

# **A 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Essay on the Fishiness of the First Folio of William Shakespeare's Collected Plays**

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The importance of the First Folio to the case for William Shakspeare<sup>1</sup> of Stratford-upon-Avon as the author of the plays and poems attributed to William “Shakespeare” cannot be overstated. Without the First Folio, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have thought of the Stratford man as the author “Shakespeare” at all. Certainly nothing shows that anyone thought of him as the great author at the time when he died, in 1616. Even Professor Stanley Wells, Honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, now admits that nothing shows the author was from Stratford during William Shakspeare's lifetime. Yet he says this is irrelevant because the front matter to the First Folio identifies him clearly as the author. But does it? In fact, there are good reasons to think the First Folio is misleading, or even an outright spoof.

When he died in 1616, William Shakspeare of Stratford left nothing that suggests he thought he would long be remembered. He left no record of himself or his life. There is no arrangement for a memorial in his will. The will mentions no books, plays, poems, manuscripts, or literary effects of any kind – nothing to suggest he had a literary career. He had held no public offices in either Stratford or London, and he left no bequests that would have moved the citizens of Stratford to honor him. He was buried in the Stratford parish church beneath a plain stone slab that didn't have his name on it, just six lines of embarrassing doggerel verse. For over seven years after he died, there was nothing to indicate he would be remembered at all, merely silence.

Then, in November 1623, the silence ended. A magnificent book, containing thirty-six plays, was published in London, entitled *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies*. Eighteen of the plays had not been published previously, and three of them had not been known to exist. It contained ambiguous hints that our William Shakspeare of Stratford had in fact been the famous poet-playwright William Shakespeare. That book, now known as the “First Folio” (“Folio” because of its large, folio-sized pages; “First” because there were three subsequent folio editions), was impressive. Copies today sell for many millions of dollars. Yet as James Boswell the younger wrote in a note in 1821, there is “something fishy” about the First Folio.

Nothing in the First Folio specifically states that Mr. Shakspeare of Stratford *was* the author “Shakespeare.” Nor does it contain any biographical information that confirms he was, such as his dates of birth and death. There are no names of any of his family members, nor any revealing episode from his life one could verify. It doesn't even display the coat of arms that he and his father went to much trouble and expense to acquire. That would have left no doubt about the identity of the author, and its omission can hardly be an oversight.

Nor does the Folio include a eulogy from any of the fellow writers with whom he supposedly collaborated. At least they were consistent, since no putative collaborator wrote a tribute at the time when he died, either. Francis Beaumont, a lesser writer who died the month before Shakspeare, was buried in Westminster Abbey with great ceremony and tributes from many fellow writers. Nothing of the kind was done for Shakespeare.

Ben Jonson was the only important writer to pen a tribute for the First Folio – this for the “Soul of the age!” Jonson's own folio contained numerous tributes from fellow writers, far more than the four to Shakespeare. None of the other three who wrote poems for the Folio was a major writer or an obvious choice for the role.

Ben Jonson and Shakespeare were rivals, and in his later writings Jonson is critical of Shakespeare's plays. It seems odd that Jonson was chosen to write the main eulogy, rather than one of the putative collaborators,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, we use the spelling “Shakespeare” to refer to the author, whoever he may have been, and “Shakspeare” to refer to the man from Stratford-upon-Avon. Some such convention is required to refer to them separately, and this is standard. “Shakspeare” is also how the Stratford man's name is nearly always spelled in the Stratford parish register.

such as Heywood, Dekker, Middleton, or Fletcher. The Folio ascribes all of the plays to Shakespeare alone. If, in fact, the author collaborated with others, then we know that the Folio is misleading at least about that.

These are some of the more obvious problems with the First Folio. Others are more subtle but no less fishy.

### **The Droeshout engraving**

The first problem one encounters is on the title page. The Droeshout engraving, ostensibly of Shakespeare, is so odd in so many ways that orthodox scholars find it an embarrassment and are unable to account for it. It has no neck, and the head is too big for the body, making it appear to be suspended on the ruff in mid-air. The hair is longer on one side than the other. The great bulbous forehead is so large that it seems unnatural. Some think it has two right eyes, one lower than the other. Its nose is off center, and the mouth is too small.

