When Did Shakespeare Die?

by Matt Hutchinson

One of the many mysteries surrounding Shakespeare is that there was no literary notice given of the death of William Shakspere of Stratford in 1616. On the other hand, there are numerous veiled allusions beginning in late 1604, which suggest that the great writer had passed and that he had been involved in scandalous behavior. Allusions occur in the following works:

- John Cooke’s Epigrams, Served out in 52 Severall Dishes, 1604/5
- Sir Thomas Smyth’s Voyage, 1605
- Ratses Ghost, published 1605
- William Barksted’s Mirrha, Mother of Adonis, 1607
- Thomas Dekker’s A Knight’s Conjuring, 1607
- John Marston’s What You Will, 1607
- Shake-speares Sonnets, 1609
- Henry Peacham’s Minerva Britanna, 1612
- Christopher Brooke’s The Ghost of Richard the Third, 1614
- Richard Brathwait’s Strapaddo for the Devil, 1615
- Envies Scourge and Vertues Honour, by M.L, 1605–1615
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We shall also look at information contained within the following works for further corroboration:

- Charles Fitzgeoffrey’s *Affaniae*, 1601
- Ben Jonson’s poem *To the Memory of my beloved The author, Mr. William Shakespeare*, 1623
- John Benson’s edition of *Poems by Wil Shakespeare*, 1640
- The Shakespeare Apocrypha
- The “Shakespeare Fest” of 1604–05 and the silence of Shakspere’s death in 1616

Let us examine the allusions in chronological order.

1601: *Affaniae* by Charles Fitzgeoffrey

Poet and clergyman Charles Fitzgeoffrey (1576–1638) was described by Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* as “that high touring Falcon” for his much-respected poem *Sir Francis Drake* of 1596. Fitzgeoffrey also published a collection of epigrams, *Affaniae*, written in Latin, at the height of the Essex Rebellion, which provide insight into Shakespeare’s posthumous plans as well as illustrating the danger contemporary writers faced in trying to talk about him.

Given the exhaustive list of writers Fitzgeoffrey mentions, we may wonder why he does not explicitly mention Shakespeare, as he was hugely popular at the time, *Venus and Adonis* alone having gone through numerous printings. In addition, on the February 7, 1601, Shakespeare’s *Richard II* was staged at the Globe as a propaganda device in the Essex Rebellion to try to encourage support for Essex among the London populace.

Incredibly, Mr. Shakspere was never called to account for the play in an age where writers were routinely interrogated, imprisoned and tortured.

Of interest in *Affaniae* are several epigrams dedicated to “Bardus” or “the bard,” which as Margo (formerly Mark) Anderson points out, should pique our interest, but which have been routinely ignored by orthodox scholars, perhaps because of their inflammatory nature. (Anderson, 2005, 336–37)
In epigram 64 of Book II, To Bardus, Fitzgeoffrey writes:

Is he sane, who writes for far posterity? The letter [document] will never be delivered, Bardus, hold your silence. (Translations by Dana F. Sutton)

The theme of posterity has often been considered the central one of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, especially the first 17, often referred to as the procreation sonnets. Meres had suggested in 1598 that at least some of Shakespeare’s sonnets were already circulating in manuscript.
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Epigram 35 of *Book I, On Bardus*, translates as

> You have been cautious, Bardus, saying “I shall publish my verse post-
> humously,” lest I wish you a speedy hanging.

In *Shakespeare Sonnets* the poet often refers to his poems as his “verse”.

> Who will believe my verse (17)
> Why is my verse so barren of new pride (76)
> your monument shall be my gentle verse (81)

Fitzgeoffrey is implying that there is something volatile and controversial about the sonnets, so much so that publishing them during the lifetime of the author would result in the author’s death.

It is worth noting that Marlowe and Oxford are believed to have died several years prior to the 1609 publication of *Shakespeare Sonnets*, but that Mr. Shakspere and authorship candidates Henry Neville, Francis Bacon, Mary Sidney, and William Stanley were reportedly still alive at the time of its publication. Mr. Shakspere is recorded as having died in 1616, an important date to bear in mind as we examine the allusions to Shakespeare having died prior to this date.

**Late 1604/5: Epigrams, Served out in 52 Severall Dishes for every man to tast without surfering by John Cooke**

Epigrammatist John Cooke’s *Epigrams Served out in 52 Severall Dishes for every man to tast without surfering* was entered into the Stationers’ Register on May 22, 1604, just over a month before Oxford’s passing. However, as Alexander Waugh points out, books were usually printed months after being registered. While the entry states Cooke’s book was registered as “fyftie [50] epigrams,” the final product contained 52, indicating that at least two were added after the book was registered. Since the dedication begins with an allusion to Christmas

> To you all but to thee Iudicious Reader, as most respected, I submit my twelue nights trifles, (for so I may truely call them) being then made instead of Christmas Carrols

Waugh’s contention that the book was printed around Christmas/New Year 1604/05 seems the most plausible. (Waugh 2020)

Waugh argues that epigram 12 implies Shakespeare is dead by the time of its publication in late 1604/05. As he demonstrates, Cooke begins epigram 12
by criticizing writers whose poems dedicated to the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of King James were of poor quality. Cooke continues

Some dare do this, some other humbly craves
For help of Spirits in their sleeping graves
As he that calle to Shakespeare, Jonson, Greene,
To write of their dead noble Queene [my emphasis]

Cooke here alludes to a poem from 1603, A Mourne-
full Dittie, Entitled Elizabeth’s Losse, together with a welcome
for King James by “T.P.,” in which the poet chastised the
lack of elegies for Elizabeth’s death. Cooke seems to
link “spirits in their sleeping graves” with “Shakespeare,
Jonson, Greene.”

Taken at face value, Cooke seems in error, as anyone
close to the London theatrical scene in 1604/05 would
know that while Greene was very much dead, Jonson was
very much alive and enjoying a successful career on the
London stage (he would live until 1637). Indeed, Diana
Price’s Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Biography shows Jonson
to have been the most well documented poet of the era
who left behind copious correspondence with his peers
(Price 310). Shakspere, on the other hand, was seemingly invisible, leaving
nothing behind that would suggest a life as a writer, while all allusions to
“Shakespeare” were mysterious, cryptic, and impersonal. (Price 296)

However, as Arthur Melzer writes in his seminal book Philosophy Between the
Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing, prior to the rise of democracy
and freedom of speech, writers often wrote “between the lines,” that is, their
works had a surface meaning but also an esoteric or “beneath the surface”
meaning that the learned reader had to discern. (Melzer)
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Did Cooke make a mistake? Or was he using a form of rhetoric to imply that Shakespeare was dead? Waugh argues the latter. By referring to the plural “spirits,” “their” and “graves,” it would logically require at least two of the three poets to be deceased. It may well have appeared to the judicious reader and follower of the theater that if Greene was clearly dead and Jonson clearly alive, the “mysterious William Shakespeare,” to borrow Charlton Ogburn Junior’s title (Ogburn, 1984), would also have had to have been deceased.

