

Shakespeare on the Orient Express

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Introduction

In the 1974 Sidney Lumet film *Murder on the Orient Express*, detective Hercule Poirot contends with a train full of suspects in a murder case. Of the twelve passengers who shared a car with the murdered man, some possess an apparent motive, others match the physical profile of the murderer, while others had access to his berth. Yet no *one* suspect can be singled out as having motive, means, and opportunity. A myriad of clues point first in one direction, then in another, but never add up to a coherent whole. Eventually, the brilliant detective realizes that what seems to be the puzzle is actually the solution. No one suspect could have committed the murder alone. They *all* done it.

Literary detectives who study the works of William Shakespeare are confronted with a similar conundrum. The prime suspect, an actor from Stratford-on-Avon named Shakespeare, or possibly Shakspeare,¹ has an alibi strong enough to shake the faith of any unprejudiced sleuth. This Shakspeare was a working-class man, without higher education, concerned with accruing wealth.² The actor lacked the education and breadth of experience needed to be the author of the plays published in his name. Close study of the thirty-six comedies, dramas and histories reveals that their author had a knowledge of law; classical literature and languages; courtly manners and pastimes; philosophy; history; the French, Spanish, and Italian languages; Danish geography, terms and customs; music; painting; natural history; mathematics; astronomy; fishing; medicine; navigation and seamanship; military life; theatrical life; and the secret languages used by

¹ Bertram Fields suggest that the contemporary pronunciation of the name used a short a. See Bertram Fields, *Players: the Mysterious Identity of William Shakespeare* (New York, N.Y.: Regan Books, 2005), pp. 35-36.

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York and London: W.R. Norton & Co., 2004), pp. 149-163.

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freemasons, the Elizabethan secret service, and undergraduates of Cambridge University. No matter how good the grammar school at Stratford-on-Avon was, it did not teach nautical science or Cambridge slang! Of course, education does not ideally end with schooling. A great deal can be learned through travel and reading. But there is no evidence that our prime suspect ever left England, and an inventory of his estate following his death does not list a single book.³

Dismayed by this body of evidence exonerating the prime suspect, some scholars have suggested alternate suspects. Francis Bacon, it has been pointed out, possessed the legal knowledge, the classical knowledge, and the scientific knowledge to be the author of the plays. Moreover, there is some fairly compelling evidence suggesting that Bacon's (and Shakespeare's) contemporaries believed that Bacon was the true author of *Venus and Adonis*. But the evidence that Bacon wrote the sonnets, or had any reason to dedicate poetry to the earl of Southampton, is weak. Moreover, although Bacon did write plays for private performance, he had no known connection with the public theater.⁴

Many scholars think the person most likely to have penned the sonnets is Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford. He was the right age (as the actor and Bacon were not) to describe himself as someone at "that time of year...when yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang upon those boughs that shake against the cold."⁵ He had a relationship with the earl of Southampton, which the sonnet cycle could describe,⁶ and cryptologists have even found his name cleverly encoded into the publisher's dedication to the 1609 edition of the

³ John Michell, *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1996), pp. 102-103.

⁴ Michell, pp. 113-134.

⁵ Sonnet 73, lines 1-3.

⁶ Michell, pp. 161-184.

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poems.⁷ Oxford, too, had the necessary knowledge of law and university life, as well as the intimate knowledge of court intrigue needed to be the author of the plays. Hence, Oxford has emerged as the favorite alternate. Yet Oxford could hardly have been the author of *Macbeth*, *Winter's Tale* and *Tempest*, each of which alludes to events that took place after his death in 1604, and, while it is physically possible for him to have written the remaining plays, there is no evidence strongly connecting him to any of them.

Among suspects who *can* be strongly connected to certain of the plays, there is William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby. His brother, Ferdinando, 5th Earl of Derby, became in 1588 the patron of the company of actors for which William Shakespeare worked. Moreover, *Love's Labours Lost*, first performed in 1593, is based on events that took place at the court of Navarre, which Stanley visited in the 1580s. The schoolmaster in the play seems to be a caricature of Stanley's own tutor, Richard Lloyd. But Stanley lived until 1641. Shakespeare, whoever he was, wrote no plays after 1612. It is hardly conceivable that, if Stanley were the genius behind the works of Shakespeare, he would have turned off the spigot of his genius while still in excellent health and at the height of his powers.⁸

Another possibility is Roger Manners, 5th Earl of Rutland. In 1596 he studied at Padua, where he had Danish classmates named Rosenkrantz and Gyldenstjerne. He traveled to Denmark in 1603, the very year in which the first quarto edition of *Hamlet* was published. *Hamlet* is full of arcane knowledge about Denmark and the Danish court that no untraveled Englishman would know – but Rutland would have known it. Also, he died in 1612, the year that “Shakespeare” ceased writing. However, born in 1576, Roger

⁷ John M. Rollett, “Secrets of the Dedication to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*,” *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 60 – 75.

