


Was ‘Shakspere’ also a Spelling of ‘Shakespeare’?

Strat Stats Fail to Prove It

by Richard F. Whalen

The most fundamental article of the Stratfordian faith is the tenet that “Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare.”¹ That is, that the man who was born, raised, married and buried in Stratford-on-Avon and whose name was spelled “Shakspere” in the parish register there was the William Shakespeare who wrote the great poems and plays. “Shakspere” and “Shakespeare” are taken to be different spellings of the same name.

The belief is expressed directly when Shakespeare establishment scholars decide they must respond to those who doubt the traditional belief. In *Why Shakespeare WAS Shakespeare* (2014), Stanley Wells, honorary president of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford and professor emeritus at the University of Birmingham, specifies that “Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was Shakespeare the poet and playwright.” The capitalized “WAS” in the title fairly shouts Wells’s conviction. He dismisses as “nothing peculiar,” and presumably nothing significant, in the “Shakspere” spellings in the Stratford parish register and several other Stratford records.² Likewise, in *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (2010), James Shapiro expresses his confidence that “Shakespeare of Stratford really did write” the Shakespeare plays, and a few pages later cites the “overwhelming evidence of the title pages” naming Shakespeare as the author.³ The “Shakspere” spelling in Stratford gets two brief mentions, both seriously misleading.⁴

Much more common (and arguably more insidious) is the indirect expression of the traditional belief that simply leaves the “Shakspere” spellings in Stratford unrecognized. Very many biographies of the Stratford man as Shakespeare silently change the “Shakspere” spellings of the Stratford records to “Shakespeare” for the poet-dramatist and do so without comment. Rarely, if ever, do they discuss or even mention the lifelong “Shakspere” spellings on many documents. To cite just one of myriad examples, *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* states without qualifications that “Shakespeare was born in Stratford-Upon-Avon. . . . His father was John Shakespeare.”⁵ That spelling, however, was not the spelling of their surnames in the Stratford parish register.

One Shakespeare establishment scholar who has openly, albeit reluctantly, recognized the spelling problem is Gary Taylor of Florida State University. In *Reinventing Shakespeare* he acknowledges that “the spelling of Shakespeare’s [sic] name causes special difficulties,” noting that the “Shakspere” spelling “seems to have been his own preferred spelling.” But, he concedes, “In our time ‘Shakespeare’ is normal, and I have therefore grudgingly perpetuated it.”⁶ This reluctant concession and so-called “normalizing,” however, comes only at the very end of his book where he reveals that until then he has silently substituted “Shakespeare” for “Shakspere” throughout.

An attempt to provide statistical support for the traditional belief is made by David Kathman, a security analyst and co-author of an Internet website entitled (no surprise) “The Shakespeare Authorship Page: Dedicated to the Proposition that Shakespeare Wrote Shakespeare.”⁷ One of his articles on the website uses a statistical methodology to argue against the Oxfordian proposition that William Shakespeare was the pseudonym of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford, the leading candidate as the poet and playwright, and that William Shakspere of Stratford was not the writer. At issue is whether “Shakspere” was nothing more than a variant spelling of “Shakespeare,” the name on the poems and plays, or was a different name that belonged to the Stratford man.

The issue arises because spelling in the Elizabethan Age was so irregular that even someone’s family name could be spelled in several different ways, even in the same document. E. K. Chambers, the eminent Shakespeare scholar, found 83 different spellings of the Shakespeare/Shakspere surname over several centuries. He devoted four pages of *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* to the phenomenon and noted the problem that “some of the forms may be merely scribal eccentricities or may rest on misreading.”⁸ Kathman finds 25 different spellings in 160 documents from 1564 to 1616, the lifespan of the Stratford man.⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, this article accepts Kathman’s listing of references, some debatable, and his tabulations of the raw data, while challenging his methodology and conclusion.

His statistical methodology is simple, probably *simplistic*. He divides the occurrences of the 25 spellings into two categories, literary and non-literary. In the literary category are the occurrences of “Shakespeare” and its variant spellings with the first *e* (i.e., *e* immediately after *k*). In the non-literary category are the occurrences of “Shakspere” and its variants without the first *e*. He then totals the occurrences in each category. Literary references (Table 2) total 149 for “Shakespeare” and 22 for “Shakspere.” The predominance of the “Shakespeare” spellings would be expected; they include the Shakespeare name on all editions of the poems and plays and the many references to them in literary contexts. None of the references in literary contexts identified “Shakespeare” as from Stratford.

The crucial evidence for Kathman’s analysis is in the non-literary category, which shows a higher frequency of the “Shakespeare” spelling in legal and business documents associated with the Stratford man. These non-literary references (Table 1) total 128 for “Shakespeare” and 52 for “Shakspere,” nearly three times as many for “Shakespeare,” which leads Kathman to conclude:

There were not two separate names, “Shakspere” and “Shakespeare”; rather, they were the same name, with “Shakespeare” being by far the most common spelling both in non-literary references to the glover’s son from Stratford and in the literary references to Shakespeare as a poet and playwright.¹⁰

The totals would appear to provide statistical certainty for the conclusion, which includes the unstated but implied corollary that the glover’s son from Stratford and the poet-playwright were the same man.

Statistics carry an aura of certainty; the numbers appear to speak for themselves. The single indicator of the 128-52 spelling totals in the non-literary category is supposed to be the final score. There may well be, however, good reasons for the “Shakespeare” spelling appearing so often in non-literary contexts referring to Shakspere of Stratford.

There are three significant problems with Kathman’s methodology: 1) the effect of counting repetitions of a spelling in the same document; 2) the failure to recognize that spellings probably should be weighted depending on the context, and 3) the need for essential judgments about contextual, historical, chronological and geographic factors. A statistical methodology that is based solely on frequencies of the “Shakspere” and “Shakespeare” spellings in the raw data distorts and superficially oversimplifies the evidence.