Adding corroboration to this interpretation, the couplet

Some dare do this, some other humbly *craves*
For help of Spirits in their sleeping *graves*

seems to evoke a well-known poem by Oxford:

Were I a king I could command content;
Were I obscure, unknown should be my cares;
And were I dead, no thoughts should me torment,
Nor words, nor wrongs, nor loves, nor hopes, nor fears.
A doubtful choice, of three things one to *crave*,
A kingdom, or a cottage, or a *grave*.

As noted by Michael Marcus, George Chapman’s 1608 play *The Conspiracy of Charles, Duke of Biron*, contains a soliloquy which the Stratfordian scholar James E. Hirsh recognized as a “manifest imitation of Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech” (Hirsh 274), and Chapman also references and uses the words “crave” and “grave” in the last couplet of the poem:

A fained passion in his hearing now,
(Which he thinks I perceau not) making conscience,
Of the reuolt that he hath vrdgd to me,
Which now he meanes to prosecute would sound,
How deepe he stands affected with that scruple.
As when the Moone hath comforted the Night,
And set the world in siluer of her light,
The Planets, Asterisims and whole state of Heauen,
In beames of gold desending; all the windes,
Bound vp in caues, chargd not to driue abrode,
Their cloudy heads; an vniuersall peace,
Proclaimd in scilence of the quiet earth.
Soone as her hot and dry fumes are let loose,
Stormes and cloudes mixing; sodainely put out.
The eyes of all those glories: The creation,
Turnd into Chaos, and we then desire,
For all our ioye of life, the death of sleepe;
So when the glories of our liues, mens loues,
Cleere consciences, our fames, and loyalties,  
That did vs worthy comfort, are eclipsd,  
Griefe and disgrace inuade vs; and for all,  
Our night of life besides, our Miserie 
Darke earth would ope and hide vs in our graues,

Was Chapman drawing a link between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Oxford?

**1605: Sir Thomas Smyth’s Voyage and Entertainment in Russia** by Anonymous

This falling away of them, the State so greatly blinded upon…with the many continually doubts of the issue, hastied the last breath of the once hoped-for Prince…that his father’s Empire and Government, was but as the Poetical Fury in a Stage-action, compleat yet with horrid and woeful Tragedies: a first, but no second to any *Hamlet*; and that now Revenge, just Revenge was comming with his Sword drawn against him, his royal Mother, and dearest Sister, to fill up those Murdering Scenes. (my emphasis)

The author then examines which writer, or “pen-man,” would do best to document this drama. He lists some of the finest candidates:

*Oh for some excellent pen-man to deplore their state: but he which would lively, naturally, or indeed poetically delineate or enumerate these occurrents, shall either lead you thereunto by a poeticall spirit, as could*
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well, if well he might the dead living, life-giving Sydney Prince of Poesie; or deify you with the Lord Salustius [du Bartas] divinity, or in an earth-deploring, sententious, high rapped Tragedy with the noble Fulke-Greville, not only give you the Idea, but the soul of the acting Idea; as well could, if so we would, the elaborate English Horace that gives number, weight, and measure to every word, to teach the reader by his industries, even our laureate worthy Benjamin [Jonson], whose Muse approves him (with our mother, the Ebrew signification to be) The elder Son, and haply to have been the Child of Sorrow: It were worthy so excellent rare wit: for my self I am neither Apollo nor Appelles, no nor any heir to the Muses: yet happily a younger brother, though I have as little bequeathed me, as many elder Brothers, and right born heirs gain by them: but Hic labor, Hoc opus est [this is the task].

Sidney, du Bartas, Greville and Jonson are each considered, before the author settles on the author best suited:

I am with the late English quick-spirited, clear-sighted Ovid: It is to be feared Dreaming, and think I see many strange and cruel actions, but say myself nothing all this while: Be it so that I am very drowsy, the heat of the climate, and of the State will excuse me; for great happiness to this mighty Empire is it, or would it have been, if the more part of their State affairs had been but Dreams, as they prove phantasmas for our years. (my emphasis)

Earlier in Sir Thomas Smythe’s Voyage, the writer had referred to Elizabeth, who had died two years earlier, as “her late Majesty of blessed memory.” As Bryan Wildenthal opines:

The author’s meaning may be paraphrased as follows: I agree with the recently deceased English Ovid, a quick witted and perceptive writer. As he said, and as I have learned, dreaming is to be feared, and one may witness many strange and cruel events yet say nothing about them. (Wildenthal 225)

So, after drawing a parallel between the events in Russia and Hamlet, and after considering several of England’s best writers, the anonymous author concludes that the late English Ovid would be best to document this drama, then notes that “It is to be feared dreaming, and think I see many strange and cruel actions.” Wildenthal notes Alexander Waugh saw this as an allusion to the most famous speech in literary history (Wildenthal 226; Waugh, 2018, location 1772), the “to be or not to be” soliloquy from Hamlet, which reads, in part:

To die—to sleep, No more;
and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: ’tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause…
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovere’d country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all…

That Ovid is the writer most closely associated with Shakespeare is generally accepted:

- In 1598, Francis Meres wrote “the witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare.”
- Jonathan Bate’s book *Shakespeare and Ovid* clearly demonstrates Ovid as Shakespeare’s favorite author and the writer most closely associated with Shakespeare’s works. (Bate, 1994)
- The British Library website states, “Ovid is widely agreed to have been Shakespeare’s favorite author. He is the only classical author to be named in any of Shakespeare’s works (in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, IV.ii.123), and of the few specific books read by Shakespeare’s characters, *Metamorphoses* appears twice (in *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*).”
- Oxford’s uncle, Arthur Golding, translated Ovid’s writings into English while tutoring Oxford as a teenager.
- Oxford sponsored the English translation of *Cardanus Comforte*, a meditation on death and the afterlife, described by orthodox scholars in the 19th and early 20th centuries as “Hamlet’s Book.”
- In *Speculum Tuscanismi*, Gabriel Harvey compared Oxford to Naso (Ovid’s full name being Publius Ovidius Naso).

Orthodox reaction to this reference has been to avoid it. John Payne Collier in 1880 recognized it as an early allusion to *Hamlet* and mentioned “the late English Ovid,” but did not attempt to identify him. (Collier 46) The compilers of the *Shakespere Allusion Book* published in 1909 also recognized it as a clear *Hamlet* allusion, but did not even mention the Ovid reference. (Ingleby 156)

A modern commentator, Margreta de Grazia, wrote in 2007:

Within two years of its publication, *Hamlet* was cited in the report of a recent, almost concurrent, event in world history: the fall of Boris
Godunov, Tsar of Russia. In 1605, the anonymous author of *Sir Thomas Smithes Voiage and Entertainment in Russia* likened the demise of Russia’s regime in 1605 to the tragedy of *Hamlet*. (de Grazia 45)

Yet de Grazia also avoided any mention of the reference to Ovid. A single word, “late,” implying that the author was recently deceased, seems to have discouraged orthodox scholars from recognizing what should be one of the first allusions to *Hamlet*, which we believe to have been published for the first time in 1603. On the Shakespeare Documented website, the page with the *Hamlet* reference is shown, but not the following page with the “Late English Ovid” reference.