⁸ Michell, pp. 190-211.

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Manners seems too young to have been the author of the earlier plays. Fourteen of them had been staged by the time he was twenty.⁹

Twelfth Night and *As You Like It* point the investigator in yet another direction. These are plays about women, but, more than that, they are plays written from a female viewpoint. Viola and Olivia, Rosalind and Cecily are not just strong women, like Lady Macbeth or Captain Margaret. They are point of view characters. They are the central points around which all the other characters revolve. In a gender neutral society, in which gender roles are not sharply differentiated, a man might have written such plays; but early modern English society was the opposite of gender neutral. It was a society in which the roles of men and women were very different and very unequal. Men were accustomed to think of themselves as superior to women.¹⁰ They believed that women's minds worked differently from their own, and they seldom wrote from a woman's point of view. On the rare occasions when one did, as in Samuel Rowlands' early 17th century poem, *The Bride*, the portrayals contain patriarchal assumptions about the "unperfect female."¹¹

Leslie Hotson, in his study of *Twelfth Night*, accounts for the woman-centered plot by pointing out that 1600, the year in which the play was probably first performed at court, was a leap year. Leap year tradition held that women might take the initiative to woo men during that time, and *Twelfth Night* was normally celebrated by role reversal.¹² These traditions may explain why a play about women on top was acceptable to the audience, but they do not explain why Viola is so much more than a maiden in drag.

⁹ Michell, pp. 212-222.

¹⁰ Anne Laurence, *Women in England, 1500-1760: A Social History* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994), p. 177.

¹¹ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 290.

¹² Leslie Hotson, *The First Night of Twelfth Night* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1954), pp. 129-130; John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998) p. 53

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In spite of the widespread belief in women's intellectual inferiority, there were women who engaged in literary composition. One was Mary Sidney Herbert, dowager countess of Pembroke. Lady Pembroke was a well-regarded poetess and playwright or, rather, a translator of French plays.¹³ She was also a patron of the theater; in fact, of the very company that included the actor, William Shakspeare. The subplot of *Twelfth Night*, dealing with the humiliation of Malvolio, closely resembles a trick actually played by Mary Fitton, one of the queen's maids of honor, on Sir William Knollys, comptroller of the royal household. Mary Fitton's lover was the earl of Pembroke, eldest son of the dowager countess.¹⁴

The countess also had connections to *As You Like It*, if a now-lost letter from Lady Pembroke can be believed. In the 1603 letter, which was last seen in 1865, Mary Sidney directs her son to bring the new king, James I, to her Wilton estate to see a performance of *As You Like It*. The King's Men (Will the actor's company) did perform before the king at Wilton on December 2, 1603.¹⁵ Coincidentally, the Wilton estate stood on the banks of a river called Avon. A surviving portrait of Mary Sidney shows her wearing a lace collar featuring swans. She could be the "swan of Avon" to whom Ben Jonson alludes in his dedication of the folio edition of Shakespeare's plays.¹⁶

However, psychological evidence cuts both ways. If a man could hardly have conceived a heroine such as Viola, a woman could scarcely have imitated the talk of soldiers or demonstrated the knowledge of war that appears in *Henry V* and *Richard III*.

¹³ Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 106-142

¹⁴ Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. Lamar (ed.), "A Comedy Mad and Merry," in Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), p. xiii

¹⁵ Hannay, pp. 122-123.

¹⁶ Michell, p. 77.

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Women did not have access to such matters of the masculine world any more than men had access to what really went on in women's minds. If *Twelfth Night* demonstrates that Shakespeare could not have been a man, *Henry V* equally demonstrates that Shakespeare could not have been a woman.

In any case, why are all of the alternate suspects noble? Do the plays really require an upper-class author? The many references to court life and foreign travel support that theory, but the depth of Shakespeare's legal and medical knowledge is more suggestive of a middle-class origin.¹⁷ And what of references to the arcane language of wool-dealing in *The Winter's Tale* or glove-making in *Romeo and Juliet*?¹⁸ It seems Shakespeare's origins lay among tradesmen. What of the extraordinary feeling for the under-classes that Shakespeare displays in the comic scenes of *Henry IV*? What would an Elizabethan noble or tradesman have known about thieves' cant? Actors, on the other hand, were by law classed as "rogues and vagabonds" unless they were under the protection of some great lord (hence the need for Shakespeare's company to style themselves the Lord Chamberlain's Men and later the King's Men).¹⁹ An actor might have sympathized with such rogues as Poin and Bardolph and Sir John Falstaff. An actor might have invested Prince Hal with his greatest charm when consorting with such ignoble companions. While much evidence points away from Will of Stratford, this evidence points back in his direction, for Shakspeare's father made a living as a glove maker, and Shakspeare himself was undoubtedly an actor.²⁰

¹⁷ Michell, pp. 20-23; 32-33.