The analysis distorts by failing to take into account the effect of counting repetitions of the same spelling of the name in the same non-literary document. For example, a “Shakespeare” variant spelling of the poet-dramatist’s name occurred *17 times* in a 1605 tithes document in Stratford. It’s debatable whether that spelling should be counted 17 times, as Kathman does, or only once. The problem occurs in both the non-literary and literary categories.¹¹

Repetitions of “Shakespeare” in all non-literary references to the Stratford man occurred 90 times in 14 documents. Repetitions of “Shakspere” occurred 12 times in five documents. If the repetitions are not counted, the occurrences of “Shakespeare” in non-literary contexts drop precipitously, from 128 to 38, and repetitions of “Shakspere” drop from 52 to 40. They occurred with approximately the same frequency by this more conservative, less generous counting, contrary to Kathman’s conclusion that the “Shakespeare” spelling was “by far the most common spelling . . . in non-literary references to the glover’s son from Stratford.”¹²

There is good reason to question whether it makes sense to count repetitions of the spelling of a name in a non-literary document. A scribe would be expected to spell an important name the same way throughout an important legal or business document.¹³ It should come naturally to a professional business writer. But his repeated spelling of the name adds little or no significance to the frequency of its use in a statistical analysis of spelling usages. So it should probably be counted once, reflecting that writer’s understanding, rightly or wrongly, of how the name should be spelled. It might be argued that such repetitions should have at least some

significance, but it's difficult to see how this weighting factor would be defined and calculated without recourse to subjective criteria. Whether and how repetitions should be counted may never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.¹⁴ It does, however, raise doubts about the validity of the methodology.

Counting repetitions also distorts the results in literary contexts, where the "Shakspere" spellings for the Stratford man, by Kathman's count, occurred 22 times versus 149 for "Shakespeare." But if the nine repetitions of "Shakspere" in three documents are omitted from the count, it occurs only 13 times. Shakspere's name in his hometown spelling occurred rarely in literary contexts for someone who is supposed to have written the works of Shakespeare.

A problem of oversimplification is whether every occurrence of a spelling should be given the same statistical weight. Two handwritten notes concerning purchases of Shakespeare books illustrate this problem. Richard Stonley, a court finance official, wrote "Shakspere," the Stratford spelling, in a diary entry for his purchase of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 (the year it was published), despite the Shakespeare name on its dedication. Stonley's spelling gets the same weight as the dedicator's name in the book. It's entirely possible, however, that Stonley's "Shakspere" spelling, its first appearance in London, was simply his shorthand and not a reference to Shakespeare the poet, as Kathman would have it. There's no corroborating evidence that already in 1593, Stonley knew, or thought he knew, that Shakspere was Shakespeare. Similarly, sixteen years later (if the entry is authentic), Edward Alleyn, actor and impresario, wrote "Shaksper sonnetts, 5 d." on the back of note to him requesting a mastiff puppy. It's the last of seven payments he made in 1609, the year *Shake-speares Sonnets* was published. His entry gets the same weight as the prominent and uniform "Shakespeare" spelling on the title page and in the running title in the book published in dozens or scores of copies. Giving the same evidentiary weight to the two "Shakspere" spellings in short, handwritten jottings as "Shakespeare" in the two books is at least debatable.¹⁵

It is also arguable that spellings in authoritative documents of legal and historical significance should be given more weight. The six "Shakspere" spellings in two variants in the Stratford man's will, a personal, authoritative, primary source document, are each given no more weight in the tabulations than each of the eight "Shakespeare" spellings in five variants scribbled without any apparent purpose on a page of the so-called Northumberland manuscript (c. 1598-1603), a page that has little historical authority for anything.

Ignoring such qualitative distinctions, Kathman's methodology gives the same weight to every occurrence regardless of context. A statistical methodology based solely on frequencies of the "Shakspere" and "Shakespeare" spellings risks the accusation of being superficial. It fails to recognize the need to make essential judgments about the historical, chronological and geographic contexts in which the raw data appeared, especially the effect of the best-selling books by Shakespeare in that spelling at the time. For these reasons, each "Shakespeare" and "Shakspere" reference cannot be presumed to have the same evidentiary weight. Examples of such weighting problems can be multiplied and seriously undermine the validity of

Kathman's conclusions. As a practical matter, it is hard to imagine how the necessary weightings could be calculated numerically for a statistical model. Instead we should examine the contexts of each data point to see what they may suggest about the evidence.

First and foremost is recognition of the likely influence on scribes of the "Shakespeare" spelling displayed prominently and uniformly on the Shakespeare poems and plays. From 1593, when the first edition of *Venus and Adonis* was published, to 1616, when the Stratford man died, "Shakespeare" as the author appeared uniformly on more than 20,000 copies of 45 editions of the Shakespeare poems and plays.¹⁶ This massive, highly visible propagation of the name in the "Shakespeare" spelling could hardly have failed to influence the writers of non-literary documents associated with the Stratford man with the similar name. They were well-read readers by education and profession. This influence is especially pertinent at a time of highly irregular spelling when there was no consensus about how a surname should be spelled.

The year 1598 was the watershed year for the Shakespeare name in publishing. In that year alone, Shakespeare appeared as the author on the title pages of four playbooks, on the dedication page of the second edition of *Lucrece*, and eight times in the text of Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia*. Print runs for the six books were probably well into the hundreds, or even into the thousands for the three second editions of the playbooks and the third edition of *Richard II*. More editions would signal great popularity and bigger print runs. And Richard Barnfield, prominent in literary circles, spelled it "Shakespeare" in *Poems in Divers Humours*, in which he praises his fellow poet's *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. Before the watershed year, the Shakespeare name appeared in his books not at all in 1597, and only five times in the previous five years.¹⁷ In 1599, four more books with Shakespeare as the author were published: a third edition of *Henry the Fourth Part One* (featuring Falstaff), *The Passionate Pilgrim* and two more editions of *Venus and Adonis*, testimony to the sudden demand by readers for the play and the long, narrative poem of sexual desire.

