

Declaration of Reasonable Doubt About the Identity of William Shakespeare

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To Shakespeare lovers everywhere, as well as to those who are encountering him for the first time: know that a great mystery lies before you. How could William “Shaksper” of Stratford have been the author, William Shakespeare, and leave no definitive evidence of it that dates from his lifetime? And why is there an enormous gulf between the alleged author’s life and the contents of his works?

In the annals of world literature, William Shakespeare is an icon of towering greatness. **But who was he?** The following are among the many outstanding writers, thinkers, actors, directors and statesmen of the past who have expressed **doubt that Mr. “Shaksper” wrote the works of William Shakespeare:**

Mark Twain	Orson Welles	William James	Paul H. Nitze
Henry James	Tyrone Guthrie	Sigmund Freud	Lord Palmerston
Walt Whitman	Charlie Chaplin	Clifton Fadiman	William Y. Elliott
Ralph Waldo Emerson	Sir John Gielgud	John Galsworthy	Lewis F. Powell, Jr.
Sir George Greenwood	Hugh Trevor-Roper	Mortimer J. Adler	Harry A. Blackmun

Present-day doubters include many more prominent individuals, numerous leading Shakespearean actors, and growing numbers of English professors. Brunel University in West London, and Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, now offer degree programs in authorship studies. **Yet orthodox scholars claim that there is no room for doubt** that Mr. Shaksper wrote the plays and poems traditionally attributed to him. Some say that it is not even an important question.

We, the undersigned, hereby declare our view that **there is room for reasonable doubt** about the identity of William Shakespeare, and that it is an important question for anyone seeking to understand the works, the formative literary culture in which they were produced, or the nature of literary creativity and genius.

The Problematic Case for Stratford’s Mr. Shaksper

Many people think that Mr. Shaksper (a frequent spelling of his name, used here to distinguish him from the author) *claimed* to have written the works. No such record exists. The case for him as the author rests largely on testimony in the First Folio collection of the plays, published in 1623, seven years after he died. However, nothing in the contemporaneous documentary evidence of his life confirms the Folio testimony. If Mr. Shaksper was the author, there should be definitive evidence of it from his lifetime. There is none. Not that there are no reasons to think that Mr. Shaksper wrote the works, but we find them inconclusive.

There are four main reasons to identify Mr. Shaksper of Stratford with the author William Shakespeare. First, the name “William Shakespeare” (often “Shake-speare”) appeared on the title pages of many of the poems and plays published during his lifetime. Second, Ben Jonson wrote a key phrase in the First Folio referring to the author as “Sweet Swan of Avon,” and Leonard Digges refers to “thy Stratford monument.” Third, fellow actors Heminges and Condell, mentioned in his will, point to him as the author in the Folio. Fourth, the effigy and inscription on his Stratford monument suggest that “Shakspeare” had been a writer. These four reasons would seem to amount to a *prima facie* case for Mr. Shaksper (evidence sufficient to establish a presumption of fact, unless rebutted by other evidence); however, each of them is problematic.

1. It is not certain from the title pages that the name printed on them necessarily refers to Mr. Shakspere. Mr. Shakspere's last name was spelled numerous ways, even after many of the works had been published. The name on the works was virtually always spelled one way, "Shakespeare;" but it was often hyphenated – a rarity for English names at the time. Scholars have no definitive explanation for the hyphenated name. Mr. Shakspere's name was *never* hyphenated in other contexts, such as his business dealings in Stratford. On his baptismal record, even on his monument, Mr. Shakspere's name was spelled with no "e" after "k." The same is true of its three appearances in his will, twice spelled "Shackspeare," and once "Shakspeare." Some think that it may have been pronounced with a short "a," like "Shack," as it was quite often spelled.
2. The First Folio testimony does point to Shakspere as the author, but should this be taken at face value? It is very unusual that the identity of such a great writer would depend so heavily on posthumous evidence. Neither Ben Jonson, nor Leonard Digges, ever wrote a personal reference to Mr. Shakspere while he lived. Not until the year Shakspere died did Jonson refer to "Shakespeare," and then only to list him as an actor. Other than their two brief allusions, neither Jonson nor Digges offered any further identifying information – not his dates of birth and death, or names of any family members, or any revealing episode from his life. Short on individualizing facts, they gave us generalized superlatives that describe the author, not the man.
3. Perhaps the strongest link to Mr. Shakspere is the apparent testimony of actors Heminges and Condell. Neither of them was a writer, however, and several scholars doubt that they wrote the passages attributed to them. Some think their Folio testimony sounds like a sales pitch, urging undecided readers to purchase. Most orthodox scholars are untroubled by the lack of corroboration, limited specifics, ambiguities, puffery and unclear role of Mr. Shakspere's fellow actors. Skeptics ask why the Folio is not more straightforward, and why such a great outpouring of eulogies only occurred following seven years of silence after his death.
4. Yes, today the Stratford monument effigy clearly depicts a writer; but it does not look the same as the one erected in the early 1600s. A sketch by a reputable antiquarian in 1634 shows a man with a drooping moustache holding a wool or grain sack, but no pen, no paper, no writing surface as in today's monument. Records show that the monument was "repaired." Apparently the effigy was also altered to depict a writer. The monument's strange inscription never states that Mr. Shakspere *was* the author William Shakespeare. For anybody living in Stratford, who may have known him, the epitaph could appear to say no such thing. It neither names, nor quotes from, any of the works; and it never mentions poetry, plays, acting or theater. Most orthodox biographers have little to say about the inscription, and some even describe it as enigmatic. Epitaphs of other writers of the time identify them clearly as writers, so why not Mr. Shakspere's epitaph?