As Cole perceptively notes:

> If [the author] was happy to identify “English Horace” as “Benjamin” (Jonson), why did he not identify “English Ovid” by name? (Cole 27)

Once again, there seems to be trepidation around revealing the true identity of Shakespeare.

### 1605: *Ratseis Ghost*

Ostensibly a pamphlet about the notorious highwayman Gamaliel Ratsey, but, as orthodox scholars Katherine Duncan-Jones and Andrew Gurr have noted, the anonymous *Ratseis Ghost* is a literary squib which contains numerous allusions to Shakespeare’s life and the King’s Men. Gurr notes that the document contains anecdotes which “provides a common view of the common player in his own times” (Gurr 80), while Duncan-Jones writes:

> The point of the narrative seems to be not so much to itemize Ratsey’s villainies as to use him as a mouthpiece for knowledgeable reflections on the current condition of drama in England. (Duncan-Jones 122)

In unpublished material for her book *“Shakespeare” by Another Name*, Margo Anderson writes:

> It spins an adventurous yarn about a highway rogue, based on an actual robber from the period named Gamaliel Ratsey. During the course of the action Ratsey meets up with some country jesters and actors. He watches their revels, pays them and then the next day summarily robs them. He takes a shine to one of the actors, though, and delivers some parting advice. (Anderson, 2015)

This advice includes, “Get thee to London, for if one man were dead, they will have much need of such a one as thou art. My conceit is such of thee that I durst venture all the money in my purse on thy head to play *Hamlet* with him for a wager.” (my emphasis)
Anderson continues that the author made it clear:

that a Shakespeare play is on his mind—and that someone involved in the story has just died, opening up new opportunities for a country player.

Ratsey continues in the pamphlet:

There thou shalt learn to be frugal—for players were never so thrifty as they are now about London—and to feed upon all men, to let none feed upon thee; to make thy hand a stranger to thy pocket, thy heart slow to perform thy tongue’s promise; and when thou feelest thy purse well lined, buy thee some place or lordship [a man with a title] in the country, that, growing weary of playing, thy money may there bring thee to dignity and reputation. Then thou needest care for no man, nor not for them that before made thee proud with speaking their words upon the stage.

The potential player replies, “I have heard indeed of some who have gone to London very meanly and have come in time to be exceedingly wealthy.”

Anderson opines further:

Shakspere, who bought a coat of arms in 1596 and New Place in Stratford-on-Avon in 1597, clearly fits Ratsey’s [description] of the player who’s bought “some place or lordship in the country, that, growing weary of playing, [his] money may there bring [him] to dignity and reputation.” Some orthodox critics even recognize this. By 1605, Shake-speare plays are abundant both in print and the theaters. Yet here is a Londoner plainly stating that a player fitting Shakspere’s description has earned his money “speaking [other people’s] words upon the stage.” (Anderson, 2015)
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1607: *Mirrha, Mother of Adonis* by William Barksted

Inspired by *Venus and Adonis*, William Barksted, a member of the King’s Revels Acting Company, published his long poem in 1607. Terry Ross and David Kathman describe the poem thus:

Barksted’s *Mirrha* is a narrative poem that expands on an incident in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Barksted graciously nods to Shakespeare, whose *Venus and Adonis* was one of the most popular and influential poems in the genre of the Ovidian brief epic. Barksted’s poem, in relating the tale of Adonis’s mother, is a sort of prequel to *Venus and Adonis*. At the end of his poem Barksted begins to tell the story of Venus’s love for Mirrha’s son, but then breaks off, as if realizing that he is encroaching on Shakespeare’s poem. (Ross & Kathman, n.d.)

Barskted frames his poem by intermittently addressing his muse. The final stanza pays tribute to Shakespeare:

But stay my Muse in thine owne confines keepe, 
& wage not warre with so deere lou’d a neighbor
But hauing sung thy day song, rest & fleepe
preserve thy small fame and his greater fauor:
His song was worthie merrit (Shakspeare hee)
sung the faire blossome, thou the withered tree
Laurell is due to him, his art and wit
hath purchast it, Cypres thy brow will fit.

Barksted often abruptly changes from past to present tense. It is instructive
to read this stanza as follows, following Ross and Kathman:

But stay my Muse in thine owne confines keepe,
& wage not warre with so deere lou’d a neighbor [Shakespeare]
But hauing sung thy [muse's] day song, rest & fleepe
preserve thy [muse's] small fame and his [Shakespeare’s] greater
faour:
His [Shakespeare’s] song was worthie merrit (Shakspeare hee)
sung the faire blossome, thou [muse] the withered tree
Laurell is due to him[Shakespeare], his [Shakespeare’s] art and wit
hath purchast it, Cypres thy [muse's] brow will fit.

As noted by Katherine Chiljan,

Barksted bade his muse not to compete ("wage not war") with Shake-
spere, “so dear lov’d a neighbor”. This line implies that Shakespeare
was no longer mortal, that he was a “neighbor” of a muse—the
Muses were goddesses in Greek mythology.” (Chiljan 261)

Joseph Sobran analyzes it thus:

“Was worthy merit”? Why is “Shakespeare” in 1607, already being
spoken of in the past tense? …The cypress was a symbol of mourning;
is this stanza a salute to a poet whom Barksted expects his readers to
understand is dead? The passage can only embarrass the mainstream
biographers, and it does. In spite of the severe shortage of records of
Shakespeare’s literary career, they rarely cite this item. (Sobran 144)

Sobran lists several orthodox scholars who fail to mention this reference
to Shakespeare, and, considering that Sobran published his book in 1997,
many more orthodox biographies published after 1997 also avoid it alto-
gether, such as Wells’s 2003 Shakespeare for All Time, Greenblatt’s 2004 Will
in The World, Ackroyd’s 2005 Shakespeare: The Biography, and Bate’s 2009 Soul
of The Age.

The only orthodox response to Sobran has been by Terry Ross and David
Kathman with their article, “William Barksted and Shakespeare.” Their coun-
terargument consists of only two points and addresses only some of Bark-
sted’s statements. First, they speak to Barksted’s use of the past tense in the
fifth line of the stanza:

His song was worthie merrit (Shakespeare hee)
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They note several examples from works of the period where works or songs are referenced in the past tense, but where the respective authors were still alive.

However, that does not mean that the past tense was always, or even frequently, used in such situations. We should contextualize the sentence relative to those around it. Further, when we place that line in the context of the paragraph—including the reference to Shakespeare being with the muses and the muse wearing cypress to mourn the deceased—there is every reason to believe that Barksted was using the past tense because Shakespeare was indeed dead.