The following year, 1600, is termed by Lucas Erne an "extraordinary year" in the London book trade,¹⁸ and more Shakespeare books were published then than in any other year from 1593-1616. Ten editions of Shakespeare plays and poems were published that year, almost one a month; six of them carried the author's name. Four of the plays were first editions, as publishers seemingly rushed to take advantage of the market value of the Shakespeare name on a book. This outpouring of fifteen books by Shakespeare in just three years was unprecedented in England. William Shakespeare—in that spelling—was by far the most prominent literary name for readers and writers in 1600, probably including writers of non-literary documents who happened to be writing about the Stratford man but seeing so often the "Shakespeare" spelling.

Erne, a professor of English at the University of Geneva, calls attention to 1600 as this peak year for publication of Shakespeare works in *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (2013). The fourth of his books on Shakespeare, it follows on from his

well-regarded *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003, 2nd ed. 2013). He describes Shakespeare as a “surprisingly prominent man-in-print”¹⁹ whose name “started appearing on title pages in 1598 with a suddenness and frequency unrivalled by fellow dramatists”²⁰ and whose popularity in London in 1600 was “sudden and massive.”²¹ The Shakespeare quarto playbooks that “started being read, annotated, commonplaced, collected and catalogued in his own time” demonstrated to Erne “his rise to popularity in the book trade.”²²

He lists 65 editions of Shakespeare books from 1593 to 1616, an average of one every four and one-half months.²³ Forty-five of them carried the author’s name.²⁴ After the peak year of 1600, only three did not “advertise” the Shakespeare name, as Erne puts it. By 1600 the William Shakespeare name had arrived as that of a best-selling author.

Upwards of tens of thousands of his books probably circulated. Erne estimates that for a typical book a publisher would have issued at least a few hundred copies of each edition and perhaps well over a thousand if earlier editions had been very popular.²⁵ Given the rapid rise in the popularity of a book with the Shakespeare name on the title page, a conservative estimate might be a print run of up to 500 copies. That would mean that more than by 1616 at least 20,000 copies, and perhaps twice that number, had been published with Shakespeare as the author. The “Shakespeare” name in print was highly visible for book-buying readers, and apparently lucrative for publishers.

The immense popularity of the Shakespeare works is evidence for Erne of the rapid growth in “leisure reading,” as opposed to religious reading.²⁶ He calls Shakespeare “the reader’s writer, whose popularity called for a steady stream of new editions.”²⁷ All these editions, particularly in 1600, indicate to Erne that the Shakespeare works were “popular in more than one sense, not only widely read but also enjoyed by a more general, less specialized and elite readership.”²⁸ This general readership would have naturally included the scribes, clerks and attorneys in London, and even some in rural villages like Stratford.

Erne also observes that “clearly, it was not only Shakespeare that sold, but also Shakespeare’s name.”²⁹ He points out that the Shakespeare name on a book sold so well that over the years the type size for it increased. On the title page of the third quarto of *Hamlet* (1611), it’s spaced out in capitals, W I L L I A M S H A K E S P E A R E.³⁰ The Shakespeare name was so popular that it was often used to market playbooks that he did not write. By Erne’s count, as many as seven playbooks were falsely ascribed to Shakespeare, by name or initials, in the eighteen years from 1595 to 1613. During the same years, no other playwright had any false attributions.³¹

Although Erne (like Kathman) counts and tabulates data in search of their meaning, he cautions over several pages that quantifications may measure certain things but “are blind to others.” Data, he adds, “do not speak for themselves, but need to be interpreted.” Conclusions from statistical analyses of data drawn from literature and history, as Erne suggests, “inevitably depend on the principles of classification” that are adopted to analyze the raw data and depend especially

upon the questions that the statistical analysis is supposed to answer.³² Different principles of classification of data may lead to different conclusions, some valid, some not. The selection of the literary and non-literary classifications for “Shakspere” and “Shakespeare” spellings provide the relative frequencies of the spellings but reveal nothing about the contexts, especially when, where and by whom the spellings appeared, contexts that might well render the two classifications of little value.

Erne’s cautioning about “the limitations and pitfalls of quantitative analysis” in literary studies³³ suggests a fundamental question: Can a valid conclusion result from a statistical methodology that relies on a single indicator—surname spelling frequency—to analyze a complex socio-literary phenomenon four centuries ago involving personal identities? No rationale is given to justify this methodology, especially for spellings in a time of highly irregular spelling practices and usages in general, even of surnames.

Based solely on a single indicator, Kathman concludes that because the “Shakespeare” spelling by his count was by far the most common, 128-52 in non-literary contexts, “Shakespeare” with the first *e* and “Shakspere” without the first *e* were the same name. (As shown above, 128 and 52 may very well not be valid counts.) It’s debatable, however, whether a higher frequency of the “Shakespeare” spelling in non-literary contexts is sufficient to conclude that that spelling for the poet and playwright also designated the glover’s son from Stratford. A higher score for “Shakespeare” might or might not be more convincing; a lower score might be more problematical. Even the reverse score of only 52 for “Shakespeare” to 128 for “Shakspere” in non-literary documents might or might not be considered sufficient reason to decide whether Shakspere was Shakespeare. It would be a subjective opinion, not a statistical certainty, in a questionable methodology.

Embedded in his conclusion that Shakspere and Shakespeare were the same name is the unstated assumption that when writers of non-literary documents associated with the Stratford man used the “Shakespeare” spelling they were designating the glover’s son from Stratford as the poet-dramatist of London and did so often enough for Kathman to call it a common practice. As he puts it in his one-sentence conclusion, the “Shakespeare” spelling was “by far the most common spelling both in non-literary references to the glover’s son from Stratford and the literary references to Shakespeare as a poet and playwright.”³⁴ But there is no way to know what the writers had in mind. The unstated assumption is probably unwarranted; there is no corroborating evidence for it. Indeed, if the Stratford scribes had known, or thought they knew, that Shakspere of Stratford was the famous London author, none of them, or anyone else in Stratford, left any indication of it during his lifetime.³⁵ A more likely reason for the “Shakespeare” spelling in the non-literary documents is the influence of that spelling uniformly on tens of thousands of his best-selling books.

