

# Seeing Double

## Early doubters of Shakespeare's identity

Julia Cleave

In a recent review of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, Paul Dean's opening remark recycles a stock Stratfordian meme:

Until 1856, when Delia Bacon published "William Shakespeare and his Plays: An Enquiry Concerning Them" in *Putnam's Magazine*, **no one questioned** that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon had written the plays ascribed to him in the First Folio of his works (1623), and possibly, in part or whole, a few others not included there. One may well wonder why anyone ever bothered to doubt it...

*The New Criterion*, dated Nov 2013

In making this all-too-familiar claim, as we all know, he is taking his cue from the usual suspects: Wells, Edmondson, Shapiro and Bate, and their followers:

"No one expressed doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the works attributed to him, give or take some suggestions that some of the plays might have been written in collaboration with other professional writers, as was exceptionally common at that time... until the middle of the nineteenth century.

*Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (2013).

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith state baldly:

No one expressed any doubt or suspicion about the authorship of the plays in the early modern period, nor until the nineteenth century.

*30 Great Myths about Shakespeare* (2012).

The blurb to Shapiro's *Contested Will* is even balder:

For more than two hundred years after William Shakespeare's death, no one doubted that he had written his plays.

James Shapiro *Contested Will* (2010).

But it is Jonthan Bate who takes the biscuit:

No one in Shakespeare's *lifetime*, nor the first two hundred years after his death expressed the slightest doubt about his authorship.

J. Bate *Genius of Shakespeare* (1998)

Ironically, this claim is directly contradicted in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* by one of the titles which Hardy Cook selects for his reading list: **R. C. Churchill: *Shakespeare and his Betters: a History and Criticism of the Attempts Which Have Been Made to Prove that Shakespeare's Works Were Written by Others* (1958).**

Cook notes that the history of doubt about the subject began in the seventeenth century and continued to the time of writing. Moreover, it is the modern so-called disintegrators – *within* the Stratfordian fold, who have done more than anyone to compromise any absolutist claims to Shakespeare's exclusive authorship of the canon. A point half acknowledged by Stanley Wells.

But such nuances are lost in the propaganda wars – the meme in its starkest form has gone viral. It's a combination of complacency and ignorance which is particularly galling to non-Stratfordians – and needs to be robustly

challenged. Leaving aside the prevalence of anonymous, pseudonymous and proxy authorship which characterised the Elizabethan theatre, and the swirl of rumours among a score of Shakespeare's contemporaries - who seemed to have felt compelled to drop heavy hints – from Greene's (or is it Chettle's?) exposé of Shaksper's pretensions, to Jonson's extraordinary unanswered question: What Author would conceal his name?\*

What I propose, instead, is to re-visit a dozen occasions, over the period of “over two hundred years” between the 1640s and 1850s when doubts were cast – and what different modes and discourses were chosen to express these, and, on occasion, provide a cover of deniability. The fact that these doubts surfaced at intervals over a span of two centuries testifies to what we might call an ‘underground stream’ of doubt. A good question to pose is: whether these relate to traditions handed down within particular families – as well as free-thinking individuals coming, independently, to the same conclusion? This is necessarily going to be a whistle-stop tour. As so often happens, you embark on a project, thinking it will be relatively straightforward, and then discover it merits much more in-depth treatment. So, what I am offering you is some suggestive sampling of a series of texts – some of which, I appreciate, will already be at least half familiar to you.

I've chosen to work backwards, starting with the article which appeared, just four years ahead of Delia Bacon, in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, and ending with George Wither's *Great Assizes Holden on Parnassus*, dated 1645. What is striking is that, collectively – and consistently through time - they touch on virtually all the objections which we continue to focus on today. And, spurred by doubt, are driven to invent varying scenarios based on doubleness, hence my title.