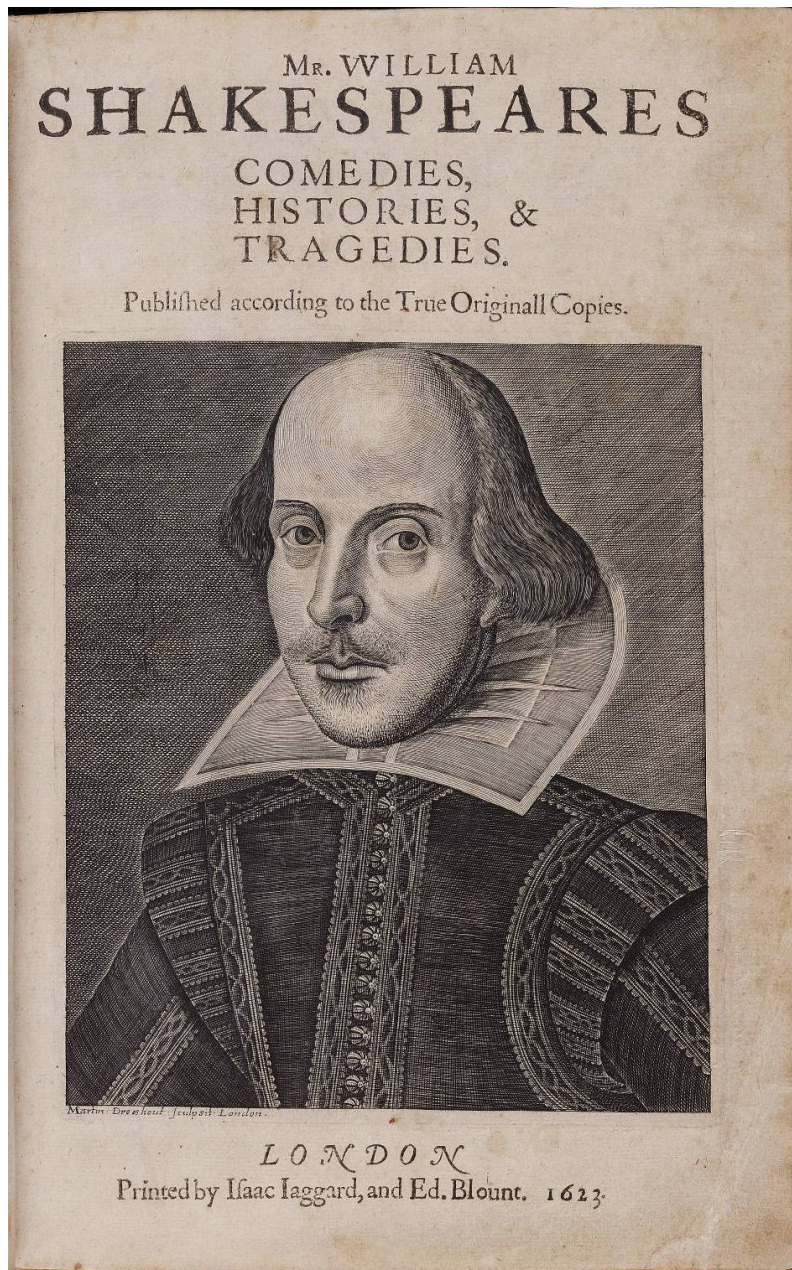


Figure 1: Title page of the First Folio with Martin Droeshout's engraving

Scholars blame the engraver, Martin Droeshout, but the publishers did not have to accept it and could have hired someone else for such an important project. The fact that they did not implies that they were satisfied. At least one notable oddity was evidently quite deliberate: In 1911 a tailor published an article pointing out that the right side of the front of the doublet shown in the engraving is “obviously” the left side of the back. He wrote that it was “not unnatural to assume it was intentional and done with express object and purpose.”

