

Why Should We Question Shakespeare's Authorship?

Shakespeare or Shakspeare?

Many people assume that William Shakspeare (note the spelling) of Stratford-upon-Avon was the famous writer we call Shakespeare. But when we look closely at the evidence from his lifetime, there is no record of him claiming to be the author of the plays and poems. The main evidence linking him to the works comes from the *First Folio*, a collection of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623, seven years after Mr. Shakspeare of Stratford died.

There are four main reasons usually given to support the idea that Mr. Shakspeare of Stratford was the author:

1. The name "William Shakespeare" appeared on many published plays and poems during his lifetime.
2. Writers like Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges praised "Shakespeare" in the *First Folio* and referred to his connection with Stratford.
3. Two actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell—mentioned in Shakspeare's Stratford will—called him the author in the Folio.
4. His monument in Stratford shows a man with a pen and paper, suggesting he was a writer.

But each of these points has problems:

- The spelling of the name "Shakespeare" on the title pages was nearly always the same, often with a hyphen ("Shake-speare"), which was rare for names. Meanwhile, Shakspeare's own name was spelled several different ways in official records, including "Shakspeare" and "Shackspeare," and never with a hyphen. The spelling differences raise the question: was the printed name referring to the same person?
- Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges only praised "Shakespeare" after Mr. Shakspeare died. They never gave personal details about the man, like his family, education, or even when he lived. Their words praised the works, not the person. Ben Jonson didn't even mention Shakespeare until the year of Shakspeare's death, and only then as an actor.
- Heminges and Condell are often seen as strong witnesses, but there are doubts about whether they actually wrote the *First Folio* introductions. Some scholars believe those passages were written by someone else as marketing. Why, skeptics ask, did nobody

praise or memorialize “Shakespeare” for seven years after his death?

- The monument in Stratford now shows a man with a pen and paper, but an earlier sketch from 1634 shows him holding a sack, not writing tools. Records also say the monument was “repaired,” suggesting it may have been changed later to make it look more like a writer’s memorial. The inscription on the monument never clearly says that Mr. Shakspeare was the famous author. It doesn’t mention plays, poetry, or acting at all.

The Missing Evidence

If Mr. Shakspeare really was the author, we would expect to find some evidence: a letter, a manuscript, a reference to him as a writer from someone who knew him. But we don’t. Not a single play, poem, or personal letter written by him has ever been found after great searching. The only surviving examples of his handwriting are six shaky signatures on legal papers, including his will. These suggest he may have struggled even to sign his name. Some experts think even these signatures may have been written by someone else.

We do have evidence that he was a father, a husband, a property owner, a money lender, an actor, a person who liked to sue others in court, a theater shareholder, and even a tax cheat. But unlike all the other, lesser known writers of his time, we have no evidence of Shakspeare the author.

His will contains no mention of books, papers, or anything literary. It famously leaves his wife his “second best bed,” but it says nothing about his work as a writer, despite being long and detailed. He left small gifts to three actors (written in as an afterthought), but not to any writers or printers—not even to Richard Field, the Stratford-born printer who published the poems that first made the name “Shakespeare” famous.

A Life That Doesn’t Match the Works

Mr. Shakspeare grew up in a small, farming town, and there’s no record of him traveling outside of England. His parents were illiterate, and neither of his daughters could write. He may have attended the local grammar school, but we don’t know for sure. He didn’t go to college, and no records show how he could have gained the deep knowledge found in the works.

The plays and poems reveal expertise in many areas—law, music, history, medicine, foreign languages, royal court life, and much more. The works refer to things that were mostly known only by the educated upper classes, and many of the books and sources used hadn’t been translated into English at the time. How could someone with Mr. Shakspeare’s background have accessed all this knowledge?

The first 28 years of his life are almost a total blank, often called the “lost years.” No one knows how he became connected to theater or how he learned to write. Some say he was just a genius, but even geniuses need education and access to books. There’s no evidence that Mr.

Shakespeare owned a library, or that he borrowed books from one. He also never published any poetry or plays under his own name during his lifetime, and no payments for writing can be traced to him.

Silence from His Own Time

Shakespeare's works were performed for royalty and played an important role in English culture. Yet there's no record that Queen Elizabeth I or King James I ever met or even mentioned Mr. Shakespeare. When Elizabeth died, Shakespeare—unlike other writers of the time—wrote no tribute. Even when one of his plays was linked to a rebellion, no one asked him about it. If he was so important, why was he invisible?

Even stranger, when he died in 1616, no one in the literary world seemed to notice. No tributes, no letters, no public mourning. His name wasn't mentioned in connection with his death. Even his actor friends—those mentioned in his will—did not comment. This silence seems hard to explain if he truly was the greatest writer in English history.

Shakespeare lived another five years after he supposedly stopped writing. But there's no sign he wrote again. He didn't put on plays in his hometown or leave behind any evidence that the people around him knew him as a poet or playwright. In fact, several people who knew him personally never referred to him as an author. His own son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, kept a detailed diary and mentioned other local poets, but never that his own wife's father was the greatest of them all.

A Mystery That Endures

Nothing in Mr. Shakespeare's life clearly connects him to the works of Shakespeare. The plays focus almost entirely on nobility, foreign lands, and experiences far removed from the life of a small-town businessman or a London actor, money lender, and theater manager. They show no trace of his hometown or personal life—not even the death of his young son.

Some inconsistencies could be explained away, but there are simply too many. Even respected Shakespeare biographer Samuel Schoenbaum admitted that the gap between the beauty of the works and the plainness of the records about the man is "vertiginous."

The famous scholar Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote that despite centuries of research, Shakespeare "still remains so close to a mystery that even his identity can still be doubted."

Many brilliant people Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Ralph Waldo Emerson and three Supreme Court justices have said as much. It's not unreasonable to question whether the man from Stratford really wrote the works of Shakespeare. In fact, what seems unreasonable is pretending there's no doubt at all.

Adopted from “The Declaration of Reasonable Doubt” at <https://doubtaboutwill.org/>.

The Case for Oxford

The case for Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the true author behind the works of William Shakespeare centers on his exceptional education, literary background, and courtly experience—qualities that seem far beyond what the historical William Shakspere, the actor from Stratford had. De Vere was a well-traveled nobleman fluent in multiple languages, with intimate knowledge of court politics, law, classical literature, and foreign cultures—areas that are richly reflected in the plays and poems attributed to Shakespeare. Many Shakespearean works seem to show firsthand knowledge of aristocratic life, as well as detailed familiarity with places in Italy and France that de Vere visited for more than a year but the Stratford man did not.

The public use of a commoner’s name, Shakespeare, may have served as a pen name to allow de Vere to write for the public stage, something considered inappropriate for a nobleman of his rank. There are many autobiographical parallels between de Vere’s life and themes or characters in the plays. There are also stunning parallels between the life of de Vere and specific details mentioned in Shakespeare’s Sonnets. Although de Vere died in 1604, and some Shakespeare works were published after that, the plays and poems were likely already complete by then.

Oxford was known in his time as a talented writer. He was praised as a fine poet and playwright, among the “best for comedy,” as Francis Meres described him in 1598. The *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), which was the most important book of literary criticism in that period, named Oxford as “first” among courtiers “who have written excellently well, as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest.” This means people believed he was a great writer, even though most of his work wasn’t published under his own name. The book concluded that writers like Oxford, who were Earls, “...suffered it to be published without their own names to it.”

There is no single piece of evidence that is absolutely convincing as to whether the Stratford man or Oxford wrote the works of Shakespeare - that is why it is so debated today.