## 1852

### *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*

An interesting essay puts the case very vigorously as well as entertainingly. The anonymous author of this piece was actually a Robert Jamieson (in no. 449. Vol. 18, 7 August).<sup>1</sup> He poses the question:

#### WHO WROTE SHAKSPEARE?

Thus asks Mrs Kitty in High Life Below Stairs,\* to which his Grace my Lord Duke gravely replies: 'Ben Jonson.' 'O no,' quoth my Lady Baby: 'Shakspeare was written by one Mr Finis, for I saw his name at the end of the book!' and this passes off as an excellent joke, and never fails to elicit the applause of the audience; but still the question remains unanswered: Who wrote Shakspeare?

If published anonymously – what critic of any age would ever have ascribed these works to Shaksper?

Unfortunately, the search for ‘a local habitation and a name’ for such a genius is at once ‘cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd’ by the authentic recorded whatabouts, whenabouts and whereabouts of WS, actor, owner, purchaser and chattels and messuage devisor whilom of the Globe theatre, Surrey-side.

The unsurpassed brilliancy of the writer throws not one single spark to make noticeable the quiet uniform mediocrity of the man.

It will not do to fall back on genius to explain this discrepancy.

His solution to the mystery: Shakspeare kept a poet. He goes on to posit a scenario in which the calculating man of ‘commonplace transactions’ finds a Chatterton-like pale youth

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hotfreebooks.com/book/Chambers-s-Edinburgh-Journal-No-449-Volume-18-New-Series-August-7-1852-Variou.html>

in some garret, whom he employs to pen the plays for him. Where are the manuscripts he asks?

Take besides the custom of the age, the helter-skelter way in which dramas were got up, sometimes by half-a-dozen authors at once, of whom one occasionally monopolised the fame; and the unscrupulous manner in which booksellers appropriated any popular name of the day, and affixed it to their publications.

How comes it that Spenser, Raleigh and Bacon ignored the acquaintance – and that Heywood, Suckling and Haughton confine themselves to the works, and seem personally to avoid the man – the exception being Ben Jonson – bound by the strongest ties to keep the secret. ... notes what he calls the “unqualified fib” of Jonson’s description of the Droeshout portrait.

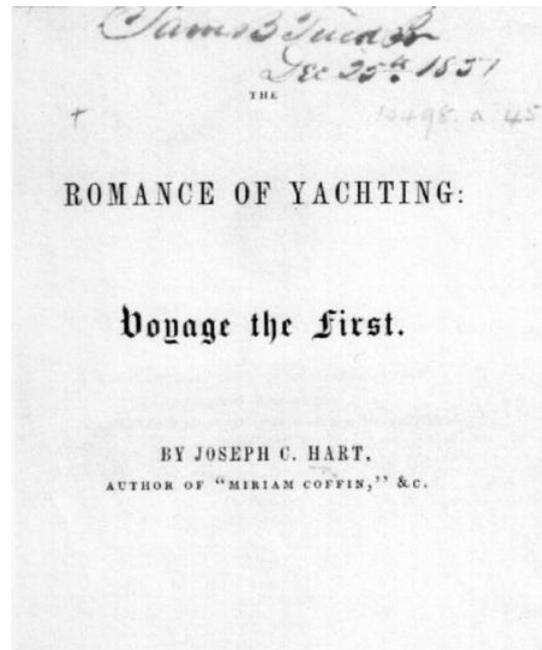
He concludes:

In fine, we maintain we have no more direct evidence to show that Shakspeare wrote Hamlet’s soliloquy than we have that he wrote the epitaph on John a Coombe, the ballad on Sir Thomas Lucy, or the epitaph to spare his “bones” on his own tombstone – all of which the commentators are now determined to repudiate.

His final point could have been made by an Oxfordian:

All at once Shakespeare leaves London with a fortune, and the supply of plays ceases. Is this compatible with such a genius thus culminating on any other supposition than the death of the poet, and the survival of the employer?