When a spelling occurs can also be significant, and failing to recognize this can create a chronological problem. To give just one example, the first occurrences of a “Shackespeare” spelling with *cke* in the middle was in a 1588 lawsuit involving

John Shakspeare and mentioning his son William twice. Kathman classifies those spellings as non-literary references to the poet-dramatist because it was spelled with the first *e*.³⁶ The spellings, however, occurred five years before the Shakespeare name first appeared on the literary scene with *Venus and Adonis* in 1593. So “Willielmo Shackespere” in the lawsuit could only have been one of the many early variant spellings of the “Shakspeare” name. Chambers found five “Shakespeare” variants for the name before 1593.

In the years that followed, “Shackespeare” spellings with *cke* occurred ten more times in non-literary contexts, which Kathman also counts as a variant spelling for Shakespeare the author.³⁷ Given the pre-1593 occurrence of “Shackespere,” it’s doubtful that the ten later occurrences of it should also be counted as variants of the spelling for the author Shakespeare. Adjusting the count would change the totals from 128 for “Shakespeare” spellings and 52 for “Shakspere” to 116 and 64, perhaps not that important, but still raising questions about Kathman’s methodology and weakening his conclusion that the “Shakespeare” spelling was “by far the most common spelling” for the poet-dramatist in non-literary references. It should also be noted that the “Shackespeare” spelling with *cke* never occurred in literary contexts for the poet-dramatist.

More important is the result if the “Shackespeare” spellings “Outside London” in Table 1 of non-literary references—all of them in or near Stratford—are more properly counted as “Shakspere” variants. Kathman allows that the “Shakspere” spellings were “fairly prominent” outside London.³⁸ This adjustment, however, changes the “Shakspere” occurrences outside London from not just “fairly prominent” to more prominent. The total of “Shakspere” spellings in Stratford increases from 42 to 54, while “Shakespeare” spellings drop from 61 to 49, for a final score of 54 to 49 for the “Shakspere” spelling outside London.³⁹

In sum, Kathman’s conclusion from his statistical analysis of spelling frequencies makes it deceptively easy to accept the Stratfordian tenet that Shakespeare (meaning Shakspeare) wrote Shakespeare. It is, however, not that simple. His methodology is flawed by several major problems: 1) whether repetitions of a spelling in the same document should all be counted, 2) what consideration should be given to weighting spellings in differing contexts, and 3) how the prominence of the Shakespeare name on tens of thousands of Shakespeare books might very well have been an important influence on the scribes writing non-literary documents. The methodology relies solely on a single indicator to measure a complex socio-literary phenomenon. So many problems of context and chronology must raise significant doubt about his methodology and conclusions.

Kathman also overlooks or omits several spelling patterns that can be drawn from his lists of literary and non-literary references to Shakespeare and Shakspeare, patterns that undermine his conclusion. They are the 80-4 score (without repetitions) for the “Shakespeare” spelling in printed references to the poet-dramatist, the 10-0 score for the “Shakspere” spellings in the authoritative Stratford vital records and in his will, and the 6-0 score for the “Shakspere” spelling of the signatures, which Stratfordians maintain that he himself wrote.

At least four modern-day non-Stratfordians have tackled the spelling issue by compiling and analyzing the occurrences, although none addressed Kathman's methodology. These include Mark Alexander, Richard Lester and myself.⁴⁰ Most recently, A. J. Pointon of the University of Portsmouth devoted a full chapter to it in *The Man Who Was Never Shakespeare* (2011). He offers a comprehensive historical analysis of William Shakspeare as a member of the Shakspeare family, concluding at one point that "the adherence of Shakspeare to his family name was amazingly consistent."⁴¹ His list of surnames in the records for the Shakspeare family has 26 "Shakspeare" spelling entries for 17 individuals from 1558 to 1617.⁴² None of the spellings was "Shakespeare."

A more straightforward methodology, and arguably a more reasonable one, is to set aside the doubtful significance of the spelling frequencies of the raw data and examine the historical facts. The result should be a more valid and persuasive conclusion.

First of all, in Stratford, the name of the man who was born, raised, married and buried there was William Shakspeare or a close variant (but without the *e* after the *k*) on all the official church records for him from his birth to his death and on his will.⁴³ His name was never spelled "Shakespeare." The Stratford parish register, the town's vital records of identity, from his baptism to his burial, and the records of the Worcester diocese, which included the Stratford parish, never use the literary spelling of the name:

- ***Shakspeare* on his baptismal record in 1564**
- ***Shaxpere* on the entry in the Worcester diocese records for his marriage license in 1582**
- ***Shagspere* on the security bond for his marriage in the Worcester diocese records in 1582**
- ***Shakspeare* as the father of Susanna on her baptismal record in 1583**
- ***Shakspeare* as the father of twins Hamnet and Judith on their baptismal record in 1585**
- ***Shakspeare* as the father on burial record of his son Hamnet in 1596**
- ***Shakspeare* on the record of his death and burial in 1616**

Despite the fact that by 1616 the famous Shakespeare name had appeared tens of thousands of times on the poems and plays, the name on his will and on his burial record that year used the "Shakspeare" spelling; on the monument in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford it is "Shakspeare," again without the *e* after *k* in *Shak*.