Why We Say the Evidence Does Not Fit

If the case for Mr. Shakspere were otherwise sound, the problems in these four areas would hardly matter. Unfortunately, once one looks beyond them, one finds no contemporaneous evidence that Mr. Shakspere was even a professional writer, much less that he was the poet-playwright William Shakespeare. Further, much contemporaneous evidence that has come to light seems at odds with his having been Shakespeare. Of a few great writers, like Homer, we know nothing at all; but there is only one great writer about whom the more we learn, the less he appears to have *been* a writer. How can this be for England's Shakespeare?

Not one play, not one poem, not one letter in Mr. Shakspere's own hand has ever been found. He divided his time between London and Stratford, a situation conducive to correspondence. Early scholars naturally expected that at least some of his correspondence would have survived. Yet the only writings said to be in his own hand are six shaky, inconsistent signatures on legal documents, including three found on his will. If, in fact, these signatures are his, they reveal that Mr. Shakspere experienced difficulty signing his name. Some document experts doubt that even these signatures are his and suggest they were done by law clerks. One letter addressed to Mr. Shakspere survives. It requested a loan, and it was unopened and undelivered.

His detailed will, in which he famously left his wife "my second best bed with the furniture," contains no clearly Shakespearean turn of phrase and mentions no books, plays, poems, or literary effects of any kind.

Nor does it mention any musical instruments, despite extensive evidence of the author's musical expertise. He did leave token bequests to three fellow actors (an interlineation, indicating it was an afterthought), but nothing to any writers. The actors' names connect him to the theater, but *nothing* implies a writing career. Why no mention of Stratford's Richard Field, who printed the poems that first made Shakespeare famous? If Mr. Shakspeare was widely known as William "Shakespeare," why spell his name otherwise in his will? Dying men are usually very aware of, and concerned about, what they are famous for. Why not this man?

Mr. Shakspeare grew up in an illiterate household in the remote agricultural town of Stratford-upon-Avon. There is no record that he traveled at all during his formative years, or that he ever left England. Both of his parents witnessed documents with a mark; but most surprisingly, neither of his daughters could write. One poorly-executed signature exists for his daughter, Susanna, but it only suggests a functional illiterate. His younger daughter, Judith, twice signed with a mark when witnessing a deed for a Stratford neighbor. Mr. Shakspeare may have attended the Stratford grammar school, but records to confirm this do not exist. Records do survive for England's two universities at the time, but no record places him at either of them. Most orthodox scholars make no claim that he ever attended any university, inside or outside of England.

Some say that the Stratford grammar school would have provided all the formal education Mr. Shakspeare would have needed to launch him on a trajectory consistent with the author's literary output. We disagree. The works show extensive knowledge of law, philosophy, classical literature, ancient and modern history, mathematics, astronomy, art, music, medicine, horticulture, heraldry, military and naval terminology and tactics; etiquette and manners of the nobility; English, French and Italian court life; Italy; and aristocratic pastimes such as falconry, equestrian sports and royal tennis. Nothing that we know about Mr. Shakspeare accounts for this. Much of the knowledge displayed in the works was the exclusive province of the upper classes, yet no record places Mr. Shakspeare among them for any length of time. The works are based on myriad ancient and modern sources, including works in French, Italian, Spanish, Latin and Greek not yet translated into English. How Mr. Shakspeare could have acquired knowledge of these sources is a mystery.

The gap between Mr. Shakspeare's youth in Stratford and the first record of him in London is known as the "lost years." But for a few church records, the first twenty-eight years of his life could be described as lost. Scholars know *nothing* about how he acquired the breadth and depth of knowledge displayed in the works. This is not to say that a commoner, even in the rigid, hierarchical social structure of Elizabethan England, could not have managed to do it somehow; but how could it have happened without leaving a single trace? Orthodox scholars attribute the miracle to his innate "genius," but even a genius must *acquire* knowledge. Books were expensive and difficult to obtain during those times, except at universities or private libraries. No book that Mr. Shakspeare owned, or that is known to have been in his possession, has ever been found. Academic experts on characteristics of geniuses see little reason to think that Mr. Shakspeare was a genius.