## 1848



### *Romance of Yachting* Joseph Hart <sup>2</sup>

This eccentric book is a discursive ragbag of opinions and observations in which he devotes over 30 pages to dissing Shakespeare (208 – 243). What seems to have piqued him was a denigratory ‘Life of Shakespeare’ by Dionysius Lardner in his *Cabinet Cyclopaedia* 1830-49, vol. II, p.100. Hart writes:

Shakespeare grew up in ignorance and viciousness and became a common poacher. And the latter title, in literary matters, he carried to his grave ... It is a fraud upon the world to thrust his surreptitious fame upon us ... the enquiry will be Who were the able literary men who wrote the dramas imputed to him?

His [Lardner’s] account of WS is one of under-hand brokery – speaks of his *literary thievery* and *pirating propensity*: He is *A mere factotum of the theatre – a vulgar and unlettered man*. Who “left no records of his

<sup>2</sup> This is the earliest mention of the Authorship Question according to Warren Hope and Kim Holsten in *The Shakespeare Controversy: An Analysis of the Authorship Theories*, McFarland, 2009.

literary labours” And merited “the indifference of his contemporaries”.

Hart’s observations, however, amounts to a rather confused rant – he seems to be attacking the idea of ‘Immortal Shakespeare’ as much as questioning the authorship. He disputes the authorship of most of the plays, regarding them as joint productions, often highly derivative, and vitiated with “gross impurities”. Where its value lies is in reflecting the existence of a groundswell of dissenting opinion in the 1830s and 40s – Hart is constantly referring to other ‘commentators’ some of whom he names: Rees, Chalmers, Lardner – reacting to the excesses of bardolatry and the discrepancy between the claims made for ‘Immortal Shakespeare’ and the absence of any documentation of a literary life.

1827.



DE VERE; OR, THE MAN OF INDEPENDENCE. BY THE AUTHOR OF TREMAINE

ROBERT PLUMER WARD

*De Vere or the Man of Independence*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For further consideration, see the article by Richard Whalen “*De Vere: Man of Independence*. Before Looney, did anyone know Oxford was Shakespeare? A Novel, a Song and a Portrait”. His article can be viewed at [www.shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/man-of-independence](http://www.shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/man-of-independence)

*De Vere or the Man of Independence* is a Regency roman à clef which has nothing overtly to do with the Shakespeare authorship – and yet, it does include some suggestive material from an Oxfordian point of view. It was attributed to “the author of Tremain” i.e. Robert Plumer Ward. Tantalisingly, the title page brings together De Vere, Shakespeare, and Francis Bacon. And almost every one of the 26 chapters is headed by a quote from Shakespeare.

My free drift

Halts not particularly, but moves itself  
In a wide sea of wax.

Shakespeare

Power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring: for good *thoughts* (though God accept them), yet, towards men, are little better than good dreams, except they be put in act; and that cannot be without power and place, as the vantage and commanding ground.

Francis Bacon

Even more tantalisingly, are the two directly contradictory verdicts it provides on Edward de Vere. Early on in the story, the narrator, and his companion who turns out to be a ‘Mortimer De Vere’, come upon a ‘fair seat’:

Two immense gates... flanked by two stone pillars – on top of one the figure of a boar cut in stone, supported by a shield of arms of ancient simplicity, being quarterly gules, and or, ... but what particularly struck me ... obelisk, or pedestal ... a tablet ... inscription: it was in old characters ... bore the date 1572.

This identical inscription, tablet and all, was supposed to have been cut from the wall of the cabinet or oratory of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, at Castle Hedingham in Essex, chief seat of the family.

**He was a poet, and not a very good one**, but ranked with those of his time... and this, added to the quarrels with his

father-in-law, Burleigh, for not saving his friend the Duke of Norfolk, according, as he thought, to a promise made, both by the queen and minister, created a tradition in the family that the inscription was his.