¹⁸ Fields, p. 105.

¹⁹ C. C. Stopes, *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage* (New York: Haskell House, 1970) pp. 8-10.

²⁰ Irvin Leigh Matus, *Shakespeare, In Fact* (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 54-64.

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Yet perhaps this evidence is pointing to one of the other members of the troupe. The others were also talented and creative men from middle-class backgrounds, and several were better educated and more widely traveled than Will of Stratford was. There was Richard Burbage, the troupe's chief tragedian, who played Prince Hal, Hamlet, King Lear, and indeed all the great starring roles. There was the comedian, William Kempe, who played Falstaff, Bottom and Dogberry. There were also Augustine Phillips and Thomas Pope, both well-known actors, and John Heminges who later took over management of the company. However, for one reason or another, none of the players are good candidates to be the one and only Shakespeare.

Kempe left the troupe in 1599 and was replaced by Robert Armin, who created the character of the "wise fool" dressed in motley.²¹ Both of the comedians were noted literary talents in their own right. Kempe wrote a best-selling memoir, *Nine Daies Wonder*, about Morris dancing from London to Norwich. Armin was the author of three books of collected jokes, a collection of brief biographies of well-known court fools, and a play, *Two Maids of Moreclacke*. Before becoming an actor he was trained as a lapidary and goldsmith.²² Since semi-precious gems were used at the time in the treatment of mental illness, this means that Armin was trained in psychopathology, as that science was understood in the 17th century, and plays dealing with madness—*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*—appear in the repertoire soon after Armin joined the troupe.

But, of course, since neither Armin nor Kempe were with the troupe for the entire period, neither of them could have written *all* of the plays. Thomas Pope died in 1604 and Augustine Phillips died a year or so later, so neither of them could have been

²¹ Charles S. Felver, *Robert Armin, Shakespeare's Fool* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Bulletin, 1961), p. 10.

²² Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare's Motley* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 118.

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Shakespeare. Another actor, Henry Condell, joined the troupe some time around 1598, but that late date eliminates him as a suspect. Of the troupe, only Richard Burbage, his brother Cuthbert (who was a business partner only, and did not act), John Heminges, and, of course, William Shakspeare were with the company for the necessary tenure to be the author of all the plays. But the Burbage brothers and Heminges are not known to have had any literary talent or reputation.

So our conclusion seems to be that Shakespeare could not have been a man, and neither could he have been a woman. He was not a nobleman; but neither could he have been a commoner. Everyone with some portion of the requisite education and life experience is eliminated on chronological grounds; and, everyone with the requisite lifespan and tenure of association with the company appears to lack the needed education and life experience. With no shortage of evidence, we nevertheless have no clear trail to follow. When Hercule Poirot reached this point, he offered the obvious solution: they were all in on it together.

The Multiple Author Theory

The most compelling evidence for the multiple author theory is linguistic. Depending on whose estimate is used, the works of Shakespeare employ a vocabulary of somewhere between fifteen and twenty-one thousand words. By contrast, Christopher Marlowe employed a vocabulary of seven thousand five hundred words, Milton used eight thousand, while today's university graduates average only three to four thousand.²³ Assuming that Shakespeare was a single person, he had a vocabulary at least twice the size of other literary geniuses of his time, and four to five times the size of educated

²³ Michell, pp. 18-20; Fields, p. 101.

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speakers of English today. The inescapable conclusion, if we reject divine inspiration or angelic intervention, is that more than one person had to be involved.

A number of scholars have already reached this conclusion. One of them was Percy Allen, who propounded a version of the theory in the 1940s. Allen, however, managed to make a mockery of the hypothesis by using spirit communications obtained during séances as his chief source of evidence.²⁴ Since then few scholars have been willing to take the hypothesis seriously.

Even so, John Michell cites thirteen authors who, among them, name thirty-seven different people as possible contributors to the poems and plays. Michell then dismisses the entire argument on the grounds that, once group authorship has been allowed, the number of possible authors “becomes an army,”²⁵ which must stand as one of the silliest reasons to reject a theory ever proposed. It is like arguing that the Philistine temple must have been knocked down either by Samson alone, or by someone just as strong as Samson; for, if we admit that Samson had help, the number of possible temple-wreckers becomes an army!