In 2010, Dr. John Rollett analyzed the pattern in the doublet and showed that the tailor had it exactly right. Each of the other oddities is subjective and could be due to poor drawing, but not the “impossible doublet.” His analysis of the doublet is objective, involving easily verified observations of the pattern in the garment. The engraver, evidently working from a real garment, based the left front of the doublet on the left front of the garment, then turned the garment around and based the right front of the doublet on the left rear of the same garment. As a result, the most iconic image of William Shakespeare turns out to have two left sides! Rather than amateurish and incompetent, the engraving turns out to be a very skillfully executed absurdity.

Rollett also identified other oddities in the engraving and concluded that “although one or two peculiarities might be ascribed to carelessness, six or seven (some obvious) seem to point toward a deliberate agenda...” He said he found it difficult not to think that the man depicted was being gently and surreptitiously mocked, and that by featuring a “ridiculous caricature” of the Stratford man, the publishers seemed to be suggesting to observant readers that the implication that Mr. Shakspeare was the author “Shakespeare” was a deception.

On the page facing the engraving is a ten-line poem about it by the poet-playwright Ben Jonson, addressed “To the Reader.” Jonson was known for deliberate ambiguity, and this poem is a good example. It begins:

This Figure, that thou here seest put,  
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut

Rather than a *picture of Shakespeare*, we are given a “Figure” that was cut “for” him and then “put” there. A frontispiece engraving in an author’s collected works should be *of* him, not something created *for* him. According to the OED, one definition of “figure” (now obsolete) was “an imaginary form, a phantasm.”

A few lines later, the poem reads:

O, could he have but drawn his wit  
As well in brasse, as he hath hit  
His face

It is also a bit odd to speak of the engraver having “hit” his face. An alternative meaning of “hit” is “hid.” Chaucer once used it that way, as Jonson probably knew. Did he perhaps mean for others in the know to read it that way and think that, in fact, the engraving hid the author’s image, rather than being a likeness? Some think the line drawn from the left ear down along the jaw line suggests that the engraving is a mask.

Jonson concludes by saying “Reader, looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke.” Rather than affirming the authenticity of the engraving (its ostensible purpose), the poem negates its own message, telling the reader that the image should be ignored in favor of the works, where the real author is to be found. Since we now know (per Rollett) that the Droeshout engraving is comically bogus, this interpretation has strong support. For a visual analysis of the “Impossible Doublet” by actress Debbie Radcliffe, watch this YouTube [video](#).

Authorship doubters are not the only ones who think Jonson’s poem contradicts the engraving. In *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*, Professor Leah Marcus of Vanderbilt University devotes fifty pages to the portrait and Jonson’s poem on the facing page. She found that they contradict each other, with the closing lines of the poem to the reader virtually abolishing Shakespeare as the man in the portrait.

Marcus first observes that “if the First Folio is considered in light of other English folios of the period ... there is something quite odd about the way it starts out.” She notes the “unsettling size and directness” of

the portrait, as if it were saying that “this is the Man Himself,” but, she adds, “the verses on the facing page say otherwise ... Shakespeare, the verses tell us, is not to be found in the image.” She calls Jonson’s poem “iconoclastic, shattering the power of the visual image in order to locate Shakespeare’s identity elsewhere, in wit.” It “abolishes Shakespeare as an entity apart from his writings.” She concludes that “the First Folio opens with an implicit promise to communicate an authorial identity, which it instead repeatedly displaces: Shakespeare is somehow there, but nowhere definitively there.” The First Folio is fishy right from the start.

## Heminges and Condell

Stratfordians take at face value two introductory letters attributed to Shakspere’s fellow actor-shareholders John Heminges and Henry Condell (whose names are *printed* beneath them, not signed as is often claimed). According to the two letters, they collected, edited, and published the thirty-six plays in the 900-page Folio (despite having no known prior experience as writers or editors) “to keep the memory of so worthy a friend, & fellow alive, as was our SHAKESPEARE.” This is said to prove that Shakspere was the poet-playwright.