Some 40 pages later, we have a rather different account. Speaking of Mortimer De Vere:

But English history lay before him in the library, and the puissant De Vere figured with such power and brilliancy, in the earlier part of it, as to engage his attention. This was heightened even to devotion by a large and illuminated manuscript which his research had discovered on neglected shelves, in which the family history had been blazoned. Here, besides a long line of Norman heroes, he found *that* Edward, Earl of Oxford, who in the days of Elizabeth united in his single person the character of **her greatest noble, knight and poet.**

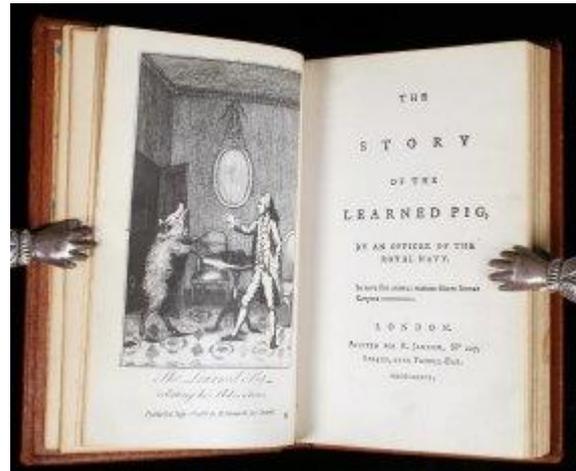
This is doubleness of a different kind – saying and then un-saying - what *are* we to make of it? At least we can assume from this last quote, that the book, given its date, is partly intended as a compliment to a different Edward – Edward Harley, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Oxford and Earl of Mortimer, 1689-1741.

## 1786

### *The Story of the Learned Pig*

By an Officer of the Royal Navy

Going back a further 40 years, we have *The Story of the Learned Pig* – almost certainly a reference to Francis Bacon - appearing in 1786, with this rather delightful frontispiece. It's a novel with outrageously picaresque plot-line turning on transmigration. The narrator inhabits a series of lives, alternating between the animal and human species. His three main human incarnations are as a Roman – Brutus, an Elizabethan – Shakespeare – and, finally, as an eighteenth century general [?].



Here is the most relevant passage:

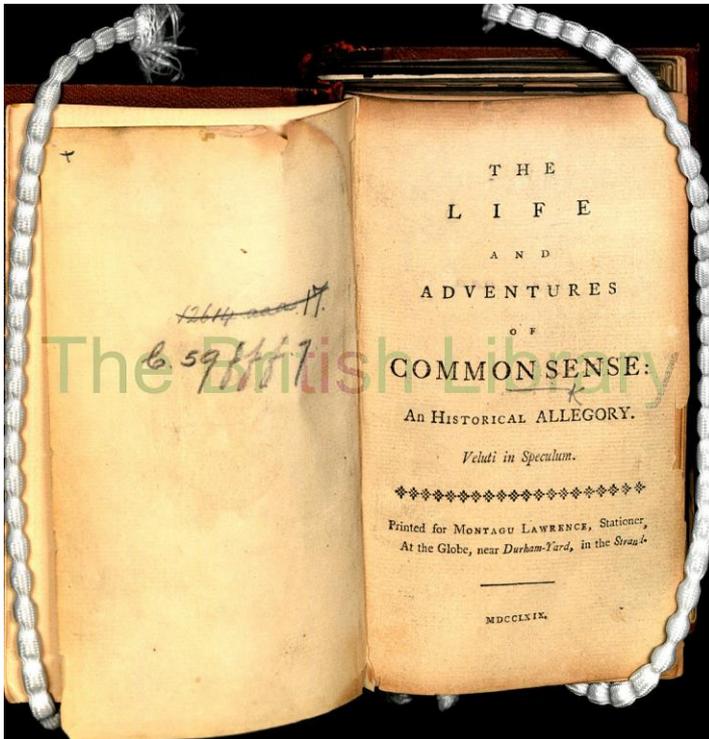
I am now come to a period in which, to my great joy, I once more got possession of a human body. My parents, indeed, were of low extraction; my mother sold fish about the streets of this metropolis, and my father was a water-carrier, even that same water-carrier celebrated by Ben Jonson in his comedy of EMIH. I was early in life initiated in the profession of horse-holder for those who came to visit the playhouse, where I was well-known by the name of **Pimping Billy.**

