether the Stratford man or any other—simply vanished.... To me there can be but one explanation for the empty-handedness of generations of scholars after lifelong quests. Someone saw to it that those quests would be fruitless" (Ogburn, 1992, 198, 183).
- How hiding so much evidence and eliminating Oxford from history could have been accomplished.

Ogburn explained that "all testimony as to the actual authorship and all testimony as to the surrogate's ineligibility would have to be forestalled and where it was committed to paper the incriminating documents would have to be gathered up and destroyed" (Ogburn, 1992, 198). He characterized such a far-reaching effort as "highly implausible" and believed that "its implausibility is what has chiefly blocked a more general acceptance of 'Shakespeare' as having been a pseudonym."

Only one explanation answers all four questions: the Sonnets Dynastic Succession Theory, sometimes referred to as the Southampton Theory, the Tudor Heir Theory, the Tudor Rose Theory and the Prince Tudor Theory. The theory has at its core the idea that Queen Elizabeth bore a child in the middle of 1574 fathered by Edward de Vere, a son who became known as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton. Because any son born to Elizabeth, legitimate or not, would have been regarded as having some claim to the throne of England,<sup>5</sup> and because she apparently decided, around 1593, the year in which she turned 60, not to acknowledge Southampton as her son and

heir, his true parentage had to be kept secret to avoid complicating the succession to the throne after her death.<sup>6</sup> Later, after James VI of Scotland had become King James I of Great Britain, the need for secrecy was even greater, as the existence of an illegitimate child born to Elizabeth posed a threat to the legitimacy of James's reign because he, being only Elizabeth's half-nephew, was less directly descended from her than Southampton (if he was indeed her son), and because English law barred non-English claimants from being crowned.

In this explanation, because Oxford had inserted veiled references to Southampton's true parentage into his plays and poems, a way had to be found to separate him from his works to make it less likely that those not already in the know would decipher the veiled references. The way found was to attribute the works to someone from the countryside who wasn't even in London much of the time, thereby cutting the connection between the works and Oxford, and between them and the court. Largely eliminating Oxford from the historical record contributed to the same end: the less that was known of his prominence in Elizabeth's court in the 1570s, the less likely it would be that anyone would connect him to any children born to Elizabeth, if any had been. This effort had to continue even in 1623 to protect not just the legitimacy of the reign of James I, but also that of the Stuart Dynasty. That's why the Shakespeare name was maintained even after Oxford died in 1604 and why it was maintained in the Folio of 1623 and beyond.

The Dynastic Succession Theory also explains how the campaign to destroy evidence of Oxford's authorship and of Shakspeare's non-authorship described by Ogburn could have succeeded: it must have been orchestrated by those who controlled State power. Only they would have had access to documents such as the records of the Privy Council and the Office of the Revels, which are missing for just those years likely to have mentioned the Earl of Oxford's theatrical activities.<sup>7</sup> Only State officers would have had the power to seize private papers of important officials and letters in private hands, as well as other items such as attendance records of the Stratford grammar school, which are complete except for the decade during which William Shakspeare would have been of age to attend. Only Robert Cecil, they claim—as Privy Council member since 1593, Secretary of State since 1596, leader of the Council since 1597, Lord Treasurer since 1608—had sufficient control over the reins of State power to have accomplished all this. The more extensive the use of State power, the greater the chances that it was used for reasons of State. And no use of such power would be more legitimate in their eyes than protecting the reign of the Stuart dynasty from challenges to its legitimacy. Such an effort to destroy evidence that would interfere with the cover story of Shakspeare's authorship was, as noted, supplemented by the creation of misleading evidence in the form of the prefatory material in the Folio, the oddities in Trinity Church, and the alterations to the portraits.

The theory fits well with either option posed regarding attribution of the plays. It explains why Oxford's family might have wanted his authorship hidden forever, and it explains why his family would have found it difficult to make an explicit statement of his authorship in 1623 had they wanted to do so. It explains why they created a cover story as flimsy as the one that was ultimately created.

## Conclusions

Which of these two scenarios took place? Were Oxford's relatives determined to conceal his authorship forever but were prevented from doing so definitively in 1623? Or did they want to announce his authorship openly but were prohibited from doing so at the time, which led to executing a weak cover story that could later be discarded?