More plausibly, opponents of the group theory ask how, if an entire group was involved, the secret of their authorship could be kept from leaking beyond the group.²⁶ The trouble with this objection is that it depends on the unproven premise that the secret didn't leak beyond the group, or, indeed, that there was a secret for the group to keep. Anti-Stratfordians have been citing evidence for years that contemporaries were well aware of the non-authorship of Will of Stratford. From Robert Greene's “upstart crow” to

²⁴ McMichael, George and Edgar M. Glenn, *Shakespeare and His Rivals* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1962).

²⁵ Michell, pp. 241-244.

²⁶ Michell, p. 245; Fields, p. 273.

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Ben Jonson's "poet-ape," references to Will's lack of credit among his contemporaries have been searched out and exposed.²⁷ The secret of the authorship of the plays may not have been more widely trumpeted because the audience didn't care about such matters. In Ben Jonson's sonnet "On Poet-Ape," the poet-ape (who may have been Will Shakspeare) tells Jonson that the "sluggish gaping auditor" does not care who wrote the play originally and "aftertimes may judge it to be his" (the poet-ape's) "as well as ours" (the original poets').²⁸

A third argument given against group authorship is that many critics claim to find a unity of style across the works. While the plays treat a wide variety of subjects, they also share many characteristics: the depth of character development, the interweaving of plots and sub-plots, the sheer theatricality of the scenes. But this argument is circular. We begin with the assumption that Shakespeare was a single author, and study the plays to get a sense of the man. We discover a complex genius with diverse interests and great psychological depth. We then ask whether the plays are written in the style of that complex genius, and discover—not surprisingly—that they are. This is not to say that the stylistic unity in the works of Shakespeare is wholly a figment of the critic's imagination, but the unity that we observe could have come from the undisputed fact that all of the plays were produced by the same troupe of actors, and that those actors exercised considerable discretion in imposing their own aesthetic sensibilities upon the plays.

A fourth argument against group authorship, not put forward by scholars, but sometimes offered in informal discussion, is that committees never produce great art. Few people enjoy serving on committees. However, committees are asked to produce

²⁷ Michell, pp. 66-70; Fields, pp. 107-112; Greenblatt, pp. 189, 213-215.

²⁸ As quoted in Michell, p. 70.

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reports precisely because the result is generally better than can be expected from a single author. Multiple authors check each other's work (as we can attest, having co-authored the present paper). But even setting that point aside, the criticism is misguided, since the claim that multiple authors contributed to the works of Shakespeare should not be confused with the claim that they sat down together as a committee to do so.

Group authorship removes a number of difficulties. It accounts for the vast vocabulary by combining the vocabularies of several people. It accounts for the evidence pointing in one direction when we consider one play and in a different direction when we consider the next. The likelihood that the earl of Derby wrote *Love's Labours Lost* does not preclude the possibility that the Countess of Pembroke wrote *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. The Earl of Rutland could have written, or had a hand in writing, *Hamlet*, without excluding the possibility that the Earl of Oxford wrote the sonnets. All of these claims could be true simultaneously. If we remember to include the players themselves among the possible authors, the group theory even accounts for the elements of stylistic unity that critics claim to see in the corpus.

The Writing of Elizabethan Plays

We tend to think of plays as having been written by a playwright. However, we should be careful not to assume that our views on intellectual property and authorship were shared by the people of Elizabethan London. If we look at the evidence on how plays were produced that is embedded in the work of Shakespeare, we find hints of a remarkably fluid text. *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* both include play-within-the-play sequences. Both sequences are intended to be humorous; but, for this very

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reason, they are likely to be accurate: if the portrayals weren't more or less true of the Elizabethan theater, they wouldn't be funny.

The play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* offers evidence of the way in which Elizabethan plays were put together. After requesting the performance of a specific play, Hamlet then requests that a speech "which I would set down" be inserted *into* the play.²⁹ It is possible that the practice of inserting speeches into plays in this manner was never done, and that the play *Hamlet* is portraying an event that would have struck an Elizabethan audience as odd, just as it strikes a modern audience. But it seems far more likely that the practice was common. Before a private audience, a few private jokes at the expense of someone actually in the audience would have been irresistible fun. What may be unusual in this case is that Hamlet does *not* intend a joke, but has a serious purpose in mind.

Lords and ladies may also have written entire plays and asked acting companies to perform those plays for their entertainment and the entertainment of their friends. A talented and literate woman, such as Mary Sidney Herbert, would have had few other outlets for her talents; and, a company of players who survived on the patronage of the nobility would hardly have been in a position to refuse such requests.

The professional players of Renaissance Europe evolved from an earlier medieval tradition of plays and revels performed at court and at great houses during the Christmas holidays. Even in the early 17th century, Christmas was the time for new plays, and the court was prepared to expend large sums of money on them. Afterward, the players might add to their income by taking their performances on the road from town to town or from

²⁹ *Hamlet*, II, ii.

