

# William Shakespeare: "O, how that name befits my composition"

In the early 1780s, the Reverend Dr James Wilmot, a friend of Dr Samuel Johnson and rector of a small parish church near Stratford-Upon-Avon, went searching for the legacy of England's greatest literary prodigy, an artist of unrivaled achievement whose poetry and drama were renowned but about whose person very little was known. Dr. Wilmot searched for years in the poet's environs for information of any kind that might illuminate this prominent man (arguably the most celebrated resident in the history of Cotswolds England). He wished to learn what was known of this man *as a writer, dramatist and poet* by his family, neighbors, peers and other friends and acquaintances. For four years, he searched diligently for letters to or from the man; he sought records and anecdotes about his personal life in diaries and family histories; he combed the region for books and other artifacts. To his consternation, he found absolutely nothing that linked Tradition's candidate to the writing of those incomparable works that had appeared in England two centuries earlier under the name of "William Shakespeare."

What Dr Wilmot found, instead, was the record of the son of a simple, untutored merchant, baptized Gulielmus Shakspere, who apparently began life as a butcher's apprentice and later excelled in various business ventures, but who otherwise had lived a fairly non-descript life. He discovered, in short, a rather ordinary man who had no connection to the literary world and who, at the conclusion of an ostensibly uneventful life, was buried without ceremony in a grave that didn't even identify its occupant by name. His findings stunned him into dazed silence about the matter, and he confided nothing of his discovery for years.

Dr Wilmot eventually confessed to a friend that despite his arduous labors in Warwickshire, he had unearthed nothing in his expeditions to connect Will Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon to the works of the Elizabethan dramatic giant that Ben Jonson had apostrophized as a "Starre of Poets" and the "Soule of the Age." Serious doubts about the authorship of the Shakespeare canon followed hard thereon—doubts that continue to bewilder and puzzle readers of Shakespeare. However, the collapse of all the quixotic campaigns of the past two centuries that have attempted to establish the man from Stratford as the author of the plays (or even corroborate his reputation as a writer!) are now leading many scholars to conclude that would-be discoverers of Shakespeare repeatedly fail, not due to their lack of zeal or skill, but because, like good Dr Wilmot, they are seeking a writer where no writer (or, more accurately, another writer) exists.

In contrast to the defenders of orthodox myths about Stratford Will, skeptics propose that the Shake-speare poems and plays were not the throwaway work of a butcher-turned-poet-and-playwright who, *in his first foray into poetic and dramatic composition*, produced such works as *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Loves Labour's Lost*. They argue, instead, that these works are the mature achievements of a worldly and urbane litterateur, a dexterous and experienced writer endowed with vast linguistic ability and an extraordinarily particularized knowledge of many arcane and specialized studies, an erudite, well-traveled, multi-lingual man of prior achievement who could not tell the world his name.

One might well ask, therefore, if the writer who called himself Shakespeare were this versatile and formidable talent, why would he disguise himself and evade recognition? What possible reasons could he have had to cloak himself in obscurity? Such questions can be answered by considering the conventions that governed writing and publication in Elizabethan England.

The invention of the printing press terrified absolutist regimes such as the Tudors. It created unprecedented opportunities for writers to stir up partisan constituencies and create audiences for new ideas. The capacity to anonymously publish pamphlets, books, plays, essays, tracts and other texts limited the ability of authorities to silence individuals for disseminating seditious ideas or advancing unflattering satires that exposed the government's incompetence or corruption. Because this revolutionary technology threatened to place writers beyond the effective control of the State, it led the English government to establish various civil and ecclesiastical licensing measures and censorial offices to regulate and control the press with the goal of stifling the flow of disapproved ideas. Therefore, by the last half of the sixteenth century, although the ability to communicate had been extended, the freedom to say what one would without penalty had not. Unlicensed presses were destroyed; pamphlets were seized; writers were imprisoned; theatres were closed.

