

RALPH SHELDON (1537-1613)

- Eldest son of William Sheldon (c. 1500-70), wealthy landowner with vast tracts of land in Worcestershire and Warwickshire.
- Entered Middle Temple in November 1556, Member of Parliament (1563-67), Sheriff of Worcestershire (1576-77), Justice of the Peace (1574-87).
- Married Anne Throckmorton in 1557, 10 children (1 son, 9 daughters).
- Family known for the Sheldon Tapestry Works, started c. 1560-70 by William Sheldon.

THEORY OF THE CASE: RALPH SHELDON AS SHAKESPEARE

Gist: The author of the early anonymous ‘source-plays’ and the later Shakespeare plays was one and the same person, Ralph Sheldon, originally working for Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.

Profile of the Writer ‘Shakespeare’ from Play References Exactly Matches Sheldon

Biography

- Warwickshire roots: Grew up in Beoley, Worcestershire, a tiny hamlet on the western edge of Warwickshire and the Forest of Arden; later built manor Weston House in Warwickshire (ref.: “Burton-heath,” TOTS 1.2.18, the closest village to Weston House; “goodman Puff of Barson,” 2H4 5.3.92, identified from the funerary monument for Sheldon’s great-great grandfather William Willington).
- Extensive legal training in procedural and property law: management of family landholdings required numerous court proceedings (ref.: numerous technical legal points in plays and sonnets; see UK National Archives for records of Sheldon litigation).
- Familiarity with daughters and weddings: Sheldon had nine daughters, all of whom married during his life (ref.: at least 14 plays include weddings of daughters).
- Personal experience with hawking/falconry: Sheldon raised hawks (ref.: at least 50 mentions of hawking experience, with great accuracy, far more than other writers).

Important External Evidence of Sheldon – Shakespeare Connection

- Date of death in March 1613, matching the time that the Shakespeare plays ended.
- Unquestionable need for continuing anonymity: Sheldon was a Catholic recusant working as the house writer for the Elizabethan Court and the Protestant noble Leicester; anonymity consistent throughout life: other Sheldon writings published under identification as ‘R.S.’ but heavily obfuscated.
- Although a well-known man, Sheldon had little official work other than his long-term position Justice of the Peace (ending in 1587), leaving considerable time for writing.
- Publishers of the 1623 First Folio provided Sheldon’s family with likely the first of the first complete copy of the Folio, as a gift.
- Prominent writer/theater aficionado Sir John Harington equated Sheldon with “Will” in an annotation of his 1596 *Metamorphosis of Ajax* to John Lumley, 1st Baron Lumley.

Development of the Plays Tracks the Sheldon Biography

(1) 1556: Sheldon's Trip to Italy with Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon to Further the Family Tapestry Business Parallels Shakespeare Plays

- Courtenay's itinerary (Mantua, Milan, Venice, Padua) combined with Sheldon's business interests (Verona was the chief exporter of tapestry-grade silk thread) precisely overlap the Italian locations in the plays that required Shakespeare's first-hand knowledge of the Italian culture and geography, as identified by Italian Shakespearean scholars Ernesto Grillo and Mario Praz.
- Sheldon entered Italy through Mantua in January 1556, at the same time that Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga and his beautiful wife Diana commenced construction on their utopian city Sabbioneta at its western side (at "il Quercia dei Duca" or the Duke's Oak); the city known as "little Athens" with a prominent Jewish temple, was built in a countryside surrounded by mulberry trees – the source of the silk needed for tapestries (ref.: see AMND 1.2.103 for "Duke's Oak," set in a forest by 'Athens' with a temple, with a King and Queen in the midst of silkworm fairies; also see Kenneth Muir, on rare manuscript advocating English silkworm cultivation as major source of AMND).
- At the time that Sheldon visited, Venice was the chief importer of raw silk into Italy; the trade was managed by Levantine Jews who lived in ghettos much like Shylock in *Merchant of Venice* (ref.: see MV for details on Jews and Venetian trade, e.g. 1.1.9, on the type of ships used, and 1.3.55, on Jewish culture).

(2) 1556 – early 1560s: the Inns of the Court and Early English Drama

- Sheldon was admitted to Middle Temple at a time when the lawyers of the Inns of the Court were inventing new forms of English poetry and drama to consider political questions; Shakespeare, in *1 Henry VI*.2.4, opens the debate over the War of the Roses in a garden very like that found in the Middle Temple.
- In May 1559, the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth I proclaimed that "henceforth" all plays would be written only by men of "auctoritie, learning, and wisdom."
- An early version of *Romeo & Juliet* was performed on stage in London circa 1560; with its Verona location and central character of Catholic Romeo Montague, the play invokes Sheldon's Italian experience with Courtenay, Catholic heir to the English throne and suitor to the Protestant Princess Elizabeth, who died likely of poison in September 1556 in Padua, ending the Sheldon's Italian adventure.

(3) 1566-1570: Sheldon Takes Over as House Writer for the Court & Leicester

- Leicester as Chancellor of Oxford demanded that Oriel College allow a 60-year lease for Sheldon in April 1566, thereby evicting the Proctor's brother; the residence was subsequently used for rehearsals of a play by Court dramatist Richard Edwardes to be performed for the Queen at her initial visit to Oxford in August 1566.
- After the Queen's visit to Oxford, Edwardes died suddenly in October 1566, leaving the Court with a lead musician (Sebastian Westcott) but no dramatist. Westcott was a known recusant Catholic publicly challenged by the Puritans; a similarly Catholic playwright

(like Sheldon) was politically impossible. Nonetheless, by the following year, Westcott's Children of Paul's had a full list of entertainment for the Queen, including *Wit and Will*, subsequently published anonymously as a five-act play *The Marriage of Wit and Science*.