"Shakspeare," or a close variant without the first *e*, was also the spelling for his immediate family during his lifetime. It was the surname on the baptismal records of his seven siblings.⁴⁴ It was most often his father's name, which was spelled 17 different ways, but never "Shakespeare," in town corporation records in his time.⁴⁵ His father was buried as John "Shakspeare" and his mother as Mary "Shaxpere." His daughter Susanna was married as a "Shaxpere" and his daughter Judith as a "Shakspeare." As has been noted, various spellings were not at all unusual for surnames at the time.

Especially compelling is the “Shakspere” spelling in his will (a document which makes no reference to anything literary). In the text, his attorney’s clerk three times spelled it “Shackspeare,” a Stratford variant spelling (still without the first *e* after the *k*); and the endorsing name of the testator on each of the three pages was written, as best that scholars can make out, “Shakspere.” No one finds in them the *ke* combination in *shake*. It’s highly improbable that, if Shakspere wrote the best-selling works of Shakespeare, he would allow his famous name to be spelled “Shackspeare” in his will and would sign it “Shakspere.”⁴⁶ Shakspeare, a Stratford spelling, was also the name engraved on the monument in Holy Trinity Church.

Six purported signatures of the Stratford burgher, the full extent of his literary output in his own hand, are extant —three in the will, as just described, and three on other non-literary documents. None spells his name “Shakespeare.” Even when the texts of the other non-literary documents in the 1600s spelled it “Shakespeare,” the signatures were “Shakspere” abbreviations without the first *e*. The tag on the outside of his deposition in the *Belott v. Mountjoy* case in London in 1612 was “Willm Shakp” even though the name is “Shakespeare” in the deposition; and the signature was “William Shakspe” on two Blackfriars Gatehouse documents in London in 1613, even though it was “Shakespeare” two dozen times in the texts.⁴⁷ Arguably, by 1612-13, the “Shakespeare” name and the uniform spelling of it, had become famous in London and was the default spelling by scribes there; but Shakspere, it would seem, had the spelling of his name “corrected” for the signatures.

The “Shakespeare” spelling appears nowhere in the vital records that constitute the best available proof of identity or in his will, even though that spelling by 1616 had become ubiquitous in print. Silently changing the Stratford man’s name from Shakspere to Shakespeare, as is done by almost all traditional scholars, is unwarranted and grossly misleading, especially when it is done to make the Stratford man the poet-dramatist of London.⁴⁸

While it was “Shakspere” in most variants for the Stratford man, in London the name on the published poems and plays was uniformly “Shakespeare.” It appeared in that spelling on more than 20,000 copies of his books, from *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 to the First Folio with thirty-six Shakespeare plays in 1623. There were only two minor exceptions, which prove the rule. It was “Shakspeare” on *Love’s Labor’s Lost* in 1598, but still that is a recognized variant of “Shakespeare” with the first *e*; and it was spelled “Shak-speare” on the first edition of *King Lear* in 1608, the only Shakespeare play published by Nathaniel Butter. His *Lear*, however, was reprinted in 1619 by William Jaggard with a title page that falsely backdated it to the original publication date, and with the author’s name corrected to “Shakespeare,” superseding the “Shak-speare” spelling on the earlier edition and firmly attesting to the normative literary spelling of “Shakespeare” (or the common hyphenated form, “Shake-speare”).⁴⁹

More than a dozen publisher/printers of the poems and plays in many editions spelled the author’s name “Shakespeare.” It is almost as if someone were

enforcing the uniform “Shakespeare” spelling for the author. This would have had the effect, intended or not, of differentiating his name from that of the glover’s son from Stratford. At a time of highly irregular spellings of surnames, spelling patterns are crucial evidence. The “Shakspere” spellings in several variants for the Stratford man are in stark contrast to the virtually uniform “Shakespeare” spelling on the poems and plays. Perhaps the single most relevant fact in the name-spelling debate is this: If Shakspere were the great poet-dramatist who wrote nearly a million words that appeared in tens of thousands of copies of the plays and poems attributed to “William Shakespeare,” why did he allow his name to be spelled “Shakespeare” three times in his will and use the “Shakspere” spelling multiple times for his own signature?

In David Kathman’s analysis, faulty and doubtful conclusions follow from a statistical methodology that relies solely on the frequency of the “Shakespeare” and “Shakspere” spellings in literary and non-literary references in an attempt to support the Stratfordian belief that Shakspere wrote the works of Shakespeare. The true meaning of the raw data is richer and more telling when the contextual, historical, geographic and chronological factors are taken into account. Examining the facts of the spelling usages in context should lead instead to the conclusion that the preponderance of evidence shows that William Shakspere and William Shakespeare were similar but not identical names, sometimes confused, but generally falling into a clear pattern of differentiation. They were two different names for two different men, Shakspere the enterprising glover’s son from Stratford and “Shakespeare,” the enigmatic poet-dramatist of London.

POSTSCRIPT: If it is accepted that Shakspere was not Shakespeare, it becomes a much debated issue—one which is not the subject of this article—about how and when Shakspere of Stratford came to be taken as the poet-dramatist Shakespeare of London. Briefly, although there were hints and allusions earlier, the first clear evidence is the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare plays, dedicated to the Earl of Oxford’s son-in-law the Earl of Montgomery and his brother, the Earl of Pembroke. Ben Jonson’s prefatory material to the folio seem to point to the Stratford man as the author, probably in an effort undertaken for several reasons to disguise the author’s identity as a ranking nobleman in Queen Elizabeth’s court. Two decades after Shakspere died, visitors to Stratford began to believe that he was the poet-dramatist Shakespeare; the belief gradually became conventional wisdom and the fundamental tenet of the Stratfordian faith. For Stratford, there were obvious commercial advantages for the rural village to become known as the supposed hometown of the famous author. And most people, including Shakespeare establishment scholars over the centuries, no doubt found it attractive to perpetuate the “Horatio Alger” myth that a glove maker’s son from Stratford wrote the works of Shakespeare.