A writer who sought protection from discovery and persecution needed to dissemble. For playwrights, this was especially urgent, particularly as the public theatre (already much mistrusted and often suppressed by authorities for its alleged traffic in corrupt matter) was exiled in Shakespeare's day to the darker districts of London (such as Southwark) where the theatre's supposed viciousness could be restricted to people who commonly were regarded as derelicts and scoundrels. Writers of public entertainments and / or their families were likely to be impugned, therefore, by such disreputable associations if they were discovered; many had personal reputations to protect. Writers who disdained anonymity, moreover, often faced frightful consequences for their daring in sallying forth to publish under their own names. Many were hauled before the Privy Council for interrogation (as was Samuel Daniel for *Philotas*); others were imprisoned (as were Ben Jonson and George Chapman for *Eastward Ho!* and Sir John Hayward for his *Life of Henry IV*); others were savagely mutilated (as were John Stubbs, Alexander Leighton and William Prynne); some may even have been assassinated (as perhaps was Christopher Marlowe).

Many playwrights, accordingly, published anonymously, shielding themselves and—perhaps more importantly—their families from bad repute and persecution. The consequence of this is that we, today, still do not know the origins of many dramatic works that appeared in the age of Shakespeare. In fact, as Professor Gerald Eades Bentley of Princeton tells us, "the large majority of all English plays before the reign of Elizabeth are anonymous, and even from 1558 to 1590 the authors of most plays are unknown." The unattributable nature of these works illuminates the problem confounding scholars' attempts to resolve the Shakespeare authorship controversy, for, unbeknownst to most people, the playwriting career of the writer who called himself Shakespeare also was maintained in secrecy. Even when the plays of Shakespeare were published (and publication almost always followed many years of performance), they were published without attribution. In fact, for seven years after the Shakespeare plays began to be printed, they were published without any name affixed to them at all. Not until the end of the sixteenth century (well into the Shakespeare playwright's career) did any plays begin to appear in

print under the name of "William Shakespeare." Even then, several of them (such as *The London Prodigall* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*) were clearly misidentified by the publishers. One might wonder if even the publishers of his works knew who he was!

If, as Oxfordians maintain, the writer behind the Shakespeare pseudonym was Edward de Vere, as the 17th Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain of England, he would have been constrained by more than ordinary apprehensions about publishing his poems and plays. Convention discouraged nobility from publishing any works—especially plays—they composed; to have indulged in such an act outside of one's station would have been regarded within court culture as *infra dignitatem*—a slur on the code of nobility itself; a nobleman's reputation, after all, was to be won by sword and shield, not achieved by pen and ink in the midst of the roguish antics and rough-and-tumble recreations of the common herd at public theatres. Accordingly, several high-born poets' works, such as those of Sir Philip Sidney and Robert Devereaux, 2nd Earl of Essex, were never published under their authors' names during their lifetimes. If Oxford was the poet-playwright Shakespeare, he would have been prompted to shield his name from discovery (apart from other legitimate considerations) because Court practice and precedent urged it; the Lord Great Chamberlain of England and the son-in-law of the Lord Treasurer and chief minister of the Crown simply could not be known as a writer for the public stage.

Oxford, therefore, probably masked his identity from the larger public because he was compelled by his family and the Crown to do so. A writer for the public stage could ill afford to be linked to the Court. If he were to become publically known as a courtier poet and playwright, his poems and plays might be interpreted as government-financed propaganda or—perhaps more ominously—satirical commentary on the life, mores and personages of the Court, and no courtier, after all, was more prominent than Oxford's own father-in-law: the great Lord Treasurer, spymaster and chief counselor to the Queen, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to whom Oxford was personally as well as politically beholden (Burghley, as Master of the Court of Wards, had overseen and provided for Oxford's youth in his own household before Oxford became his son-in-law).

Therefore, by adopting the pseudonym of William Shakespeare, Edward de Vere provided himself, his family and the Crown with the means of preventing the public from looking to the Court in search of the Shakespeare playwright. His use of the *nom de plume*, Shakespeare, likely would have been known among only a few intimates, fellow courtier poets, principals of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Crown's chief officers. Indeed, that the "secret" was something of an open one, particularly in certain literary circles, seems confirmed by Oxford's receipt of a continuing stream of dedications and acclaim by his contemporaries, over many years—although, curiously, he is purported by most Traditionalists to have published nothing under his own name after 1576. By contrast, no one ever dedicated a single literary work to anyone named William Shakespeare in that writer's supposed lifetime, the merchant from Stratford never spelled his name as "Shakespeare," and he never is identified by anyone during the whole of his life as the Shakespeare poet-playwright.