As Wildenthal points out, Ross and Kathman fail to notice either of these points, but instead make the embarrassing argument that Sobran had misread the paragraph and meant to insinuate that the cypress, a symbol of mourning, was Shakespeare’s “due”:

Ross and Kathman claim patronizingly that “Sobran has simply misunderstood the lines: ‘clearly it is the laurel…not the cypress that Shakespeare is due…’.” But Sobran never said cypress was offered to Shakespeare. He merely said it “was a symbol of mourning” …Sobran’s whole point was to argue that the author Shakespeare was dead in 1607, *not in mourning*. And if he was dead, might that perhaps explain, as both Sobran and Chiljan suggested, *why Barksted (and his muse) are apparently in mourning?* After all, Sobran suggested, “this stanza is a salute [by Barksted] to a poet” he thinks “is deceased.” That would logically suggest Barksted is in mourning for a late poet he admired. People typically mourn others who are deceased. Why do Ross & Kathman somehow think that Sobran somehow meant to suggest that Barksted somehow meant to suggest that Shakespeare should somehow *mourn himself*? (Wildenthal 236–37)

Ross and Kathman also fail to contextualize the life of Barksted properly, despite devoting part of their essay to a short biography (perhaps to try and pad out their lackluster argument). Barksted was close to both Henry and Elizabeth de Vere, and dedicated works to them both. He was clearly in a position to know the truth.

Finally, the phrase “Laurel is due to him” in Barksted’s poem suggests Shakespeare has not gotten the recognition he deserved. As Chiljan concludes:

The overall meaning of Barksted’s passage is that the great Shakespeare is dead, but tributes to him are still lacking (“*Laurel is due to him*”). It is true that whatever year the great author had died, no tributes marked the occasion. (Chiljan 261)
1607: *A Knight’s Conjuring* by Thomas Dekker

Thomas Dekker (1572–1632) was a prolific poet and pamphleteer, whose 1607 pamphlet *A Knight’s Conjuring* provides more clues to Shakespeare’s death.

In Larry Robbins’ critical edition of *A Knight’s Conjuring*, he states “its purpose is to answer Nashe’s *Pierce Penilessse, Supplication to the Devil*” (Robbins 14), and indeed it may be seen in some respects as *Pierce Penilessse Part II*.

For those unfamiliar with the original work, Thomas Nashe’s 1592 publication was one of the best-selling pamphlets of the day, no doubt as Nashe conflated both his own and Oxford’s personas into the titular character (Anderson, 2002, 29), enabling him to pass on secrets of state to his readership, using the technique necessary for plausible deniability described by Edmund Spenser in his *Faire Queene*, “Under one hood to shadow faces twain.” Even the Wikipedia entry for *Pierce Penilesse* states that “at times the identity of Pierce seems to conflate with Nashe’s own. But Nashe also portrays Pierce as something of an arrogant and prodigal fool.”

As noted by Margo Anderson, in Dekker’s 1606 publication *News From Hell*, Dekker differentiates Nashe from Pierce Penilesse and confirms Nashe was a companion of de Vere:

> And thou, into whose soule (if euer there were a Pithagorean Metempsuchosis) the raptures of that fierie and inconfinable Italian spirit were bounteously and boundlesly infused, thou sometimes Secretary to Pierce Pennylesse, and Master of his requests, ingenious, ingenuous, fluent, facetious, T. Nash.

Anderson writes that “Dekker obviously isn’t calling Nashe a ‘sometimes secretary’ to himself.” (Anderson, 2002, 29)

Returning to *A Knight’s Conjuring*, the climax, in the words of traditionalist Robbins, “finds Pierce Penilesse in one of the Elizian gardens.” (Robbins 38)

> Elizian,” the *OED* informs us, is a variant of Elysium, which is a conception of the afterlife…. The Elysian Fields were, according to Homer, located on the western edge of the Earth by the stream of Okeanos.
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To the orthodox, Pierce Penilesse is Nashe, yet Dekker has made it clear to his readers he can also be the Earl of Oxford.

Gathered in Elysium are deceased writers of note, including Thomas Watson (d.1592), Thomas Kyd (1594) and Edmund Spenser (1599). Mentioned next are Christopher Marlowe (d.1593), Robert Greene (1592) and George Peele (1596), the three of whom were

laughing to see Nash (that was but newly come to their colledge) still haunted with the sharpe and Satyricall spirit that followd him heere upon earth: for Nash inveyed bitterly (as he had wont to do) against dry-fisted Patrons, accusing them of his untimely death, because if they had given his Muse that cherishment which shee most worthily deserved, hee had fed to his dying day on fat Capons, burnt sack and suger, and not so desperately have venturde his life, and shortend his days by keeping company with pickle herrings.

The line “still haunted with the sharpe and Satyricall spirit that followd him heere upon earth” is written in the typically ambiguous manner writers of this period adopted for plausible deniability: it could be interpreted metaphorically that Nashe was still possessed by the satirical wit displayed in his pamphlets, or that a spirit—a deceased person—had followed Nashe to Elysium, that is, died after him. We do not know exactly when Nashe passed, but Charles Fitzgeoffrey refers to him as being deceased in his 1601 publication *Affaniae*, as does The Return from Parnassus of the same year, while Oxford died in 1604.

![Figure 7: Josef Abel’s ‘Elysium’, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.](image-url)
The remainder of the quotation is an allusion to a previous Nashe work. “Is there an allusion here to the banquet ‘pickled herrings’ which proved fatal to poor Greene, and at which Nash was present?” asks E.F. Rimbault, editor of Dekker’s work in 1842. “Undoubtedly there is.” (Rimbault 100)

The banquet, described by Nashe in his 1592 Strange News (originally called The Apology of Pierce Penilesse), would have been immediately recognized by his readers. As Charles Wisner Barrell noted, the dedication also introduced the reader to Will Monox (or Will “My Ox”), with his “great dagger” (or sword of state, a literal sword Oxford carried in Court processions in his inherited role as Lord Great Chamberlain). Nashe also equated Master Apis lapis (stubborn ox) with “Gentle Master William, that learned writer.” (Barrell, 1944)

*A Knight’s Conjuring* ends with the entry of Henry Chettle to Elysium; Chettle is believed to have died circa 1606, bookending the departed writers of merit.

Also in 1606, Dekker collaborated with John Webster on *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, printed in 1607. The play opens with King Edward on his deathbed, the main characters waiting outside for the preacher. The preacher enters and exclaims:

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Life, life, though death his body doe disseuer,
Our King lives with the King of heaven for ever.
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Is this play on “ever” an allusion to Oxford? The original name of the de Vere family was Ver, with a terminal *e* added when the name was anglicized upon the family’s migration from France to England. E. Ver is mentioned in numerous works such as John Southern’s *Pandora*, dedicated to “Edward De ver,” while *A Hundreth Sundry Flowres* and *Willobie His Avisa* both contain poems by the pseudonymous “Ever or Never.”