For example, Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*; James Shapiro of Columbia University in *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*; and Jonathan Bate of Oxford in *The Genius of Shakespeare*, all assert that Heminges and Condell were the publishers. But none of these leading orthodox scholars explains how this could have been done by two unlettered novices from the acting world.

Nothing shows that either Heminges or Condell ever wrote anything else, or that either of them could write at all, or that either of them ever went to school. Nothing is known of Condell’s background, but Heminges was apprenticed to a grocer at age twelve – not suggestive of the literary education needed to edit the Folio.

By 1623, Heminges and Condell had both ceased to be active members of the King’s Men acting company, from whom they supposedly obtained most of the plays in the First Folio and were supposedly representing in publishing them. Yet they would have had no right to claim to represent their former acting troupe, some of whom were still active and held important positions in the company, without the least acknowledgement. And if they were acting on behalf of the King’s Men their obvious dedicatee should have been their patron, King James, who had employed them generously for many years. Instead, King James is barely mentioned.

Another major problem for the claim that Heminges and Condell acted on behalf of the King’s Men is that the valuable manuscripts, from which some eighteen of the First Folio plays had to be typeset, disappeared when the project was complete. If they were representing the interests of the King’s Men, and the company owned the manuscripts (as Stratfordian academics allege), they should have preserved them. It seems likely that they were *not* collected by Heminges and Condell and were destroyed when the project was completed. It is difficult to imagine why this would have been done except for what they revealed about the authorship.

In fact, Ben Jonson, not Heminges and Condell, wrote the two letters, as George Steevens showed in 1770. Steevens, a distinguished 18th-century Shakespeare editor, produced twelve pages of parallels between the epistles and writings of Jonson. He concluded that Jonson wrote both epistles, and Edmond Malone agreed. Jonson, unlike Heminges and Condell, *was* qualified to write the two letters and edit the plays in the Folio, having edited and published his own collection of plays, the *first* folio of English plays, seven years earlier. If the Folio’s claims about Heminges and Condell are false, it calls *everything* about the Folio into question.

The first letter dedicates the First Folio to “the Most Noble and Incomparable Paire of Brethren,” meaning the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery. It does so with exaggerated servility and sanctimonious adulation, verging on satire. Jonson has them saying that no one approaches the earls except “with a kind of religious address” like farmers offering milk, cream, and fruits who “approach their Gods with the meanest of things made more precious, when they are dedicated to Temples.” A discerning reader could read this as an honest if bizarre dedication, or as a veiled satire of an effusive dedicatory epistle to noble patrons by simple actors. It’s difficult to imagine that Heminges and Condell would have written anything so undignified themselves.

The second letter is a strangely insistent sales pitch that has parallels to Jonson's writings. It is addressed "To the great Variety of Readers. / From the most able to him that can but spell, there you are numbered." Both letters contain falsehoods and contradictions. One says they were "without ambition... of self-profit," while the other repeatedly urges readers to "buy!" The second letter says that the plays were "maimed and deformed" but are now "cured and perfect" and "absolute in their numbers as [the author] conceived them." It is well known that the plays are full of errors, so discerning readers would have known this was not true. "Maimed and deformed" contradicts the claim on the title page that the plays were "Published according to the True Originall Copies." If Heminges and Condell were the editors, how did they miss the contradiction?

And how can something be both an original and a copy? The front matter is full of this kind of double-talk. Both letters say that the dramatist did not have a chance to prepare the plays for publication before he died. The dedication letter says the plays outlived their author, who had no chance to edit his writings. The letter "To the Great Variety of Readers" wishes "that the Author... had liv'd to have set forth... his own writings." Shakspeare allegedly retired in 1610, at age forty-six, leaving him six years to edit the plays if they were his. If, in fact, the author died before he could edit his plays for publication, evidently it was not Mr. Shakspeare.