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house to house, as the players in *Hamlet* do, but the court of some great noble was always the preferred first audience.³⁰

The play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* also offers evidence that not every line of the plays, as those plays were performed, was even written down. Hamlet requests a specific play from the repertoire of the players. The play he requests is not necessarily a popular play, and it is certainly not a play that the players came specifically prepared to perform. Nevertheless, the head player is entirely undismayed by the request. Like a good wine steward, he may have been prepared with some suggestions, but he makes no complaint that the play requested is unusual or that the troupe is out of practice. Naturally, they will be happy to put on the requested play on the following evening, after only a day of preparation.

How is this possible? One possibility is that the play *Hamlet* is indulging in some artistic license in order to move its own plot along, and that real players would not in fact have been willing to perform an out-of-the-way play on such short notice. Perhaps. But perhaps the players needed only a brief rehearsal to get ready because they were a practiced troupe of improvisers. "The play," as they understood it, was little more than a plot outline, the details of which could be re-learned in an hour or less. Speeches that had already been memorized, expressing love, or loathing, or fear, etc., might be varied to suit any number of plots. Hence, prepared with a wide repertoire of appropriate speeches and suitable stage business, the troupe was confident that they could use their wits to throw the requested play together on the spot. That was the tradition of the *Commedia dell'*

³⁰ Stopes, pp. 4-5

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Arte,³¹ and it is probable that the players in *Hamlet* are best understood as players in that tradition.

There is, of course, countervailing evidence. Later in the play Hamlet admonishes the actors, “And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them.”³² On the surface this appears to mean that the actors, including the comic actors, are expected to recite from a script; but, the fact that Hamlet must *remind* the actors to stick to the script equally proves that it was common practice for them not to. Moreover, the point of Hamlet’s complaint is *not* that the author’s original artistic conception will be lost, but that comic scenes tend to take on a life of their own “though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered.” He is not complaining about improvisation *per se*, but about improvisation that is off point.

But what does this have to do with Shakespeare’s company? They surely worked from written scripts; for, after all, we have the scripts to prove it! But do we? In fact, the “scripts” we have of Shakespeare’s plays were, in all cases, published after the plays had already been staged. Quartos—a means of making extra money on a production—were commemorative pamphlets sold to people who had already seen and enjoyed the play on stage. Usually they were sold only when the troupe was in desperate need of money or felt it had no further need to keep the script a proprietary secret.³³ In some cases the text of a quarto may even have been pirated by someone in the audience, as scholars suspect was the case with the first quarto edition of *Romeo and Juliet*.³⁴ Such a pirate would naturally record all the dialogue he could capture, without distinguishing between

³¹ Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), pp. 30-40.

³² *Hamlet*, III, ii.

³³ Matus, pp. 101 - 102.

³⁴ Wiles, David, *Shakespeare’s Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 84-85.

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scripted and unscripted dialogue, since he would not have been in a position to know the difference. But even when they were not pirated, quartos represented the play, not in its original form, but in its *final* form. They record the play as performed, and they are likely to contain dialogue improvised during performance, if any occurred, as well as lines scripted in advance by an original author.

William Kempe, the chief comedian in Shakespeare's company, is known to have been an improvisational actor. In the 1640 play *Antipodes*, by Richard Brome, a character remarks that improvisation was common "in the days of Tarlton and Kemp, / Before the stage was purg'd from barbarism."³⁵ The playwright John Day also describes Kempe as someone who preferred to improvise since he was "somewhat hard of study."³⁶ Kempe left the Lord Chamberlain's Men abruptly in 1599. Scholars suspect that the reason for his departure was artistic differences with Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, the two principal stakeholders in the company. This is, of course, only speculation, and we can only speculate on what the artistic differences may have been; but Hamlet's speech to the players, as it appears in the first quarto, was written soon after Kempe's departure. It has been suggested that the point of the speech is to needle Kempe, and to explain to the audience why Kempe (a popular performer) was no longer with the troupe.

But if the Burbages objected to improvisation, their hiring of Robert Armin to replace Kempe makes no sense. Armin, too, was a renowned improviser. His joke book published in 1600, shortly after he joined the Chamberlain's Men, was titled *Quips upon Questions: A Clown's Conceit on Occasion Offered*. It is a collection of some of Armin's stage material. Armin, like his mentor, the great clown Richard Tarlton, would invite his

³⁵ Wiles, p. 35.

³⁶ Wiles, p. 37.