An allusion to a Shakespeare play adds weight to this argument. The character Guilford states:

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Peace rest his soul!
His sins be buried in his grave,
And not remember’d in his epitaph.
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Orthodox scholars from as long ago as 1909 identify this as an allusion to Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV* (Ingleby 183):

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Thy ignomy sleep with thee in the grave,
But not remember’d in thy epitaph. (V.iv)
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Dekker and Webster seem to be making the point that the deceased man had “sinned” and, for this reason, his death was not widely reported in order to avoid resurrecting those sins in his epitaph.
When Did Shakespeare Die?

1607: What You Will by John Marston

In The Scourge of Villainy, published in 1598, Marston wrote of his favorite, hidden poet who does not get the respect he deserves. This poet is not named, but Marston comes close:

Far fly thy fame! Most, most beloved! Whose silent name one letter bounds. Thy judicial style I ever honour, and thy unvalued worth, may mount fair place, when apes are turned forth. (my emphasis)

As noted by Charlton Ogburn, Jr., the name Edward De Vere is bounded by one letter—‘E’ (Ogburn 401–02). Only four other writers of the 130 dramatists in Early English Autographs meet this criterion:

Nicholas Breton
William Crashaw
Richard Hooker
Richard Mulcaster

Breton received recognition as a writer, while the latter three are minor and inconsequential. Supporting the argument that Marston is referring to Shakespeare, in Marston’s The Metamorphosis of Pygmalion’s Image, he writes:

So Labeo did complaine his loue was stone,
Obdurate, flinty, so relentlesse none:

These lines are often quoted to support the theory that Marston’s Labeo is Shakespeare, as they are clearly seen as referencing Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis (see Gibson 61–62):

Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel?
Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth
(Lines 199–200)
The character of Labeo also appears in Joseph Hall’s *Virgedemiurum*, in what many see as an authorship allusion describing the use of an allonym or front. Hall castigates Labeo and compares his use of another’s name to that of an octopus who squirts an ink-like substance to create a diversion in which to hide:

Long as the craftie Cuttle lieth sure  
In the blacke Cloude of his thicke vomiture;  
Who list complains of wronged faith or fame  
When hee may shift it to anothers name?

The argument is that Labeo was Shakespeare, and that the author behind Shakespeare was writing under another person’s name. (Gibson 61–62)

In 1607 Marston published the play *What You Will*. As Richard Malim points out, Marston references Shakespeare:

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

Then, there is a reference to a man named Aretine, described as a “dear spirit” who is “most of me beloved”:

That Aretine, that most of me beloved, who in rich esteem I prize his soul I term myself.

This is the same language Marston used in 1598 in *The Scourge of Villainy* to describe the hidden author with the silent name. Malim states that

Clearly that “most of me beloved” has died between the first reference in 1599 and this one in 1607, where Oxford is compared to [the great Italian writer] Pietro Aretino. (Malim 200–201)

While Aretino was indeed considered a great writer, he was also the subject of much scandal and disgrace, which seems a fitting foil for the author of *Shake-speares Sonnets*, who describes himself as being embroiled in a “vulgar scandal.”

In their pamphlet quarrel, Harvey and Nashe regularly referred to Aretino, from Nashe’s 1592 *Pierce Penilesse* to his last work in 1599, when their works were banned. In *Aretino and the Harvey-Nashe Quarrel*, David McPherson describes Aretino as being regarded by the Elizabethans as “the symbol, the very type of venery” (McPherson 1), which seems very similar both to Oxford’s documented life and to the “Ver” character in Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*.

While Harvey spoke highly of Aretine in his 1580 letters to Edmund Spenser, once Nashe began using the name in 1592 with *Pierce Penilesse,*
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Harvey reverses his opinion. He refers to Nashe as “the true English Are-tine” and chastises him and his friends for their bawdy writings and behavior. McPherson states Nashe makes the “ridiculous” claim in *The Unfortunate Traveller* that Aretine is superior to Tully, Virgil, Ouid and Seneca, yet it becomes clear that Nashe is referring to Oxford, not the historical figure, and as with the character of “Pierce Penilesse,” Nashe and Harvey seem to have conflated Nashe and Oxford under the one name.

1609: *Shake-speares Sonnets*

Published in 1609, few documents in the history of English literature have confounded critics like *Shake-speares Sonnets*. The space between the lines at the bottom of the title page, where the author’s name typically appeared, is blank.

The title is unusual. As Sobran writes:

> *Shake-speares Sonnets* would not have been the poet’s title. Writers do not ordinarily speak of themselves in the third person. Other sonneteers of the time called their works *Delia, Astrophel and Stella*, *Amoretti, Idea, Diana, Fidessa, Chloris, Phyllis*...none puts his own name in the title. The phrase “Shake-speares Sonnets” has a kind of finality: it implies that there will be no more sonnets by this poet. Otherwise, the publisher might have called the collection “*Sonnets, by William Shake-speare.*” (Sobran 145)

Yet most damaging is the phrase “ever-living poet” in the dedication (see figure 10).

As Diana Price notes:

> An ever-living poet is a dead poet. The adjective is synonymous with immortal and used to describe deities, nonhuman entities, or dead persons. David W. Foster researched the term extensively but failed to find “any instance of ever-living used in a Renaissance text to describe a living mortal”.... There are two possibilities. Either Thorpe used the term “ever-living” incorrectly, or the poet Shake-speare was dead by 1609. William Shakspere of Stratford died in 1616”. (Price 153–54)

Most orthodox critics avoid dealing with these issues altogether. Equally vexing is how these same scholars can, in an age recognized by Wells and
Edmondson as one in which most sonnets were autobiographical, fail to be puzzled by some of the author’s confessions within the sonnets:

• The candidacy for the young man in the Sonnets has been mostly for Southampton, and to a lesser extent, William Herbert. As both men were nobles, it would be inconceivable for a writer from Shakspere’s social standing to address them in such ways as “we must not be foes.” (Sonnet 40)

• The poet states that he has been a victim of a “vulgar scandal stamp’d upon my brow” (112), that he has been ostracized and that “in disgrace in fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state.” (29)

• The author literally says that his name will be buried when he dies: “I, once gone, to all the world must die” (81) “My name be buried where my body is, and live no more, to shame nor me nor you.” (72)
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1612: *Minerva Brittana* by Henry Peacham

In 1612 Henry Peacham published an emblem book, a book of illustrations under which cryptic verses were printed. The reader was invited to puzzle over the possible meanings. As Peacham writes in his introduction, the book conveys subjects that “could not have beene openly, but to our praeiudice revealed.”