Endnotes

- ¹ The general reader who has not read or heard much about the Shakespeare authorship controversy might be puzzled by the significance of the Stratfordian mantra that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare. On its face, the mantra has to be true, but it's also a clever rhetorical device with a double meaning. Since everyone accepts that of course Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, everyone is also supposed to accept that the first "Shakespeare" means Shakspeare of Stratford and not somebody else, so any doubt about Shakespeare's identity should be dismissed. Oxfordians can reply that of course it's true that Shakespeare wrote (the works of) Shakespeare just as Mark Twain wrote (the works of) Mark Twain and George Eliot wrote (the works of) George Eliot. But Mark Twain was Samuel Clemens, and George Eliot was Mary Ann Evans. Both are pseudonyms. The issue is whether the second meaning of the first "William Shakespeare" in the mantra should be considered the pseudonym for somebody else.
- ² Stanley Wells, *Why Shakespeare WAS Shakespeare* (Amazon Kindle, 2014), ch. 2. Wells also defends the Stratford man in *Is it True What They Say About Shakespeare?* (Norfolk UK: Long Barn Press, 2007): "Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare. . . . William Shakespeare who came from Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the plays and poems for which he is famous." With Paul Edmondson, he edited *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (Cambridge UP, 2013), a defense of the Stratford man as Shakespeare, which drew a non-Stratfordian response, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial*, edited by John M. Shahan and Alexander Waugh (Shakespeare Authorship Coalition with Llumina Press, 2013).
- ³ James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 223, 225.
- ⁴ Shapiro misleads his readers when he writes that the name on the title pages of the Shakespeare plays was "variously spelled 'Shakspeare,' 'Shake-speare,' and 'Shakespeare,'" implying that the "Shakspeare" spelling occurred roughly as often as "Shakespeare," or even more often since it's the first of the three. He adds that "there's no pattern" (227). But "Shak-speare" (not "Shakspeare") appeared only once on a title page, and that was under unusual circumstances (see endnote 49). Without the single "Shak-speare" spelling there is in fact a significant pattern, the uniformity of spelling of the Shakespeare name on the plays. Shapiro also misleads when he says that "Shakespeare [his Stratford man] didn't even spell his own name the same way," recognizing the "Shakspeare" spelling of the three signatures on his will, but he fails to

recognize the authority of the spelling of a person's own signature on a legal document, in this case "Shakspere" on the will for the Stratford man, not "Shakespeare," the name on the poems and plays.

⁵ *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*, eds. Oscar James Campbell and Edward G. Quinn (New York: Crowell, 1966), 755, 757.

⁶ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (Oxford UP), 441.

⁷ The web site is www.shakespeareauthorship.com, created and occasionally updated by Kathman and Terry Ross with major contributions by Tom Reedy, defenders of Shakspere as Shakespeare. Kathman is the author of "The Spelling and Pronunciation of Shakespeare's Name." Besides making his statistical frequency argument, he devotes considerable space to the pronunciation of Shakspere and hyphenation of Shake-speare, which he mistakenly believes to be common Oxfordian arguments. He states that "there is little or no evidence to support the common Oxfordian assertion that 'Shakspere' always required a short 'a' pronunciation while Shakespeare always required a long 'a'" (7-9). Whether it is a common Oxfordian assertion is debatable; Kathman gives no examples. Most if not all Oxfordian scholars recognize the difficulty of determining how words were pronounced 400 years ago at a time of very irregular spellings, widespread illiteracy and quite different regional accents. Although it's difficult to be certain about Elizabethan pronunciation, Professor Emeritus A. J. Pointon of Portsmouth University, a non-Stratfordian, notes that "from what is known of the Midlands pronunciation in the nineteenth century and the way it carried through from Anglo-Saxon . . . it seems impossible that 'Shak' and 'Shake' ever sounded the same" (22). Kathman also argues that it is a "common claim by Oxfordians" that the hyphenated "Shake-speare" spelling (occurring on nearly half the quarto playbooks and on *Shake-speares Sonnets*) indicated that the name was a pseudonym (9-12). In rebuttal, he cites ten Elizabethan names that were hyphenated but were not pseudonyms. Whether it is a "common claim" by modern-day Oxfordian scholars without reservation is also debatable; again, he gives no examples. Pointon cites eight hyphenated names that were made-up names or pseudonyms and notes that "Shakspere" was never hyphenated, concluding that hyphenation alone "would not prove 'Shake-speare' was a pseudonym, but it is entirely consistent with all the other evidence that it was" (23). He addresses the two issues in just three paragraphs of his 294-page book, *The Man Who Was Never Shakespeare* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK: Parapress, 2011). Neither pronunciation nor hyphenation is central to the Oxfordian proposition. They are not the primary subject of Kathman's statistical analysis of the surname spellings, nor are they addressed in this counter-article. (Page numbers for Kathman's online article reflect the pagination in a printout by this writer's computer. Other page displays and printouts may differ, but will be close enough.)

⁸ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930) 2:371-374.

⁹ Kathman, "The Spelling and Pronunciation of Shakespeare's Name," Tables 1 and 2.