No record shows that any William Shakespeare ever received payment, or secured patronage, for writing. After dedicating his first two poems to the earl of Southampton, Shakespeare issued no more dedications. Why would any writer motivated by profit, as we are told Mr. Shakspeare was, not visibly seek patronage? Some scholars claim that the earl of Southampton was his patron, but no record shows that they ever met. A phrase in one of the dedications ("The warrant I have of your honourable disposition. . .") suggests not. Not only did prominent patrons of other writers not support Mr. Shakspeare, they did not comment on him. Up until 1623, those who commented on the author, or on his works, never indicated that they knew him. Shakespeare, the author, wrote no commendatory verse, and nobody addressed any to him while he lived.

Contrary to the traditional view that the author became a prominent public figure, there is no record that he ever addressed the public directly, either in person or in writing (other than the two early dedications); and no record shows that either Elizabeth I, or James I, ever met Shakespeare, or spoke or wrote his name. Even after one of his plays was performed as part of the Essex rebellion, Shakespeare was not mentioned. Almost uniquely among Elizabethan poets, Shakespeare remained silent following the death of Elizabeth. Early in the reign of James I, records place Shakspeare in Stratford while plays were staged in London for the Court. Why was the popular playwright and leading actor of the King's Men not part of such events?

It is not that there are no documents for Mr. Shakspere; there are close to seventy, but all are non-literary. They reveal a businessman of Stratford, plus a theater entrepreneur and sometime minor actor in London. A few records show him delinquent in paying taxes, and he was cited for hoarding grain during a famine. A William Wayte, evidently threatened by him, sought "sureties of the peace against William Shakspere." In 1612, allegedly at the height of his fame, a London court called him simply a "gentleman of Stratford." He sued over small business matters, but never once objected to an unauthorized publication of the works. The orthodox see nothing unusual in the lack of documentation for Mr. Shakspere's ostensible career, but he is the only presumed writer of his time for whom there is no contemporary evidence of a writing career.

Stranger still, this alleged prolific writer is said to have retired in his late-forties, with his faculties intact, and returned to the same market town from which he came, never to write a play, a poem, or even a letter. There is no record that he ever put on a play in Stratford, or that any of its residents viewed him as a poet. Several people who knew the man, or knew who he was, seem not to have associated him with the author, including his son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, poet Michael Drayton and prominent historian William Camden. Nobody, including literary contemporaries, ever recognized Mr. Shakspere as a writer during his lifetime; and when he died in 1616, no one seemed to notice. Not so much as a letter refers to the author's passing. If Mr. Shakspere was Shakespeare, surely *something* dating from 1616 should mention the author's death. Even Heminges, Condell and Richard Burbage, whom he mentioned in his will, had no recorded reaction. Nor did those who held rights to previously published editions of plays or poems rush new ones into print.

Scholars have found few, mostly dubious connections between the life of the alleged author and the works. Why are virtually all of the plays set among the upper classes, and how did the author learn of their ways? Why is only one play set in Mr. Shakspere's Elizabethan or Jacobean England? Why are so many in Italy? How did he become so familiar with all things Italian that even obscure details in these plays are accurate? Why did he never mention Stratford, and never write a play that seems to reflect his own life experiences? While pouring out his heart in the Sonnets, why did he *not once* mention the death of his 11-year-old son? Perhaps a few apparent incongruities could be explained away, if taken in isolation; but there are so many! Sam Schoenbaum, among the most-quoted traditional Shakespeare biographers, after decades of research, wrote that, "Perhaps we should despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record." (*Shakespeare's Lives*, Second Edition)

Finally, Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, found Shakespeare's elusiveness "exasperating and almost incredible . . . After all, he lived in the full daylight of the English Renaissance in the well documented reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I and . . . since his death has been subjected to the greatest battery of organised research that has ever been directed upon a single person. And yet the greatest of all Englishmen, after this tremendous inquisition, still remains so close to a mystery that **even his identity can still be doubted.**" ("What's in a Name?" *Réalités*, November 1962.)

We make no claim, in signing this declaration, to know exactly what happened, who wrote the works, nor even that Mr. Shakspere definitely did not. Individual signatories will have their personal views about the author; but all we claim here is that there is "room for doubt," and other reasonable scenarios are possible. If writers and thinkers of the stature of Henry James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and all the rest of the outstanding people named above, have expressed doubt that Mr. William Shakspere of Stratford wrote the works attributed to him, why is it even necessary to *say* that there is room for doubt? There clearly *is* doubt, as a matter of empirical fact – *reasonable* doubt, expressed by very credible people. Reasonable people may differ about whether a preponderance of the evidence supports Mr. Shakspere, but **it is simply not credible for anyone to claim, in 2007, that there is no room for doubt** about the author.

Therefore, in adding our names to those of the distinguished individuals named above, we hereby declare that the identity of William Shakespeare should, henceforth, be regarded in academia as a legitimate issue for research and publication, and an appropriate topic for instruction and discussion in classrooms.

(To see the list of signatories, or to read, sign and download the declaration, go to www.DoubtAboutWill.org
No longer should any prominent doubter remain silent for lack of an effective way to express their doubt.)