- Early plays like TOAS, *Gentlemen of Verona*, and LLL all are five-act plays that include sets of characters reprising the impudent page boy Will and his master Wit.

(4) 1570s: Sheldon Writes the Early 'Source-Plays' for Leicester's Men

- Notes from a volume of Hall's Chronicle (1550 edition) outline the plot of source-play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*; these annotations are a close fit for Sheldon's signature, with each including a unique uppercase 'R,' and a rare left-sloping ending 'n.'
- Four of the plays thought to have source-plays (KJ, Richard II, Hamlet, and MV) all have one thing in common: the unquestionable influence of the erudite legal writings of eminent Middle Temple jurist, Edmund Plowden (1519-85). Plowden's writings were rare, available only from manuscript or from reports written in legal Court French (not translated until 1761). Plowden was Sheldon's brother-in-law, and after the death of William Sheldon in 1570, was co-executor of the William's estate with Sheldon.
- Hamlet and another early play (MAAN) were both developed from French novellas by Francoise de Belleforest published in the mid-1570s; at the same time, translations by writer 'R.S.' of earlier Belleforest novellas were published in 1577. No other English translations of Belleforest were available until 1608.
- The publication of the R.S. translations of Belleforest were introduced by 'T.N.,' who indicates – with great ambiguity – that R.S. had run out of time to better polish his translations, thereby suggesting the R.S. may have died. This T.N. seems to have been Thomas North (1535-1604), whose translation of *Plutarch's Lives* formed the basis for numerous Shakespeare plays. Also, by the time of the publication in 1577, North's cousin George North had completed his manuscript on *Rebellion and Rebels* (1576) which was used by Shakespeare in at least eleven plays.
- The public repertory of Leicester's Men during the period between its beginning around 1560 until its end in 1583 is almost entirely unknown, and there is no record of any playwright for these unknown plays. While the dating of the source-plays is unclear, certain points are known: the last known owner of the annotated Hall's Chronicle died in 1570; an early version of MV was on stage in 1578; Plowden died in 1585.
- It is clear, however, that the stage was hugely popular by the late 1570s, and there was much criticism of the stage's alleged licentiousness by various Puritan ministers. Sebastian Westcott – the director of the renowned Children of Paul's – was prosecuted for heresy at the end of 1577, after much public outcry against the papist influence over the boy actors of Paul's.

(5) 1580s: Arrest of Sheldon, Death of Leicester, and the Retrenchment of the English Stage

- By the beginning of the 1580s, Puritan backlash against the 'papist' influence on the very popular English stage seems to have had effect: the Children of Paul's no longer

- performed at Court after 1581, and Leicester's Men (and the other adult companies) were put under the control of the sternly Protestant Francis Walsingham in 1583.
- Sheldon was prosecuted for recusancy in 1580; an anonymous pamphlet known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* accused Leicester of nefarious crimes, and haunted him until his death in 1588. The writer R.S. published the only contemporary written refutation of the claims against Leicester in 1593, in the poetry anthology *The Phoenix Nest*.
 - Sir Philip Sidney criticized the quality of English drama in his *Defence of Poesie* (c. 1583) but that criticism and Sidney's own poetry revolutionized the quality of English stage drama, and gave rise to new standards and forms of English poetry.
 - Younger, educated men like John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, and others began writing for the English stage.

(6) 1590s: The Rise of the New Poetry

- R.S. publishes a first anthology of English 'new poetry' in *The Phoenix Nest* (1593).
- At the same time, the playwright Shakespeare publishes his own version of the 'new poetry' with *Venus & Adonis* (1593) for the first time under the name 'William Shakespeare'; also, he was writing the first of his sonnets.
- These new poetic works track Sheldon: the *Nest* gathers poetry from elite poets of Oxford (where Sheldon had a residency); Shakespeare's early poetry recommended marriage and children to the young Catholic-leaning Earl of Southampton, which was likely advice from the long married 56-year-old Sheldon (ref.: Sonnet 6 celebrates 10 children; Sheldon had 10 children).
- Younger Puritan writer Joseph Hall criticized the writer of *Venus & Adonis* for its indecent poetry; in doing this, Hall called the writer "Labeo," a reference to Antistius Labeo, a Roman writer who – like Sheldon – was forced to give up government positions because of a principled disagreement with the Roman ruler.
- Beginning around 1598, the writer begins to publish edited versions of his earlier plays, aiming to produce a higher quality, more literary form of the earlier plays.

(7) 1598-1603: Funding of the Globe, Sheldon's Bankruptcy, and *Timon of Athens*

- It is unknown who funded the construction of the Globe in 1598; however, whoever did gave up his ownership share in the profits of the operation to five members of the troupe, including actor William Shakspere.
- In a similar fashion, Sheldon and his family had given up their ownership profits in a local market to fund the local weavers working for the Sheldon Tapestry Works.
- In the 1590s, Sheldon had taken out a series of loans from a friend who, around 1599, suddenly – without notice – called the loans due; the amount was vast, millions of pounds. Despite considerable effort, scholars have never been able to determine what the loans were used for (there is no record, for example, that Sheldon had substantial recusancy fines). The circumstances closely mirror Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*.

For further documentation, see www.hyddenman.com.