- ¹⁰ Kathman, 12.
- ¹¹ In his literary category, Kathman includes 53 occurrences of the “Shakespeare” spelling on excerpts in *England’s Parnassus* (1600).
- ¹² Kathman, 12.
- ¹³ Indeed, Kathman points to seven legal documents involving real estate that would have been “carefully written” and that consistently use the “Shakespeare” spelling (6). Again, this ignores the problem of counting repetitions and also fails to take into account the historical, chronological and geographic factors and especially the likely influence of the “Shakespeare” spelling on tens of thousands of books, as described later in this article.
- ¹⁴ Kathman glances at the repetition problem in note 1 on pp. 13-14. He excludes from his list repetitions in copies of two documents and in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* but does not recognize the same problem in documents he does list for tabulation that contain multiple repetitions. Decisions on when and how to count repetitions are a major problem for his methodology.
- ¹⁵ Kathman, 6. Alleyn’s note perhaps should be omitted from an analysis of contemporary spellings as a possible nineteenth-century forgery by John Payne Collier, a notorious scholar-forgery (Chambers, 2:386, 389). The similarity of the *Sonnets* purchase entry in Alleyn’s list to Stonley’s note of a purchase of *Venus and Adonis* (both in the year of publication) is suspicious. They are the only two such notes of purchases, as listed by Kathman. Also, Alleyn’s list is dated just one month after the *Sonnets* was entered for publication in the Stationers’ Register, arguably not enough time for it to be off-press and a copy purchased. See George Frederick Warner’s *Catalogue of the Manuscripts and Muniments of Alleyn’s College of God’s Gift at Dulwich* (London: Longmans, Green, 1881), 71-72.
- ¹⁶ Lucas Erne, in *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge UP, 2013), counts a total of 65 Shakespeare plays and poems between 1593 and 1616, an average of one every four and one-half months, but the total includes anonymous plays that were by Shakespeare or attributed to him (1).
- ¹⁷ Before the 1598 watershed year, only two “Shakespeare” spellings appeared in non-literary contexts, both of them years after 1593, when the Shakespeare name first appeared and began to become famous as a poet. They were in handwritten documents, which Kathman counts as “Shakespeare” spellings for Shakspeare as the poet-dramatist, although that’s not at all certain. The first was a 1595 court record of payment to three members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, including “William Shakespeare,” for performances of two Shakespeare plays. It’s possible that this was one of the early variant spellings for Shakspeare of Stratford as a member of the acting company, although not as a playwright. More likely, the spelling, in a record made by the office of the queen’s treasurer, who was the second husband of the Countess of Southampton and made on her behalf, probably was influenced by the “Shakespeare” spellings the year before in the second edition of *Venus and Adonis* and the first edition of *Lucrece*, best-selling books dedicated to her son,

the Earl of Southampton, by William Shakespeare. The “Shakspere” spelling for the Stratford man had not yet appeared in London, so the “Shakespeare” spelling in the three editions was used. The second non-literary document that used the “Shakespeare” spelling was a record about the purchase of New Place in Stratford in 1597. Although that record is from the year before the watershed year, its spelling can reasonably be taken as a rare, distant variant for “Shakspere” of Stratford and the exception that proves the rule. Among the 83 variants he found, Chambers counted five “Shakespeare” variants before the name of the poet first appeared in the literary scene, in 1593 in *Venus and Adonis* (2:372). These five, early “Shakespeare” variants could not have referred to the as yet unknown Shakespeare the poet-dramatist, so “Shakespeare” in the New Place document probably was probably not a reference to the poet. It’s doubtful that these 1595 and 1597 spellings should be counted, but in any case two entries out of 128 are not material to the totals in a statistical analysis of the commonness of spelling occurrences.

¹⁸ Erne, 27.

¹⁹ Erne, 2.

²⁰ Erne, 4.

²¹ Erne, 18.

²² Erne, 10.

²³ Erne, 1, 26.

²⁴ See Table 1 (13-16), Erne’s detailed “chronological list of Shakespeare publications, 1593-1660,” giving editions, format and whether anonymous.

²⁵ Erne 26. He cites Peter Blaney’s estimate in his *The Publication of Playbooks* of 800 copies for a first edition and more for a second if the first sold quickly (422). In *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* Shapiro calls the number of copies of Shakespeare works in print from 1564 to 1616 “staggering and unprecedented.” He estimates that publishers sold at least a thousand copies of each edition and that 50,000 copies “circulated . . . at a time when London’s population was only two hundred thousand” (223-224). That seems much too high; it’s one copy of a Shakespeare book for every four London residents, including men, women and children, where most of the women and many of the men were illiterate.

²⁶ Erne, 20.

²⁷ Erne, 54.

²⁸ Erne, 54.

²⁹ Erne, 45.

³⁰ Erne, 97.

³¹ Erne, 56-57.

³² Erne, 25-27.

³³ Erne, 27.

³⁴ Kathman, 12. He also previews his conclusion at the start of “Spelling and Pronunciation” in one sentence, also unamplified: “‘Shakespeare’ was by far the most common spelling of the name in both literary and non-literary contexts, and there is no significant difference in spelling patterns

when we take into account such factors as handwritten vs. printed and Stratford vs. London spellings” (2). He argues that “a very significant factor is handwritten vs. printed spellings” and suggests that publisher-printers “tended to normalize” the spellings to “Shakespeare” (5-6). Absent any definition of, or standard for, “normalize,” this may be read that they tended to be influenced by the popularity of the Shakespeare name to normalize the spelling to “Shakespeare,” as I argue here. Regarding handwritten spellings, he suggests that it is “somewhat surprising that there are not *more* ‘Shaksper’-type spellings among the non-literary references, all but two of which are handwritten.” There are in fact more “Shaksper” spellings in non-literary contexts, 52-34, if the 88 repetitions are not counted.

³⁵ See Ramon Jiménez, “Ten Eyewitnesses Who Saw Nothing” in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* (Fall 2002), also at www.ShakespeareOxfordFellowship.org (8 September 2011).

³⁶ Kathman, Table 1.

³⁷ The “Shackespere” spelling appeared twice in Stratford in 1598, the year that the Shakespeare name began to be famous in London. They were in a record of corn and malt holdings and in the address of a letter by Richard Quiney. It is, however, the same spelling as that on the court case record in 1588, five years before “Shakespeare” first became known as a poet, in 1593. It’s doubtful that the two writers would use “Shackespere” to mean Shakespeare the author, but that’s how they are classified in the totals of frequency of literary references. The two 1598 spellings more likely were random variants of Shaksper and/or were influenced by the 1588 “Shackespere” spelling.

³⁸ Kathman, 5.