I conclude the latter took place. Oxford's family intended to attribute the Shakespeare works to him but was prevented from doing so by the political forces in place at that time. I hold that they intended to identify Oxford as the real author at some point in the future, and that the weak cover story presented in 1623 was designed to set the stage for that happening. The principal reason for my conclusion is the portraits of Oxford that were altered to hide his identity. Not only were they altered to make the sitter more closely resemble the Droeshout engraving and to cover over or alter inscriptions indicating his true identity, they were labeled as portraits of "Shakespeare." New portraits of Shakspeare could easily and quickly have been prepared, yet Oxford's family chose to alter and rename half a dozen portraits of him—not portraits of anyone else, but of Oxford specifically—thereby tying him and no one else to the Shakespeare name.

I believe their intent was to bring the portraits forward later and publicly announce Oxford's authorship at a less politically sensitive moment. That did not happen, obviously, because of developments in English history that could not have been foreseen, principally the English Civil War and the Puritan Revolution that closed the theaters for 20 years. Later the effigy in the monument was changed to resemble the Droeshout engraving, and the sack of grain was refurbished to become a pillow. Oxford's descendants could not have predicted the degree to which scholars would allow themselves to be deceived by the official cover story, and, in many cases, to create, invent, distort, and forge evidence in support of it. Throughout it all the portraits—the Ashbourne of greatest importance among them—remained in the possession of Oxford's descendants, listed in family inventory records as being of "Shakespeare," as fabrications from the past that would unravel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Endnotes

1. See, for instance, Peter Dickson's *Bardgate: Shake-Speare and the Royalists Who Stole the Bard* (2011).
2. See also J.T. Looney's "*Shakespeare*" *Identified* (1920), 221–22.
3. See, for instance, Richard F. Whalen, "The Stratford Bust: A Monumental Fraud," *The Oxfordian*, vol. 8 (2005) 7–24; reprinted in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial* (136–151), edited by John M. Sha-han and Alexander Waugh for The Shakespeare Authorship Coalition.
4. See also Whalen's "'Look Not on this Picture:' Ambiguity in the Shake-speare First Folio," in *The 1623 Shakespeare First Folio: A Minority Report* (a special issue of *Brief Chronicles* edited by Roger Stritmatter, 2016), 47–59; and Katherine Chiljan's "First Folio Fraud," 69–87 in the same publication.
5. In the first of two articles, British scholar John M. Rollett presented evidence "which shows, or appears to show, that in the 1590s South-ampton was indeed thought by many people to be the Queen's son." "Was Southampton Regarded as the Son of the Queen? Part 1." *De Vere Society Newsletter* (January 2000): 8. In a second article on the same subject, he presented additional findings showing that "From purely literary evidence, the dynastic sonnets, it was deduced fifty years ago that Southampton was the son of Oxford and the Queen. However unlikely that deduction may have seemed, it is now apparently confirmed by documentary evidence from 1592 and '93, where one publication actu-ally styles him 'Dynasta,' a Prince, one of a line of hereditary princes or rulers." "Was Southampton Regarded as the Son of the Queen? Part 2". *De Vere Society Newsletter* (July 2000): 26.
6. Although it is true that a monarch's illegitimate children were prohibited by law from succeeding to the throne, political considerations of the moment, not words printed on a parchment, were paramount. In two of the three successions to the throne of England during Edward de Vere's lifetime, the person who became monarch had been forbidden by law from succeeding. Elizabeth Tudor became Elizabeth I in 1559 even though she had been declared illegitimate and forbidden from succeeding by Henry VIII's Will, and King of Scotland James VI became James I

of England in 1603 even though English law prohibited any but natural born Englishmen from rising to the crown. Again, political considerations, not formal laws, determined who would replace a deceased monarch.

7. On this point see Stephanie Hopkins Hughes's "Oxford's Worst Enemy: Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury," posted May 6, 2019 at <https://politicworm.com>, accessed May 20, 2022. "To me it seems obvious that this is the reason why so many paper trails from that period disappear just where one would expect to see some mention of the truth, in particular the otherwise inexplicable absence of Privy Council minutes relating to policy discussions around the phenomenal rise of the London Stage as a powerful new industry and the "Fourth Estate" of government. Someone had to have done this, and only Robert Cecil had the power, the opportunity, and the personal reasons."



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