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audience to suggest a “theme,” upon which he would then make extemporaneous jests.³⁷ Armin, a far more refined, studied, and verbally witty comic than Kempe, may have been hired, not because he could stick to a script, but because his style of improvisation was more likely to advance the plot than to distract from it. Perhaps the Burbages did not object to improvising; they just objected to *bad* improvising.

More of Robert Armin can be found in the roles he played than can be easily explained by the hypothesis that he was merely reciting lines written for him by someone else. Remember that Armin was a lapidary and goldsmith as well as an actor. It cannot be a coincidence that in *As You Like It* he played Touchstone. A touchstone is, of course, used by goldsmiths to test for false gold. In *Twelfth Night* Armin played the clown Feste, who remarks to Duke Orsino “thy mind is very Opall.” The opal suggests a shifting, changeable quality, but it also implies that the Duke is in love, since the opal represents the goddess Venus. Later in the play, Feste visits Malvolio as “Sir Topas,” purportedly to cure him of madness. At the time the topaz was used to treat certain forms of madness.

Hotson, who notes the connection between Armin’s first career and the characters he portrays, assumes that Shakespeare knew his actors well enough to write such lines into his plays.³⁸ However, a far simpler hypothesis is that Armin created the characters of Touchstone and “Sir Topas” himself, and that he then improvised lines for the characters, drawing from his store of prepared witticisms and from the inspiration of the moment. His improvisations were then captured in the quarto edition, and have come to be attributed to “Shakespeare.” This scenario is even more likely if Mary Sidney Herbert, rather than Will of Stratford, was the chief author of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*;

³⁷ Wiles, p. 138.

³⁸ Hotson, *Shakespeare’s Motley*, pp. 116-121.

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for, while the actor from Stratford might have known Armin well enough to create those characters for him, the countess of Pembroke certainly did not. In this case, the implication is that the countess provided a script, from which the actors improvised.

The play-within-the-play in *Midsummer's Night's Dream* offers further evidence about the writing of Elizabethan plays. In *Midsummer's Night's Dream* we see a troupe of actors—in this case a troupe of rank amateurs, unlike the seasoned professionals portrayed in *Hamlet*—preparing a play to be performed before the nobility. The humor of the scene comes from the fact that they are dreadfully bad at their craft, but it still tells us something about the way in which plays were written. Notably, we learn that actors were not afraid to insert new material into their scripts, if the production seemed to call for it. Bottom is concerned that his portrayal of the death of Pyramus will be so realistic that it will upset the ladies, so he requests a “prologue” to assure them that he is only an actor, and that he does not really die. Then a “prologue” must also be written for Snug the joiner, to assure the ladies that he is not really a lion. Since the script (and they do have one) specifies that Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight yet a third “prologue” is written to explain that the actor holding a lantern presents “the person of Moonshine,” and a fourth is written to explain that another actor portrays Wall. Finally, the entire play is preceded by a prologue that entirely gives away the story, and makes the remainder of the performance unnecessary. The play, as it is performed, has more prologues than plot!

It is notable that the writing of these prologues falls to one particular member of the troupe, Peter Quince, the company's stage manager. For the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the stage manager was William Shakspeare, the actor from Stratford. While it may strain credibility to claim that Will of Stratford wrote every line of every play attributed

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to William Shakespeare, it also strains credibility to claim that he wrote nothing at all. Ben Jonson knew Will of Stratford well enough to accuse him of being a hack.³⁹ He could hardly have been a hack without writing *something*.

So what, precisely, did he write? If the scene from *Midsummer's Night's Dream* is reasonably accurate, he at least wrote explanatory prologues. Just such a prologue appears at the beginning of *Henry VIII*. This play was staged in 1613, the last year that Shakespeare was with the company. Audiences came to the play expecting to see Robert Armin in the role of Will Somers, Henry VIII's well-known and beloved court fool. Armin had made a career of playing precisely that sort of character. Indeed, according to Hotson, it is hard to imagine that *Henry VIII* was not originally conceived just so Armin could play that role.⁴⁰ Yet, in 1613 Armin retired from the stage, before the play opened. Perhaps he became suddenly ill, for he died just two years later. Meanwhile, *Henry VIII* had to be performed without him, and, since there was no time to replace him, it had to be performed without any comic at all. So the play begins with an explanatory prologue.

Only they
That come to hear a merry bawdy play,
A noise of targets, or to see a fellow
In a long motley coat guarded with yellow
Will be deceived.⁴¹

However much or little of the works of Shakespeare we can attribute to Will of Stratford, we can at least be reasonably sure that he wrote *that kind of speech*, for it is just the sort of speech that it would have been his job, as stage manager, to provide. However, according to linguistic evidence, that *particular* speech was probably written by John

³⁹ Michell, pp. 70-71

⁴⁰ Hotson, *Shakespeare's Motley*, pp. 74-75.