The cover depicts a writer hidden behind a theater curtain, whose body is obscured but who is writing “Mente Videbor”—“I will be perceived in the mind.” Indeed, so intriguing is the cover that the Shakespearean Authorship Trust (established in 1922) uses the center illustration as its banner image. The full cover is as follows:

![Figure 11: Full cover of Minerva Brittana by Henry Peacham, 1612.](image-url)
The title *Minerva Britanna* means “Britain’s Minerva.” Minerva, the Roman goddess of the arts, was equated with Pallas Athena from the 2nd century BCE onward. The title can thus be read as “Britain’s Pallas” or “Britain’s Spear shaker.” This alone should make the document of enormous interest to scholars. Images of Pallas “the spear shaker” are below:

![Figure 12: Pallas Athena, the Spear Shaker in numerous poses, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.](image)

As Roger Stritmatter notes:

> the image of Minerva’s spear even features prominently in Peacham’s introductory Latin verses dedicating his emblem book to Henry Stuart: … “She spins everywhere her ashen spear in her virile right hand, and all around the air reverberates with misaimed blows.” (Stritmatter 9)

While most readers are understandably transfixed by the central picture on the title page, when looking at the whole cover it becomes obvious that the main picture is framed within a funerary monument—a physical structure that commemorates a dead person:

![Figure 13: Several funerary monuments, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.](image)

The interpretation of the mysterious cover has been the subject of much discussion among researchers, from Eva Turner Clark (1937), John Astley-Cox (1947), Peter W. Dickson (1998), Noemi Magri (1999), Margo Anderson (2005) and particularly Roger Stritmatter (2000), whose paper in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* presents a thorough treatment of the issue.
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The Latin on the scroll draped over the laurel wreath reads “vivitur ingenio, caetera mortis erunt,” or “Genius lives on, all else is mortal,” reaffirming the theme of mortality.

So, the title page seems to be suggesting:

- Britain’s spear-shaker
- A hidden playwright
- Funerary symbolism—the playwright is dead.

As Stritmatter notes, Peacham plays on the relationship between “eye” and “i” throughout his work, as does William Segar, Garter King of Arms, in his introductory poem:

Readers of Segar’s poem will be struck by the repeated emphasis on the eye as the organ of vision and by the implied English language pun in which “i” and “eye” are homophones. This identity is often activated in Peacham’s book, as if to emphasize that not only “eyes”—which are needed for seeing emblems—and “minds”—which are needed for understanding them—but also “i’s”—a small and apparently innocuous letter of the alphabet are needed for comprehending Peacham’s message. (Stritmatter 11)

Stritmatter writes:

The form VIDEBOR in Peacham’s inscription means “I shall be seen.” It completes the ablative case of MENTE; the inscription declares that “by the mind—” that is not merely with the eyes—“I shall be seen.” Apparently, however, the pen in Peacham’s drawing is in the process of writing a diacritic dot on a small i after the R in VIDEBOR. (Stritmatter 10)

Margo Anderson writes:

However, there is no Latin word “videburi.” Yet “Videburi” makes a perfect anagram of the sentence—and would also make sense of the stray period between the two words. Unscramble “MENTE. VIDEBOR,” and one Latin phrase makes all the pieces of the puzzle fit together: TIBINOM. DE VERE. Or in English: “Thy name is de Vere.” (Anderson, 2005, 367)
Adding weight to *Minerva Brittana* containing allusions to Shakespeare, Peter Dawkins, following James Arther, points out that the engraving on page 33 seems to refer to Shakespeare’s poem *Lucrece* (Dawkins 353–54):

For much imaginary work was there,
Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,
That for Achilles’ image stood his spear,
Griped in an armed hand; himself, behind,
Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:
A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head,
Stood for the whole to be imagined.  
*Lucrece*, lines 1422–28

**Figure 15:** From *Minerva Brittana*, an image of a gloved hand holding a lance.

### 1614: *The Ghost of Richard III* by Christopher Brooke

Brooke’s epic poem *The Ghost of Richard III* (1614) features the ghost of the notorious main character of Shakespeare’s play as the protagonist speaking about his life. Throughout the work are allusions, recognized by orthodox scholars Ingleby, Toulin Smith and Furnivall in their 1909 *Shakspere Allusion Book*, to various passages from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. (Ingleby 249–50) In Part II, the ghost of Richard praises the author who made him such a memorable character, yet he does not use the author’s name. Ingleby et al take him to be Shakespeare:

*To him that impt [added to] my fame with Clio’s quill,*
Whose magic raised me from oblivion’s den;
*That write my story on the Muses’ hill,*
And with my actions dignified his pen:
He that from Helicon sends many a rill,*
Whose nectared veins, are drunk by thirsty men;
*Crowned be his style with fame, his head with bays;*  
*And none detract, but gratulate bis praise* (my emphasis)
When Did Shakespeare Die?

Brooke speaks of Shakespeare as being with the muses, who sends “rills” from [Mount] Helicon, the home of the Gods. Note that “sends” is in the present tense, while “impt,” “raised,” “writ,” “dignified,” all words Brooke uses to describe the author’s work on the play, are in the past tense. As Wildenthal writes:

I think most readers would concede this passage gives at least the impression that this unnamed playwright is deceased. He now seems to live with the muses, echoing Barksted’s Myrrha. (Wildenthal 305)

Also interesting is the concluding couplet. As Chiljan notes, the strange comment “And none detract” seems to imply “that people were disparaging Shakespeare” (Chiljan 265), once again suggestive of the “vulgar scandal” mentioned in the Sonnets.

Why does Brooke not name the author of Richard III? If Mr. Shakspere was the author, there should be no problem in praising him openly. As Wildenthal postulates, “Does that suggest a common awareness at the time that the name was a pseudonym?” (Wildenthal 306)
1605–1615: *Envies Scourge and Vertues Honour* by M.L.

As noted by Katherine Chiljan, the only existing copy of this long poem has a missing title page, and therefore no date on it. The author, “M.L.,” has not been identified and the initials do not suggest any writer of the time, indicating the publication may have been pseudonymous. Based on the type of paper, the publisher’s marks and the type of ink used, orthodox scholars have dated it to between 1605 and 1615. (Chiljan 262) Mr. Shakspere was therefore still alive at the time.

After implying the subject of their verse is dead, and likely alluding to *Venus and Adonis* (which on the title page, alluded to the Castalian springs):

> I know lines steep’d in *dew of Castalie*
> have power to bring to life *a buried man* (my emphasis) (Stanza 19)

The author seems to confess his or her shame at their initial opinion of their subject, yet having now changed their mind, it seems too late:

> Dear nurslings of Parnassus be not won
> by rash credulity to leave to time
> *a shameful calendar of deeds misdone*
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by those which never yet committed crime;
My selfe instead a reverend wit have blamed
without desert, whereof I am ashamed.

Pardon sweet wit (which has a liberal part
of pure infusion in thy happy brain)
My sorrowing sohs have bloodless left my heart,
that giddy rage so clear a spring did stain,
let worthless lines be scattered here and there,
but verses live supported by a speare.