But why "Shakespeare"? Why would Edward de Vere adopt that name as his playwriting name? There is no mystery here. Like that of Martin Marprelate, the well-known sobriquet of a Puritan

dissident (still unknown to us) in the late 1580s, Shakespeare was a pseudonym that addressed the chief realm of the writer's attention; in Marprelate's case, his focal point was the prelacy of the Anglican Church; in Shakespeare's case, it was the theatre.

"William Shakespeare" is a name that might have been adopted by almost any writer who wished to conceal from the public his title, office or his baptismal name but who yet wished to assert his identity as a playwright. After all, Pallas Athena, the mythological patron goddess of Athens (the ancient home of the theatre) wore a helmet, crowned by a Sphinx, that, when its visor was drawn, made her invisible. In her hand she carried a great spear. For a writer to be such a "spear-shaker" could therefore suggest that he was a writer of plays—an invisible writer of plays. That Oxford should have resorted to this pseudonym makes eminent sense, for he also was known as a champion battler in the lists—a spear-shaker of military renown. Similarly, Oxford's occasional hyphenated spelling of his poet-playwright name may also have been adopted to allude, with a more obvious wink and a nudge, to the author's role as a warrior with a pen as his spear. The possible suggestiveness of the name "Will-i-am Shake-speare" ("I will be [a] spear-shaker") as one whose words are intended to disturb the complacent takes on additional significance when we read Ben Jonson's knowing commemoration of Shakespeare in the First Folio: "He seems to shake a lance / As brandish't at the eyes of ignorance."

Writers always have taken terrible risks by writing "offensive" works. Ovid so offended Caesar Augustus' puritanical sensibilities by his erotic verse that he suffered the indignity of life-long exile from the empire. Dante, too, was exiled from his beloved Florence. When the brilliant British novelist, Matthew Gregory Lewis, owned up to his authorship of the Gothic novel, *The Monk*, he faced savage rebuke from ossified old Tories like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and risked charges of blasphemy being leveled against him in Parliament. Voltaire (the pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet) was imprisoned and subsequently exiled. Emile Zola was driven from France following his publication of *J'accuse*. Jean-Baptiste Pocquelin concealed himself, and protected his family, behind the name of Molière. Women, in particular, have invoked pseudonyms merely to get into print. Consider Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) and the Brontë sisters (who published under the names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell); Jane Austen wrote anonymously (her name was attached to her work only after her death). Oscar Wilde, while in exile, wrote as Sebastian Melmoth (the martyred wanderer). The sobriquet "O. Henry" shielded William Sidney Porter's family from association with Porter's personal disgrace following his conviction and imprisonment for embezzlement. In the 1950s, America's Hollywood Ten resorted to a host of pseudonyms and front men to try to get around the barriers to work that were established by the McCarthy-era blacklists. Daniel Defoe concealed himself behind more than *twenty* pseudonyms. In retrospect, Salman Rushdie probably wishes that he had chosen to hide behind at least *one*...!

English nobility who have employed pseudonyms since Elizabethan days include King George III, who published as Ralph Robinson. Lord Tennyson sometimes published his poetry under the name of Merlin. Lord Hardinge of Penshurst published crime fiction in the 1940s as George Milner. Edward de Vere might be comforted to know that the tradition of adopting a disguise when venturing into publication continues even today among England's peers. In any event, that the chief courtier poet-playwright of Elizabethan England, son-in-law of the Lord Treasurer and cousin to the Queen should have chosen the devices of anonymity and pseudonymity to assure

himself freedom of expression in his repressive, suspicious and censorious culture should hardly be surprising. That such an accomplished writer is likely to be the poet-dramatist we know by the name of Shakespeare—as opposed to an unlettered merchant from Warwickshire whose own offspring were illiterate—is even less so.

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