⁴¹ *Henry VIII*, I i.

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Fletcher,⁴² who by 1613 was writing for the King's Men and eventually replaced Will of Stratford as their house writer.

In fact, we can probably give the actor from Stratford credit for more than just an occasional speech. As the company's stage manager, he had considerable say in the final form of the plays. He and his partners, the Burbage brothers, clearly agreed on the artistic importance of producing plays with tightly integrated plots and sub-plots and with rich characters. Hence, much of what we admire about Shakespeare might actually be attributable to Shakspeare, even if he did not write every line of every play.

The Mystery of the First Folio

Many of Shakespeare's plays would be completely unknown to us if it weren't for the first folio. And if it weren't for the first folio, William of Stratford would never have been credited as the author of them. No one can argue that William of Stratford was not Shakespeare without advancing some plausible theory explaining why the first folio says he was.

The folio was published in 1623, seven years after William the actor died, in unelogized obscurity, in Stratford on Avon. He had retired from the acting company at some point between 1611 and 1613⁴³ and no play manuscripts were in his papers at the time of his death. Plays were considered to be the property of the troupe that performed them,⁴⁴ so there is no reason to doubt that the scripts were left in Burbage's hands when Shakspeare retired. Richard Burbage died in London early in 1619, but the company continued, led by Heminges and Condell, who were the company's chief stakeholders in

⁴² Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: a Socio-linguistic Study*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 67-83.

⁴³ Greenblatt, pp. 378-379.

⁴⁴ Matus, pp. 93-95.

1623. Scholars have questioned whether these two actors really edited the scripts for the first folio. Sir George Greenwood affirms that the true editor was Ben Jonson.⁴⁵ Still, Jonson had to get the texts from somewhere. The simplest theory is that he got them from Hemminges and Condell, who were probably looking for a way to dispose of the company's older and unfashionable material—plays suited to the talents of men no longer with the troupe.

If Jonson was the true editor, then he was the one who put Will of Stratford's name on the title page. Did he do this in the sincere belief that Will was the author? Jonson was the source for much of what we know to Shakspeare's discredit as an author. If Jonson's sonnet on the Poet-Ape does, in fact, refer to Will, Jonson believed that Will Shakspeare had, at least once, rewritten somebody else's play and claimed the result as his own work.⁴⁶ Now Jonson had in his hands the texts that the King's Men had used, presumably including the very play (whichever one it was) that had initially raised Jonson's hackles. Jonson could have published the collection without citing an individual author. Most of the quartos were published that way.⁴⁷ But Jonson had a wicked sense of humor. If Will of Stratford had once claimed one of these plays as his own, Jonson could have been poking fun by attributing *all* of the plays to him.

Did Jonson seriously expect to fool anybody with this masquerade? Probably not. Possibly he went so far as to include a specific and very broad hint by giving pride of place to a very un-Shakespearean play, *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* is the first play in the folio, although it is almost certainly one of the last plays of the Shakespeare canon to be written. The very traditional Stratfordian editors of the Folger Library edition of the play

⁴⁵ Michell, p. 78.

⁴⁶ Michell pp. 70-71, 80-81.

⁴⁷ Matus, p. 96.

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admit that it is not in Shakespeare's usual style, and that it is, in fact, more the sort of masque that "Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, the architect, were making popular at court."⁴⁸ Perhaps Jonson commenced the folio with a play of his own as a clear statement that it contained the work of people other than its putative author.

If this is the case, then the secret of multiple authorship did not leak out because it was never a secret. Jonson's fulsome dedication was never intended to be taken seriously. How, then did posterity manage to forget the punch line of such a well-known joke? How did we come to believe in the great poet William Shakespeare? That mystery is less deep than at first glance it may appear if we remember that the forty-odd years following the publication of the first folio were some of the most unusual in English theater history. These were the years that saw the rise of Puritan political power, culminating in the closing of the public theaters in 1642. An entire generation was born and grew up between this time and the Restoration of the British monarchy and of the English theater in 1660. An entire generation knew nothing of the traditions of live professional stage performances.

In justice to the maligned Puritans, it should be pointed out that English play-writing did not cease during this hiatus. Plays were still written, printed, bought and sold, and occasionally performed quite legally.⁴⁹ But the regular and methodical development of stage writing and stage tradition was disrupted by war and frequent legal suppression. It was during this period that the theater was "purg'd from barbarism." The theater in which plays were the property of a troupe to do with as they pleased gave way to a conception of plays as literature, which, like published poetry, belonged to an author.

⁴⁸ Wright and Lamar, "Island of Magic," p. xiii.

⁴⁹ Dale B. J. Randall, *Winter Fruit: English Drama 1642-1660* (University Press of Kentucky, 1995) pp. 1-15, 368-372.