Finally, clear evidence that Heminges and Condell had nothing to do with editing the First Folio is the fact that the name printed beneath the epistles is "Heminge," not Heminges. This suggests that Heminges never saw what Jonson passed off as his work. Otherwise, he would have corrected the misspellings of his name. In the list of actors at the end of the front matter, it is "Heminges," so the editors knew the correct spelling.

In writing the two introductory letters, Jonson was *using* Heminges and Condell, Shakspeare's fellow actors, to convey the falsehood that Shakspeare was Shakespeare. But the letters cannot be taken as valid testimony, given the ambiguities, contradictions, and falsehoods that Jonson put into them, starting with the claim that Heminges and Condell wrote them. Rather than incontrovertible evidence for orthodoxy, they undermine it.

### **Ben Jonson, master of ambiguity**

To accept unquestioningly that the First Folio's front matter proves Shakspeare's authorship ignores the fact that deliberate ambiguity was a common literary practice, even a high art, in the dangerous political climate of that time. Writers like Ben Jonson resorted to it when expressing unwelcome truths that might offend the authorities and other powerful people, leading to reprisals or punishment. Stratfordian academics, however, choose to ignore Jonson's reputation for ambiguity and his role in preparing the First Folio for publication.

Annabel M. Patterson, Professor Emeritus of English at Yale University, in *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England*, wrote that "the unavoidable relationship between writers and holders of power was creative of a set of conventions ... as to how far the writer could go in explicit address to the contentious issues of his day, and how ... he could encode his opinions so that nobody would be required to make an example of him." In other words, writers could address controversial matters in ambiguous language that could be understood by those in the know if they preserved deniability.

Patterson describes Jonson as "this most complex of authors," adding that in his plays "there is ... a highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers and audiences (among whom were the same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation." Jonson learned the hard way: he was imprisoned for his roles in two plays and five times faced charges of libel. These experiences led him to hone his skills for ambiguity. Jonson biographer David Riggs of Stanford University also offers many examples of his use of ambiguity.

Jonson not only had a reputation for deliberately ambiguous writing, but also experience with publishing. Seven years earlier he had published his *Workes of Benjamin Jonson*, the first English collection of plays, and several poems, in a folio volume. At the time, King James granted him an annual pension of sixty-six pounds for unspecified services. Jonson was involved in every aspect of his thousand-page folio, revising

both its contents and presentation. With this experience, he was eminently qualified to shape the prefatory matter in the First Folio and to inject as much ambiguity, contradiction, and subtle falsehood as necessary.

Jonson's role in the publication of the First Folio gets further support from his close connection to William and Philip Herbert, earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, the two brothers to whom the Folio was dedicated. Pembroke was Jonson's patron, and Jonson dedicated his own *Workes* to him in 1616. Pembroke was Lord Chamberlain to King James, a powerful position overseeing plays performed at court and in public theaters, and the publication of plays. He supported Jonson's publication of his own *Workes*, and he had the position and wealth to authorize and finance the First Folio and commission Jonson to work on the sensitive project. Pembroke paid Jonson an annual pension of £100, which was doubled ahead of the publication of the Folio. In addition to ignoring Jonson's role, Stratfordian academics ignore the critical role of the Herbert brothers.

### **Ben Jonson's First Folio eulogy**

Among the many oddities about Jonson's eulogy to the author is that it was his *first* tribute to Shakespeare. He didn't even mention Shakspeare's death in his own folio, published later in the year that Shakspeare died. That would have been the logical time and place to eulogize him, if, in fact, he was the author Shakespeare. He wrote poems praising the literary works of many writers, but none for Shakespeare, until the First Folio.

The full title of the poem is "To the memory of my beloved, the AUTHOR, Mr. William Shakespeare, and what he hath left us." Note that saying "the AUTHOR" is unnecessary. It would have been clear without it. By including it, and calling attention to it by putting it in caps, was Jonson clarifying that he is now talking about the real author, not the front? We do not know his intent, but that seems like a credible interpretation.