³⁹ It might be argued that the frequency of “Shakespeare” spellings in non-literary documents in Stratford, 45 times in five documents, indicated that Shaksper of Stratford was indeed Shakespeare, but if the 40 repetitions are removed, it’s only five times (once per document), and four of the five documents were written two to nine years after 1598-1600, when the “Shakespeare” name became famous.

⁴⁰ A full chronology of documents related to Shaksper and Shakespeare is provided by Mark Alexander, a writer and independent researcher, on his website, [ShakespeareAuthorshipSourcebook](http://ShakespeareAuthorshipSourcebook.com). The chronology includes much useful contextual information and comparative tabulations of occurrences of the names at certain points in time. Richard Lester, a U.S. government historian and independent researcher, used Kathman’s list of spellings as a source for tabulations in his article, “Shakespeare’s Name,” in *The Elizabethan Review* (Autumn 1998). He lists 127 occurrences of the various spellings, finds “a robust, statistically significant difference” between the Shakespeare and Shaksper spellings and discusses briefly the pronunciation and hyphenation factors. I counted the occurrences of Shaksper and Shakespeare during Shaksper’s lifetime and tabulated them as literary and non-literary in chapter 3 of my book, *Shakespeare: Who Was He? The Oxford Challenge to the Bard of Avon*

- (1994). For an early analysis of the spelling issue, see William H. Edwards, *Shaksper Not Shakespeare* (1900), 7-11.
- ⁴¹ Pointon, 15. He condensed and edited the first three chapters of his book for his contribution to *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial*.
- ⁴² Pointon, 24.
- ⁴³ In note 2 of his article, Kathman dismisses the authority and importance of the official “Shakspere” spelling in the parish register, suggesting that that spelling was “not very common at all” based on his count of non-literary occurrences, 52 for “Shakspere” vs. 128 for “Shakespeare.” But the “Shakespeare” spellings include the 88 repetitions, whose relevance as evidence for commonness is questionable. Even if it were not common, the “Shakspere” spelling was the spelling used in the town’s vital records from baptism to death, especially strong proof of identity. That it was less common in non-literary references as counted in Table 1 is not especially relevant given the many different spellings of a proper name and the great popularity of the “Shakespeare” spelling after 1598 and more so after 1600. He also questions the reliability of the “Shakspere” spellings in the parish register in the 1500s by noting that they were transcripts of lost originals, probably made in 1600 by the Stratford vicar, who “consistently used his own preferred spellings.” The alleged “consistency” of spelling by the vicar is contradicted by his four different Shakspere spellings out of seven. If the vicar had been “consistent” in his spelling, he would not have copied the four different spellings. He must have copied the variant spellings accurately from the originals. It’s also not clear what his “preferred spellings” might have been or why they would have included four different spellings. Kathman’s argument carries little or no weight. The Shakspere spellings in the parish register in the 1500s are authoritative evidence, along with the spellings in Shakspere’s will and on the monument.
- ⁴⁴ His brother Edmund was buried as “Shakespeare” in 1607 in London, but by that time the uniform “Shakespeare” spelling was far better known in London than the “Shakspere” spelling, if it was known at all. Pointon notes that this “was the only time in the context of family matters that the ‘Shakespeare’ spelling was used” during William Shakspere’s lifetime (16).
- ⁴⁵ Robert E. Hunter, *Shakespeare and Stratford-Upon-Avon, a Chronicle of the Time* (OUP, 1864), 11. Fourteen of the seventeen were Shakspere or a close variant, i.e., without an *e* after the *k*. The other three were *cke* spellings, also probably a “Shakspere” spelling. None was “Shakespeare.” John “Shakspere” appears in property documents in 1579, fourteen years before *Venus and Adonis* in 1593, and also appears in 1597 (Halliwell-Phillipps, *Outlines*, 11, 14), both no doubt early variants and not surprising, given the many different spellings of John’s surname.
- ⁴⁶ If he himself signed it. Whether the signatures are in Shakspere’s own hand is a matter of dispute between Stratfordians and non-Stratfordians. See, for example, Jane Cox, “Shakespeare’s Will and Signature: Shakespeare in the

Public Records,” *Journal of the British Records Office* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1985), 24-34. Cox had access to scores of wills during her two-decade career at the Public Record Office and suggested in her article that clerk-scribes might well have written the signatures on wills and other documents.

- ⁴⁷ These two important entries in Kathman’s list of non-literary references are written in a way that could mislead unwary readers. The 1612 entry for a signature on the *Belott v. Mountjoy* deposition is listed as a separate occurrence from the deposition itself. It reads: “(Signature on above; May 11) ‘Willm Shakp’ (handwritten; William Shakespeare).” This implies that “Willm Shakp,” a variant of the “Shakspere” spelling, was handwritten by William Shakespeare, the author of the poems and plays. The effect of this phrasing is to lead the reader to assume that “Willm Shakp” was a variant of the Shakespeare spelling, which it was not. The same ambiguity occurs in the 1613 entry for the signature on the mortgage for the Blackfriars conveyance, where it’s spelled “Shakspe.” The “Shakspere” spellings for the supposed signatures of the Stratford man here are significant because they are appended to the non-literary documents of 1612 and 1613 that use the “Shakespeare” spelling with the first *e* but contradict that spelling.
- ⁴⁸ In a curious and revealing about-face, many Shakespeare scholars and literary figures from the late 1800s to the early 1900s used the “Shakspere” spelling for the poet-dramatist Shakespeare, recognizing for their supposed author the predominance of that spelling in Stratford. Then they changed their collective mind, no doubt realizing that the spelling on the poems and plays was “Shakespeare,” and began to use that spelling for the Stratford man to make him the poet-dramatist. See Whalen, *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* 36-37.
- ⁴⁹ Butter’s reliability as a publisher is questionable; he also published *The London Prodigal* (1605), falsely attributing the anonymous play to William Shakespeare, probably to exploit the market value of the famous name, as did other publisher-printers.