Now I doe praise what I disprais’d of late
And hold thy favorits in high admire;
That held thy virtues at such worthie rate,
Imbracing virtue with so great desire;
Ye rare examples live with fame protected,
That others may affect what you affected
(my emphasis) (Stanzas 24–26)

Some points to note:

• The phrasing “verses live supported by a speare” is an interesting one, perhaps indicating a pseudonym, and likely alluding to Shakespeare. As Chiljan contends, “M.L. was not just making a pun—he was openly saying that Shakespeare’s verses exist because they are ‘supported’ by a pen name.” (Chiljan 262)

• “reverend” wit may be a pun on Vere’s name.

• “so clear a spring did stain,” while metaphorically suggesting Shakespeare had a stained reputation, may also have been seen by readers as an allusion to the Latin word for spring, Ver, evoking Nashe’s character Ver or “The Spring” in his play Summer’s Last Will and Testament, seen as a caricature of Oxford (See Lamb, n.d.).

The likely pre-1615 allusion to Shakespeare in a poem about a deceased poet is another problematic piece of evidence for the orthodox theory of authorship.
1615: A *Strappado for the Devil* by Richard Brathwaite

As noted by Margo Anderson, poet Richard Brathwaite’s 1615 satire *A Strappado for the Divell* is a nostalgic look back at the reign of Elizabeth (Anderson, 2005, 368), and alludes to numerous Shakespearean works throughout, including *Venus and Adonis*:

*Ile be thy Venus, pretty Ducke I will,*  
*And though lesse faire, yet I have farre more skill,*  
*In Loves affaires: for if I Adon had,*  
*As Venus had: I could have taught the lad*  
*To have been far more forward than he was,*  
*And not have dallied with so apt a lasse.*

and *Richard III*:

*If I had liv’d but in King Richards dayes,*  
*Who in his heat of passion, midst the force*  
*Of his Assailants troubled many waies*  
*Crying A horse, a Kingdome for a horse.*  
*O then my horse which now at Livery stayes,*  
*Had been set free, where now hee’s forc’t to stand,*  
*And like to fall into the Ostler’s hand*
When Did Shakespeare Die?

Reminiscing about the heyday of Elizabeth and criticizing Jacobean poets as no match for those who lived during the Elizabethan era, Brathwaite writes:

Yea some I know are Poets in this time
Who write of swains, might write as well of swine,
For th’profit of their labours is so small,
As t’were farre better not to write at all….

Using the past tense, Brathwaite writes of the pre-eminent author of the Elizabethan age:

Yea, this I know I may be bold to say,
Thames ne’er had swans that sung more sweet than they,
[Elizabethan authors]
It’s true I may avow it, that ne’er was sung,
Chanted in any age by swains so young,
With more delight than was perform’d by them,
Prettily shadow’d in a borrowed name,
And long may England’s thespian springs be known (my emphasis)

Anderson proffers a translation:

Let me tell you: London never saw writers more gifted than the one I saw during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. And never were there more delightful lays than the ones performed by youth whose author wrote under a borrowed name. (Anderson, 2005, 368–69)

It is possible Brathwaite was referring to someone other than Shakespeare, but given the multiple allusions to Shakespeare throughout, who else would be regarded as the premier Elizabethan poet (who wrote under someone else’s name)? Brathwaite seemed to think of his favorite author as an Elizabethan poet, rather than an Elizabethan-Jacobean hybrid as many orthodox scholars suggest.

1623: To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare (First Folio) by Ben Jonson

William Shakspere died in 1616, yet there are allusions to Shakespeare after then that still allude to Oxford’s death in 1604. Regarding one of these, Alexander Waugh argues persuasively (Waugh, 2019) that the conclusion to Jonson’s poem to Shakespeare in the 1623 First Folio speaks of Shakespeare’s death:

But stay, I see thee in the hemisphere
Advanc’d, and made a constellation there!
Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage
Or influence, chide or cheer the drooping stage;
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourn’d like night,
And despairs day, but for thy volume’s light.

“Since thy flight from hence”—since your departure from here; since your death. Jonson here appears to be alluding to the supernova SL 1604, also known as “Kepler’s supernova”:

![Figure 19: Kepler’s Supernova, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution and Wikimedia Commons.](image)

As Waugh demonstrates, it exploded just months after Oxford's death in June 1604 and appeared in the skies, growing brighter and brighter for 20 days straight (I see thee in the hemisphere, Advanc’d) in the constellation Ophiuchus (and made a constellation there!). It was the only star of the era that was visible during the night and the day (bath mourn’d like night, And despairs day, but for thy volume’s light). This was a major astronomical event; no other new star would appear that century, so it cannot apply to Mr. Shakspere’s death.

1640: Poems by Wil. Shake-speare Gent edited by John Benson

As Steven Steinburg notes, Benson’s publication gives clues pertaining to the death of “Shakespeare.” (Steinburg, 398–400) In “To the reader” Benson writes:

I here presume, under favour, to present to your view some excellent and sweetly composed poems of Master William Shakespeare, which in themselves appear of the same purity the author himself, then living, avouched. They had not the fortune, by reason of their infancy in his death, to have the due accommodation of proportionable glory with the rest of his ever-living works. (my emphasis)

“Infancy” derives from the Latin infantia, meaning inability to speak, pertaining to the first year or two after birth. Since the Sonnets were published in 1609, this suggests a terminus ante quem—they cannot have been written after
1609. Yet if the author finished them and died while they were in their infancy, this would imply the author would be dead by 1610/11 at the latest. This is incompatible with the deaths of Neville (1615), Shakspere (1616), Mary Sidney (1621), Bacon (1626) and Derby (1642).

Figure 20: This controversial edition of Shakespeare’s sonnets and miscellaneous poems was published in 1640 by John Benson. He included the majority of Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets (omitting seven), printed alongside longer poems like “A Lover’s Complaint” (1609), “The Phoenix and the Turtle” (1601) and others selected from The Passionate Pilgrim anthology (1599).