I soon after contracted a friendship with that great man and first of geniuses, the 'Immortal Shakespeare', and am happy in now having it in my power to refute the prevailing opinion of his having run his country for deer-stealing, which is as false as it is disgracing

With equal falsehood has he been father'd with many spurious dramatic pieces. *Hamlet, Othello, As You Like It, The Tempest,* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* for five, of all which I confess myself to be the author.

This is truly seeing double – who is the true author? Handy dandy – Is it the Immortal Shakespeare – or is it Pimping Billy?

1769



***The Life and Adventures of Commonsense  
An Historical Allegory***

The author is believed to be Herbert Lawrence, a physician and a friend of Garrick. It was popular enough to have a second edition in London and to be published in France and Switzerland in 1777. A century and a half later, in 1917, it was hailed in a catalogue entry for an auction that took place in New York as:

The first book of the Bacon-Shakespeare Controversy. The character of 'Wisdom' in the story can easily be identified as Sir Francis Bacon by the references to his

being often consulted by Queen Elizabeth and James I, and to his "Common Place Book" which, of course, survives.

The story relates the various adventures of Commonsense, the son of Wisdom and Truth from the time of Cicero to the reign of George Ch IX of Bk II sees the narrator's parents making their way to London:

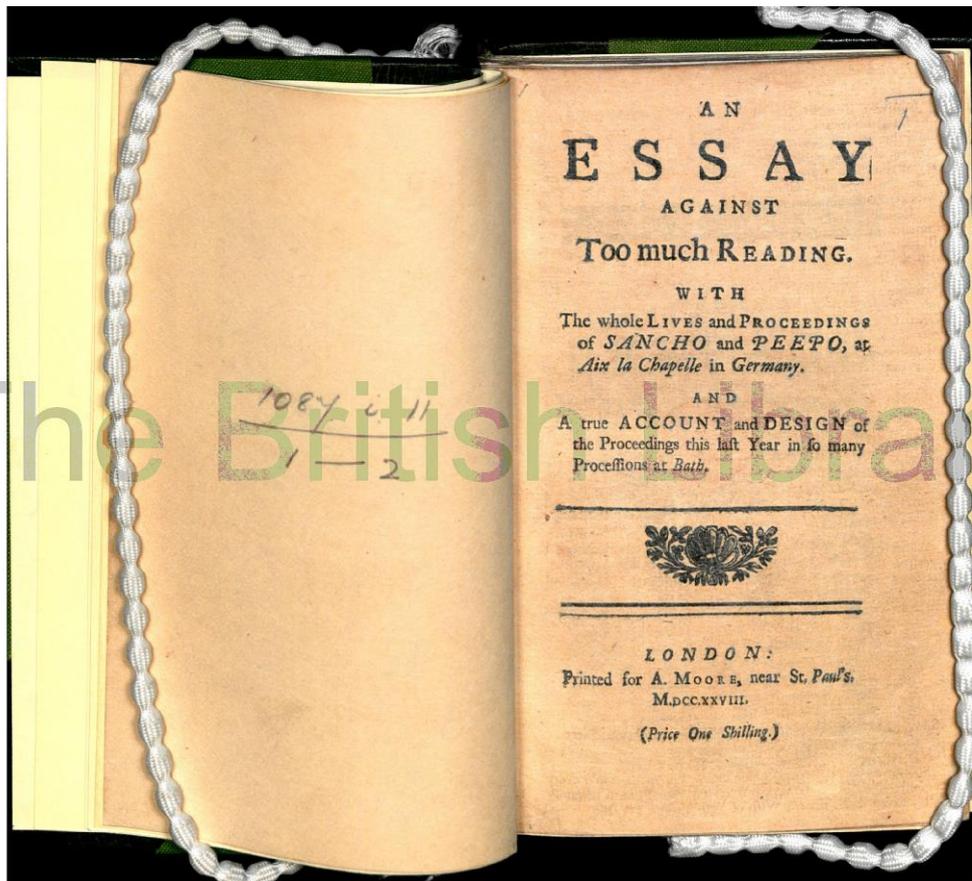
Upon their arrival they made an acquaintance with a Person belonging to the Playhouse; this Man was a profligate in his Youth, and, as some say, had been a Deer-stealer, others deny it; but be that as it will, he certainly was a Thief from the Time he was first capable of distinguishing any Thing; and therefore it is immaterial what Articles he dealt in. I say my father and his friends made a sudden and violent Intimacy with this Man, who seeing they were negligent, careless people, took the first opportunity that presented itself, to rob them of everything he could lay his hands on.