Jonson's eulogy starts off with a seventeen-line false start, before bursting forth with his "Soul of the Age!" Those seemingly superfluous seventeen lines alert wary readers that "silliest ignorance on these may light," meaning his words could be misinterpreted by those of "silliest ignorance" who overlook double meanings. Knowing his reputation for ambiguity, when Jonson gives such a warning, we should take him at his word.

After the false start, he writes:

I therefore will begin: Soul of the Age!  
The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage!  
My Shakespeare, rise! I will not lodge thee by  
Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie  
A little further to make thee a room.  
Thou art a monument without a tomb,  
And art alive still while thy book doth live  
And we have wits to read and praise to give.

Here Jonson refers to the so-called Basse poem that includes a plea for Chaucer, Spenser, and Beaumont – poets already buried in Westminster Abbey – to move over so that Shakespeare can be buried next to them. It first appeared in 1633 in a collection of poems by John Donne, so it was initially thought to be his. Later, a copy turned up with the name of minor poet William Basse written on it and it came to be credited to him.

Among some three dozen manuscript copies that have turned up, eight have the title "On Wm Shakespeare/ He died in April 1616." Stratfordians, desperate for a timely eulogy to their man, assume that it was written soon after he died, but this is not so. When eulogizing a famous person, one does not explain when he died if it is written at the time. That title was probably added to the eight copies much later. The British Library dated the earliest copy to after 1620. It is in the hand of poet William Brown, an associate of Ben Jonson's. The two both worked in the library of their joint patron the Earl of Pembroke, which is quite a coincidence.

What probably happened is the poem was written to go with the First Folio, so that Jonson could refer to it, thus covering for both the absence of expected eulogies and the absence of a funeral in Westminster Abbey. The implication is that since we have the works, *they* are his monument, and no tomb is needed. So, Jonson will *not* lodge Shakespeare “by Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie a little further,” as the poem urges. Jonson may also have said this to help prevent Shakespeare’s remains from being moved there from Stratford, as do the six lines of verse on the slab above his grave, which end with: “curst be he that moves my bones.”

Brown’s poem was likely circulated in manuscript shortly before the First Folio appeared. We do not know how Basse’s name came to be associated with it, but it may have been a decoy, since it might have exposed Jonson’s First Folio deception if it became known that his colleague, William Brown, wrote the late eulogy. Basse was not known to be writing as late as 1620 and may have been content to have Jonson use his name. In any case, it does appear that Jonson’s colleague wrote the earliest copy of the poem, which is very fishy.

Two lines later, the poem reads:

For if I thought my judgment were of years,  
I should commit thee surely with thy peers,  
And tell, how far thou didst our Lyly outshine,  
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe’s mighty line.

It is very strange that Jonson would name as Shakespeare’s literary peers three writers who had either died or stopped writing by 1593, when the name “Shakespeare” first appeared in print beneath the dedication of *Venus and Adonis*. If, in fact, these were the author’s peers, that implies he was much older than Shakespeare.

We now come to one of the most famous, yet misunderstood, lines in Jonson’s poem. Here it is, along with what follows:

And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,  
From thence to honour thee I would not seek  
For names but call forth thund’ring Aeschylus,  
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,  
Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova [Seneca] dead,  
To life again, to hear thy buskin tread  
And shake a stage...

Stratfordians and others commonly accept that Jonson said Shakespeare “had small Latin and less Greek,” but it is absurd to think so, considering all the evidence in the works that he knew Latin well and had also read Greek tragedies in the original Greek. Even if one accepts Shakespeare as the author, it makes no sense to think he had little knowledge of Latin if, as often alleged, he attended Stratford’s Latin grammar school. Jonson is being misleading here, seeming to dumb Shakespeare down to place his learning within reach of the Stratford man’s education and experience, which otherwise is a total mismatch to what is in the works. It reinforces Heminges’ and Condell’s claim that the author was an uneducated “happy imitator of nature.”

But there are other ways to interpret Jonson’s intent. The words “though thou hadst small Latin” can mean “Although you had only small Latin,” but can also mean “*Even if* you had small Latin (which you didn’t).” Jonson knew, of course, that only the second meaning made sense because otherwise Shakespeare couldn’t have written his plays, but by using an ambiguous phrase he would have plausible deniability if challenged.