Other Considerations

The Shakespeare Apocrypha

Plays bearing the name William Shakespeare began to appear shortly after Oxford died, but they are not thought by scholars on either side of the authorship question to have been written by Shakespeare. While apocryphal plays such as Locrine (1595) and Thomas Lord Cromwell (1602) were published under the initials W.S., there were numerous writers audiences could have interpreted this as referring to, such as William Smith or William Stanley. From 1605, however, not only do we see allusions to Shakespeare being dead, but the surname being attached to published works belonging to the Shakespeare Apocrypha, such as

The London Prodigal, 1605, “By William Shakespeare”
A Yorkshire Tragedy, 1608, “Written by W. Shakspeare”

Was it easier to publish under the full name now that the author was no longer alive to protest? As Robert Detobel notes in Authorial Rights in Shakespeare’s Time, it “was necessary for a stationer to obtain the author’s
permission to publish his work,” although this was forfeit upon the death of the author. (Detobel, 2001, 5)

Figure 21: Pre-1604: (top) title pages of Locrine and Thomas Lord Cromwell were published under the initials W.S. Post-1604: (bottom) title pages of The London Prodigall and A Yorkshire Tragedy.
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The “Shakespeare Fest” of 1604–05 and the Silence of 1616

When a great artist dies, there is usually an outpouring of tributes and a surge of interest in their works. That didn’t happen in 1616 when Mr. Shakspere died, but there was a swell in popularity in the works of Shakespeare in late 1604–05 after Oxford had passed away. An ornate version of *Hamlet* was published in 1604, the “good quarto” which, as Anderson writes, “was to be as regal a funeral send-off for Shake-speare as the closing scene of the Danish tragedy.” (Anderson, 2005, 361)

As Richard Malim points out, the Christmas Revels at court at the end of 1604 “bear all the signs of a Shake-speare fest” which could be seen as a sending-off of the author. (Malim 199) The plays performed at Court were:

- November 1, 1604: *Othello*
- November 4, 1604: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- December 26, 1604: *Measure for Measure*
- December 28, 1604: *The Comedy of Errors*
- January 7, 1605: *Henry V*
- January 8, 1605: *Every Man Out of His Humour* (Jonson)
- January 9, 1605: *Love’s Labor’s Lost*
- February 2, 1605: *Every Man in His Humour* (Jonson)
- February 10, 1605: *The Merchant of Venice*
- February 11, 1605: *The Spanish Maze* [argued by Stritmatter and Kositsky (2007) to be an early version of *The Tempest*]
- February 12, 1605: *The Merchant of Venice*

As Malim writes:

> On this punishing schedule one critic writes: “I find it hard to believe that so unrelenting a piece of Jonsonian improvisation as *Every Man Out* had retained its popular appeal for the five years since its first performance.” As usual, when “orthodox” critics are puzzled there is an obvious explanation. The play contains the most direct and complete refutation of the pretensions of William Shakespeare as author, and Jonson, probably the artistic director of the court revels, may well have wanted this aspect set out in the clearest terms to the court. (Malim 199–200)

Indeed, Jonson begins *Every Man Out of his Humour* with the character Macilente addressing the audience with “My Mind to me a Kingdom is,” the
title of an unpublished poem by Oxford which would have been known to those who had seen it in manuscript. Macilente then observes the character Sogliardo, believed to be a caricature of Will Shakspere, and states he could “sink my soul into the earth with sorrow.” In 1599, the year after the name Shakespeare was first attached to the plays, is Jonson telling us of the devastation Oxford had for losing control over his works?

The death of Mr. Shakspere in 1616 in Stratford-upon-Avon, on the other hand, brought silence. In a 2003 documentary, Jonathan Bate makes a feeble attempt to explain it away, saying “news tended not to travel, there was no news media.” (Rubbo, 50:40)

While a superficial glance at the records may support Bate’s comment—the first newspaper in England began in 1665, while the Royal Mail began in 1516 but was not made available to the public until 1635—a closer investigation shows him to be incorrect.

Paul Voss, author of *Elizabethan News Pamphlets: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe & the Birth of Journalism*, clearly shows that Elizabethan news pamphlets exploded in popularity in 1589 to feed the demand for news and gossip, both locally and abroad, and acted as the precursors to the development of the newspaper in England. (Voss, 2001)

In *Masters of the Post: The Authorized History of the Royal Mail*, Duncan Campbell-Smith writes:

References to the works of the carriers are common enough by the 1580s to show that there was an efficient postal service at the time available throughout the country, innkeepers and carriers being ready to arrange for local deliveries. (Campbell-Smith, Location No. 476).

Further, Campbell-Smith tells us while “the exhaustive scrutiny of every archive with even the remotest connection to the Bard” has provided nothing, it has however “unearthed plenty of details about a man called William Greenway, Stratford’s principal common carrier.” Indeed, Stratford-upon-Avon had at least three carriers during Shakspere’s lifetime; a trip to London with cart and horse would take three days while by horse alone, fewer than two.

Greenway had been servicing the London-Stratford route since 1581 and his trip “played an indispensable role *carrying letters, messages, food, goods and gossip* back and forth” (my emphasis) (Campbell-Smith, Location No. 476).
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Did Oxford Actually die in June 1604?

In an article in the 2004 issue of *The Oxfordian*, Christopher Paul analyzes the many mysterious circumstances surrounding Oxford’s death, such as the cause of death and location of his body being unknown and the guarded language in letters discussing his passing. One explanation that Paul considers is that Oxford did not actually die in June of 1604. (Paul, 2004)

There are many reasons that could explain these mysteries without having to resort to this hypothesis. One was put forward by Robert Detobel in the same volume with his article on the “suicide hypothesis,” arguing Oxford may have ended his own life, which would likely explain much of the silence and why Oxford left no will. (Detobel, 2004) Likewise, the “vulgar scandal” described in the Sonnets, including the lines “my name be buried where my body is, and live no more, to shame nor me nor you” seems to anticipate a sensitive time for the family of the poet after his death, which would also likely explain the silence if consensus can be reached on what exactly the vulgar scandal was.

As to the contention that Oxford may have survived past June 1604, Paul produces only a handful of ambiguously worded documents—such as one in which it is not clear whether “Lord Oxford” refers to the 17th or 18th Earl, or both—against a mass of documented evidence in support of a June 1604 death. Paul truncates this evidence, declaring there are “far too many [documents] to cite them all” (Paul 43) and which, if laid out, would dwarf his counterevidence, such as the sworn testimony of jurors at Oxford’s Inquisition post-mortem. There is a strong *prima facie* case for Oxford dying in June 1604 and the onus is surely on those disputing this to provide direct evidence, which, to my knowledge, has not been produced since the publication of Paul’s article.

Finally, a logical distinction should be made that, even if evidence was to emerge that Oxford did survive after 1604 and lived out his remaining years in near secrecy, this would not necessarily invalidate the above findings. As Paul himself points out, “If Edward de Vere did not die on the 24th of June 1604, then a considerable effort was made to make it look as though he did” (Paul 7), with the effect that the large majority of his contemporaries may well have assumed that this was the case and paid veiled tribute to him.
Conclusions

Taken together, the assembled evidence casts serious doubt over the plausibility of William Shakspere as the author of the Shakespeare canon. The results also undermine the viability of most of the popular alternative candidates, including Henry Neville, Francis Bacon, Mary Sidney and William Stanley.

Figure 22: The lifespan of Mr. Shakspere and the 6 most popular authorship candidates, with the vertical arrows indicating allusions to the author being dead.

Can plausible arguments be put forward to counter these findings? Can “Marlovians,” for example, find pre-1604 references to “Shakespeare” being dead that would support their candidate? If not, the Oxfordian theory is strengthened by these findings.
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