Amongst my father's baggage, he presently cast his eye upon a common-place Book, in which was contained, an infinite variety of Modes and Forms, to express all the different Sentiments of the human Mind, together with Rules for their Combinations and Connections upon every Subject or Occasion that might occur in Dramatic Writing.

With these Materials, and with good Parts of his own, he commenced Play-Writer, how he succeeded is needless to say, when I tell the Reader that his name was Shakespear [no 'e'].

Interestingly, these events are dated pre-1587.

1728



### *An Essay Against Too Much Reading*

**Captain Goulding**

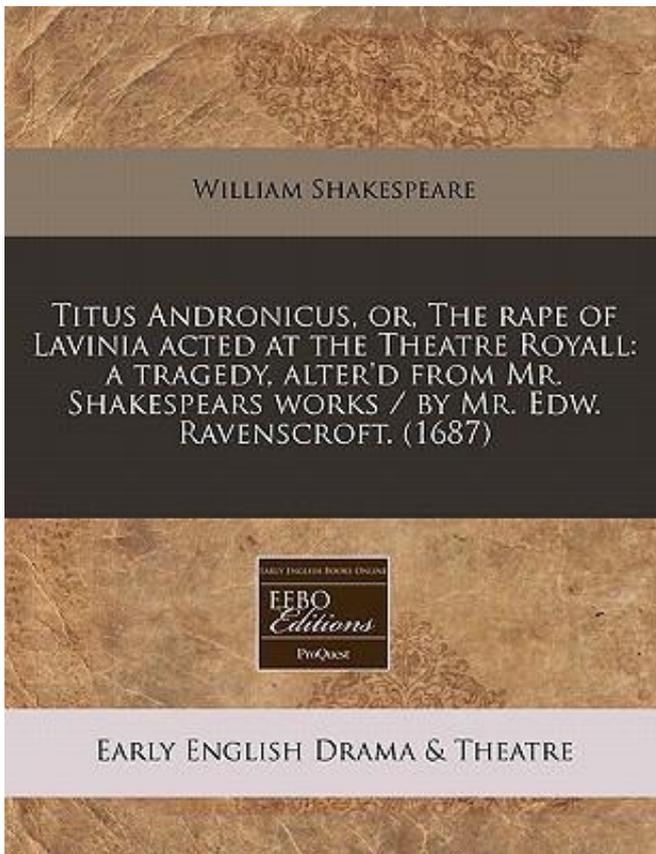
This mock essay uses hyperbole to inveigh against ‘too much reading’. Under cover of this supposedly enraged invective, the author, a Captain Goulding, satirises Bardolatry. Here’s a flavour of it:

Shakespear has frighten’d three parts of the world from attempting to write; and he was no Scholar, no Grammarian, no Historian, and in all probability, could not write English. Although his plays were historical, as I have heard, the History Part was given him in concise and short, by one of these Chuckles that could give him nothing else.