Another possible interpretation is that the words “from thence to honour thee” refer back to Shakespeare’s “peers” in the previous passage, meaning that he had “small [few] Latin and less Greek [tributes] from his peers to honor him when he died. It was not unusual for tributes to a deceased writer to be written in Latin. This alternative makes sense, given the total lack of eulogies when Shakespeare died in 1616. The rest of the passage then means that Jonson would have us “not seek for names” of additional *contemporary* writers to honor him, but “call forth” the great Greek and Roman writers “to life again” to hear him perform on stage.

## “Sweet Swan of Avon!”

Toward the end, the eulogy contains Jonson’s famous reference to Shakespeare as “Sweet Swan of Avon!” This is usually thought to refer to the Avon River in Stratford-upon-Avon and to prove that the author was from Stratford. It does no such thing. In the first place, there were several rivers in England named “Avon,” and few readers of the First Folio would have thought of the one in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. Also, seen in context, Jonson’s reference is not to the river Avon in Stratford, as assumed, nor to any river, but to a *place* upon the banks of the Thames where Queen Elizabeth and King James saw plays performed:

Sweet Swan of Avon! What a sight it were  
To see thee in our waters yet appeare,  
And make those flights upon the banks of Thames  
That so did take Eliza, and our James!

It seems odd that “Avon” would refer to a river. If someone wrote “Sweet Swan of Mississippi,” would we think it referred to the Mississippi River, or to the State of Mississippi? We would probably think the latter. If it were meant to refer to the river, it should have been “*the* Mississippi.” The same rule applies to Avon. The absence of the article “the” preceding “Avon” implies that “Avon” refers to a place, not a river. If so, what place? According to Jonson’s poem, it should be located somewhere “upon the banks of Thames.”

In 2014, British author Alexander Waugh, in an article titled “[The True Meaning of Ben Jonson’s Phrase: ‘Sweet Swan of Avon!’](#)” shows that the location of Hampton Court Palace on the Thames west of London – the main venue for court performances under Queen Elizabeth and King James – was known as “Avon.” He cites references to it as such by John Leland (1543, 1545), Raphael Holinshed (1586), Henry Peacham (1612), Laurence Nowell, and historian William Camden, in both the Latin (1607) and the English (1610) editions of his *Britannia*. Jonson had probably read all of them, but we can safely assume he read at least the two editions of William Camden’s *Britannia*, since Camden was his tutor, mentor, and lifelong friend.

Again, in context, the phrase “Sweet Swan of Avon!” refers not to Stratford-upon-Avon but to Hampton Court Palace. But Jonson anticipated that those of “silliest ignorance” would assume it meant the former. His famous allusion, seemingly pointing to Shakspeare, turns out to be an example of his use of ambiguity. The assumption that the allusion is to Stratford is essential to Shakspeare’s authorship claim, and it is false.

## “Thy Stratford monument”

The other famous allusion to Stratford in the First Folio, seemingly pointing to Shakspeare as the author, is Leonard Digges’ reference to “thy Stratford monument” in his poem to Shakespeare. Here it is in context:

Shakespeare, at length thy pious fellows give  
The world thy works by which outlive  
Thy tomb thy works must: when that stone is rent,  
And time dissolves thy Stratford monument,  
Here we alive shall view thee still.

Digges’ poem comes three pages after Jonson’s reference to “Sweet Swan of Avon!” When combined, they seem to point to Stratford-upon-Avon, but not necessarily. There were five Avon rivers in England and ten towns or villages called Stratford. Few readers would have thought first of the town three days’ travel from London in Warwickshire. They would have thought of the town called Stratford on the outskirts of London.

If they had wanted to be clear, the editors would have said “William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon.” That would have left no doubt as to the author’s identity. Instead, they chose to give only ambiguous hints. That can hardly be an accident. It seems quite typical of the sort of thing one would expect of Ben Jonson.