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During this period a secret which was no secret, but which depended on oral transmission to be remembered, might easily be forgotten.

It would be forgotten the more easily if it did not concern an important figure, and, during the 17th Century, Shakespeare was not considered especially important. In some ways Shakespearean audiences were much like modern audiences: the names they cared about were those of the actors. When Richard Burbage died in 1619 eulogies flowed from the pens of the earl of Pembroke, Thomas Middleton (the playwright), and from many anonymous poets. When Shakespeare died, there was silence. According to Charlotte Stopes, who studied the Burbages, “[m]en did not realize Shakespeare was dead while Burbage lived.”⁵⁰ It was the actor people idolized not the writer.

Indeed, even as compared to fellow writers Shakespeare was not considered important. In his comprehensive study of allusions to Shakespeare and Jonson during the 17th century, Gerald Eades Bentley discovered that Jonson led Shakespeare consistently in nearly every class of allusion. Writers alluded to Jonson, his plays, or his characters 1,839 times; Shakespeare allusions totaled 1,430.⁵¹ Subsequent work by Bentley identified over one thousand additional allusions to Jonson but fewer than one hundred new Shakespeare allusions.⁵² Bentley’s conclusion was that, until the final decade of the 17th century, when Shakespeare’s reputation began to rise, Jonson was the better known and more respected writer.

Conclusions

⁵⁰ Stopes, pp. 115-116.

⁵¹ Gerald Eades Bentley, *Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1945), vol. 1, p. 132.

⁵² Bentley, vol. 2.

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Presentism is a great danger to historical understanding. We must not imagine that our modern ideas and values were shared by our ancestors. Yet, paradoxically, the study of Shakespeare has also suffered from a failure to take into account how little we have changed in four hundred years. We have failed to perceive obvious parallels between popular entertainment in the present and in the past. Permit us to call upon Hercule Poirot one last time. The creator of Poirot as a character is well known: it was Agatha Christie. But when most of us think of Poirot, we are apt to conjure up a vision of him as portrayed by some actor: perhaps Albert Finney, who created the character for the Sidney Lumet film. And how many of us could say, off-hand, who wrote the screenplay for that film? It was Paul Dehn, a fact that can be ascertained by watching the on-screen credits. However the on-screen credits fail to mention that there was a second writer, Anthony Shaffer.⁵³ So there were actually two writers working over the outline of a plot created by someone else. The all-star cast, too, was unlikely to have been silent when it came to creating the final product. In addition to Albert Finney, there were Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman, Sean Connery, John Gielgud, Wendy Hiller, and Richard Widmark. Such a cast must have had their own ideas about how their characters would act and what they would say. On top of that there was the director, who is assumed in all modern films to have ultimate creative control, even deciding which scenes will be included in the final version, which will be excluded, and in what order the scenes will appear. It would be ridiculous to assert that one person was responsible for the show.

Would it not be equally ridiculous to ignore the contributions of Richard Burbage, William Kempe, Robert Armin, or even Will Shakspeare in our pursuit of the Elizabethan poet, whether we believe that poet to have been Oxford, Derby, Rutland, Pembroke, or a

⁵³ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071877/fullcredits>.

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combination of some or all of them? An Elizabethan play, like a modern movie, was a collaboration. The happy circumstance for us is that, in these thirty-six plays, the final script—the shooting script—was preserved instead of the bare draft of the first author. In the case of these plays, they all done it.

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Biography

D. Claudia Thompson has been an archivist at the University of Wyoming for twenty-five years, working with primary resource materials from many periods of history. She has published articles in historical journals, such as *Annals of Wyoming* and *Women's History Magazine*, and has an upcoming article in the *American Archivist*. Topics have included women's suffrage in the West, Tom Horn, and missionaries in Wyoming. Much of her work has emphasized the importance of historical context in understanding documents. She received an M.A. in Librarianship from the University of Denver, specializing in archives management. In 1984 she moved to Laramie, Wyoming, where she is presently employed at the American Heritage Center: the archives, manuscripts, and rare books repository of the University of Wyoming.

She was first exposed to Shakespeare at the age of ten, when the *Age of Kings* was running on television, but became aware of the authorship controversy only after reading John Michell's *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* Her own theories were developed during email exchanges with her brother Bruce, in which each acted as a check on the other's wilder fancies. Eventually they decided their own collaboration might provide a model for how Elizabethan plays were constructed.

Shakespeare On the Orient Express examines various candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. In every case, there is evidence in support, but there is also evidence against. The paper uses the framework of a well-known mystery novel to develop the thesis that no one suspect could be responsible and that multiple authors are required to explain the variations and contradictions that exist in the work of "Shakespeare."