I will give you a short account of Mr. Shakespear’s Proceeding; and that I have had from one of his intimate Acquaintance. His being imperfect in some Things, was owing to his not being a scholar; which obliged him to have one of those chuckle-pated historians for his particular Associate, that could scarce speak a Word but upon that subject; and he maintain’d him, or he might have starv’d upon his History. And when he wanted anything in his Way, as his Plays were all Historical, he sent to him, and took down the Heads of what was his Purpose..”

On the one hand this is *reductio ad absurdum* – it is difficult to be sure just how seriously to take him. As well as lampooning, is he making any kind of serious point about dual authorship or substituted proxy authorship?

1687



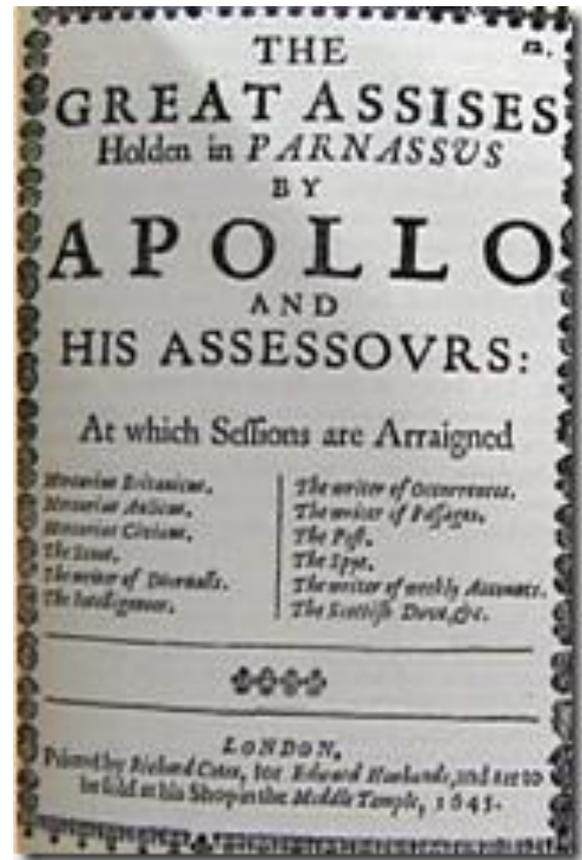
### Edward Ravenscroft

The seventeenth century playwright Edward Ravenscroft (fl. 1659 – 97) wrote a string of plays in the 1670s including his own adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. The extensive DNB article on him does not include the fact that he in the introduction to his adaptation, he stated:

I have been told by some anciently conversant with the stage that [*Titus Andronicus*] was not originally his but brought by a private author to be acted.

Here we have it – in straightforward statement – from someone who appears to have no agenda, but is simply reporting what he has been told. Here is Shakespeare acting as playbroker – his most plausible role in the whole Authorship mystery. It also matches John Ward's statement, that Shakespeare *supplied* the stage with two plays a year.

1645



### *The Great Assises Holden on Parnassus by Apollo and his Assessors*

My final example takes us one step closer to Shakespeare's time, and chiming with all the heavy hints dropped by his contemporaries about Shake-scene, a rich mummer, Poet-Ape, Shake-rags and Shake-bags. This is another teasing work which takes an established satirical genre – a mock trial of contemporary authors – and has a great deal of fun with it. On the second page, the *writer of weekly accounts* is identified as William Shakespeare – the joke of the piece being that the malefactors are the same as the jurors. Astonishingly, the modern editor of this extraordinary work, Hugh Macdonald, fails in his introduction to make any reference to Shakespeare. All the writers represented come in for abuse:

Shakespeare's a Mimicke, Massinger's a Sot  
When it comes to the accusations levell'd at  
'the writer of weekly accounts' significantly he

is not named – though he is identified through the pun on accounts – and the emphasis on ‘trade’ and ‘profit’ and the suggestion that he presides over a company which seeks a patent:

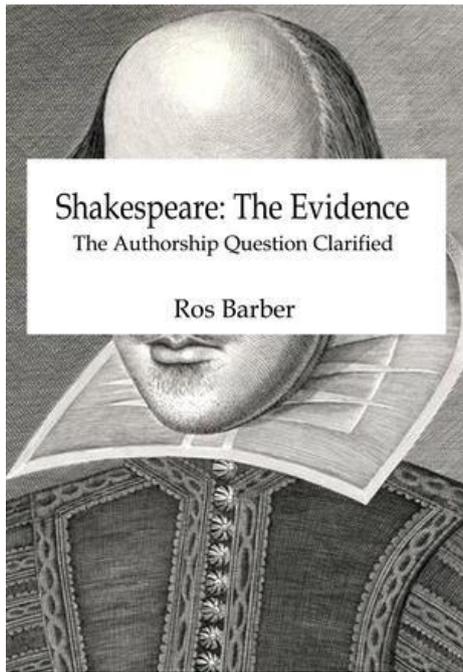
...another then was call'd to an account,  
 And this was he, who weekly did pretend,  
*Accounts* of certain news abroad to send.  
 He was accus'd, that he with Pamphlets  
     vain,  
 The art of lying had sought to maintain,  
 Which trade, he and his fellows us'd of late

With such success, and profit in the State  
 Of high Parnassus, that they did conspire,  
*A Patent from Apollo* to acquire:  
 That they might thus incorporated bee,  
 Into a *Company of Lyers free*.

And when it comes to the judgement on him delivered by Apollo – he is condemned to pass back and forward over the river Styx – the image of Shakespeare is that he is a go-between, a fixer, a dealer. ■

## *Shakespeare: The Evidence*

by Ros Barber



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Comprehensive appendices contain the full text of documents, plays and poems that are referenced in the debate. Wherever possible, each section is hyperlinked to primary sources so you can read the original texts in their contexts. Contains dozens of images of original documents: manuscripts, title pages, official records. Builds into a central repository for everything we know - or think we know - about William Shakspeare of Stratford, and the author William Shakespeare - corraling all evidence which can shed light on whether they are one and the same. No cherry-picking here: *every* piece of evidence forwarded in both the non-Stratfordian and the Stratfordian cause is considered.

### **Open Your Mind**

If you've been interested in the Shakespeare authorship question for some time, you'll probably have some fixed ideas about it. But there is always another way of looking at things. Don't fall prey to confirmation bias: reading evidence to support your pre-formed beliefs. Instead, open your mind to absorb a range of possibilities. If you're a relative newcomer to the Shakspeare authorship question, this book is also ideal. It is not pressing one point of view on its readers, or attempting to persuade you of a single truth. Its easily digestible bullet-pointed format and neutral stance

allows readers to quickly absorb the essentials of this complex issue.

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Whether you are a firm believer that Shakspeare wrote Shakespeare, or suspect that he didn't, this book offers you the chance to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the problems at hand and clarify your thinking. It enables you to identify weaknesses in, and logical rebuttals to, the arguments of your opponents, as well as potentially strengthening your own. Identify the strongest arguments to support your case and how best to put them.

### **Contribute to the debate**

The Shakespeare authorship question is an enormous field, and the only way to compile this book is to pick the brains of many, many people. Readers are encouraged to suggest any evidence items not currently included, and contribute arguments and counter arguments, in order to make this book truly comprehensive and truly neutral. Currently many readers are Shakespeare sceptics, and the author would specifically like to ask more Stratfordians to contribute their points of view in order to make it more balanced. Significant contributors to the book will be named on the Acknowledgements page, with the contributor's permission.

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