## The Stratford monument

Indeed, there is a monument to Shakspere in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. No one knows exactly when it was erected. Digges' poem is the first reference to it. There is no record of who paid for it, and no evidence that Shakspere's family was involved or that they approved of it or the image in the effigy. It was probably erected shortly before the publication of the First Folio and designed as a complement to it. It has the hallmarks of another spoof by Ben Jonson, and it seems unlikely that Leonard Digges ever saw it.

The first thing to know about the monument is that the famous effigy we see today does not look the same as the original. A sketch by a leading antiquarian in 1634 shows a man with a drooping moustache holding a sack, but no pen, no paper, no writing surface as seen today. Records show the monument was "repaired." Evidently the effigy was also altered to depict a writer. Second, the monument's inscription never says that the Stratford man *was* the author "Shakespeare." It neither names, nor quotes from, any of the works, and it never mentions poetry, plays, acting or theater. Stratfordian scholars have little to say about the inscription. Epitaphs of other writers of the period identify them clearly as writers. Why not Mr. Shakspere's epitaph?

## Jonson's motivation

Why would Jonson have orchestrated such a deception? He would have done it to honor the author's own wishes, and he would have done it in service to the Herbert brothers, who were also honoring the author's wishes. Shakespeare said in his *Sonnets* that he neither wanted, nor expected, his name to be remembered. He says that he is in some sort of disgrace, beyond recovery (sonnets 29, 37, 112, 121), but he never says why. It should not be hard to imagine that such a man might not want his name associated with his works. Here are two examples from the *Sonnets*, both addressed to the fair youth, most likely Henry Wriothesley:

From Sonnet 81:

Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die:  
The earth can yield me but a common grave,  
When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie.

From Sonnet 72:

My name be buried where my body is,  
And live no more to shame nor me nor you.  
For I am shamed by that which I bring forth,  
And so should you, to love things nothing worth.

Since he said it openly in the *Sonnets*, he probably also said it privately to those behind the First Folio.

## Conclusion

As we stated at the beginning of this essay, "Without the First Folio, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have thought of the Stratford man as the author 'Shakespeare' at all." Upon examination, there is, indeed, something fishy about the First Folio, and in fact many things that call its vague hints that Shakspere was the author "Shakespeare" into question. It appears that the First Folio was published to preserve the plays and get them into the public domain while concealing the real author's identity for reasons known only to those behind the Folio: Ben Jonson and the prominent earls to whom the Folio is dedicated. These are the real heroes who deserve recognition for editing and publishing the First Folio, not Heminges and Condell, as George Steevens showed in 1770. Except for Rollett's and Waugh's recent articles, none of this is new, and some of it has been known for centuries. Orthodox scholars ignore it because it contradicts their myth.

In ignoring the fishiness of the First Folio, Stratfordian scholars resemble a quasi-religious cult, relying on a revered text interpreted literally and regarded as infallible. In this, they are like religious fundamentalists, deferring to a text treated as gospel. Stratfordians claim to be defenders of rigorous academic standards but are no such thing. They are defenders of orthodoxy, and enforcers of conformity. Rather than Stratfordians, they should be called First Folio Fundamentalists. We understand that if one believes the Bible is the literal word of God one might view it as infallible, but the Folio front matter infallible as the word of Ben Jonson?

The one great theme, running through all of Shakespeare's plays, is the difference between appearance and reality and the difficulty of determining which is which. The plays are full of masques, disguises, mistaken identities, deceptions, conspiracies, and betrayals. Most Stratfordian academics would probably agree with this, except when it comes to the Shakespeare Authorship Question and the First Folio. Then, everything is as it appears on the surface, and anyone who disagrees is a "conspiracy theorist." That they've been wrong for so long about something so very important is a monumental failure of scholarship, and it is scandalous!

### **Acknowledgments**

As a polemical work, not a work of original scholarship, this essay borrows extensively from the works cited below by A. J. Pointon, Ph.D., John M. Rollett, Ph.D., Alexander Waugh, and Richard F. Whalen.

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