”Art Made Tongue-tied By Authority”?
The Shakespeare Authorship Question

Lars Lindholm
Bachelor Degree Project
Literature
VT 2012
Supervisor: Marion Helfer Wajngot
Abstract

The essay presents the scholarly controversy over the correct attribution of the works by “Shakespeare”. The main alternative author is Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford. 16th century conventions allowed noblemen to write poetry or drama only for private circulation. To appear in print, such works had to be anonymous or under pseudonym. Overtly writing for public theatre, a profitable business, would have been a degrading conduct. Oxford’s contemporary fame as an author is little matched by known works. Great gaps in relevant sources indicate that documents concerning not only his person and authorship but also the life of Shakspere from Stratford, the alleged author, have been deliberately eliminated in order to transfer the authorship, for which the political authority of the Elizabethan and Jacobean autocratic society had motive and resources enough. A restored identity would imply radical redating of plays and poems.

To what extent literature is autobiographical, or was in that age, and whether restoring a lost identity from written works is legitimate at all, are basic issues of the debate, always implying tradition without real proof versus circumstantial evidence. As such arguments are incompatible, both sides have incessantly missed their targets. The historical conditions for the sequence of events that created the fiction, and its main steps, are related. Oxford will be in focus, since most old and new evidence for making a case has reference to him. The views of the two parties on different points are presented by continual quoting from representative recent works by Shakespeare scholars, where the often scornful tone of the debate still echoes. It is claimed that the urge for concrete results will make the opinion veer to the side that proves productive and eventually can create a new coherent picture, but better communication between the parties’ scholars is called for.

Keywords: Elizabethan literature; Shakespeare; Edward de Vere; Earl of Oxford; authorship attribution.
And diff’ring judgements serve but to declare,
That truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where.
William Cowper, *Hope* (1782)

The scholarly issue whether it was really the man from Stratford (1564-1616) or someone else who wrote the plays and poems attributed to “Shakespeare” will be presented in this essay: its genesis, history, stalemate, and particularly its present state and prospects of reconciliation. Many new facts speak in favour of another identity, deliberately concealed by the author and his nearest circle, and apparently also by contemporary authority, since large lacunae within the sources arouse suspicions of methodical manipulations for this purpose. The essay will seize upon these findings, right up to claiming that scholars’ urge for concrete results will make the opinion veer to the party that becomes most rewarding, by achieving a new, coherent picture. This will probably include a redating of the works and a new identity for the poet.

The annoyingly sparse biographical facts concerning the alleged author may well be found inconsistent with the erudite and travelled author the works indicate. Knowing little about him and being restricted to the texts, readers and spectators in general have been content, albeit of necessity. Some, finding this improper, eventually have launched alternative identities. Established scholars have rejected them all, also the strongest one, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604). In the expanding debate between what here will be called “Stratfordians” and “Oxfordians”, scholars have totally disapproved of the other side’s contributions, often in a scornful tone.

The basic issue whether and how much an author’s life is mirrored in his/her work becomes still more controversial when inverted: whether it is legitimate to use the work as a main clue to the life and even to the identity, when other sources are missing. Both sides welcome traits in the text that may be autobiographical. However,
prospects for this are slight for Stratfordians, and they generally choose to reject that approach on principle, rightly claiming that such evidence necessarily will be only circumstantial, as hints of a topical kind are, and still more psychological reasoning. In a way, this attitude was promoted for decades by successive literary theories giving the text full priority and regarding knowledge about the author as dispensable.

By a series of odd events, which will be related below, the general public had just a vague image of a person “Shakespeare” by the time both candidates were dead. Only from around the Restoration in 1660, the image could acquire substance and be established, and without new facts. In 1769, a “Jubilee”, arranged by the actor David Garrick in London and Stratford, confirmed that the actor/author was the target of a cult, with his character much idealized.¹

The “Shakespeare canon” had to be shaped to fit his lifetime, and puzzling effects appeared. For dating each play, the year of its first performance or print gave slight guidance. Sometimes a play seemed to presuppose an earlier version, written by some other author, either known but anonymous, or just supposed to have existed, but been lost. Many of the latest plays, some of them partly written by other authors, were considered inferior, or at least immature, as if they were early. Topical allusions discovered in the plays also indicate conceptions earlier than the canon would allow. Eventually, many scholars regarded research referring to the Stratford identity as based on one great myth.

Many candidates have been launched, and new ones are still added, but all have faded away, also the most cherished one, Francis Bacon. In his manifold talent and rich production, poetry seems so little included that his advocates rather have wanted to imagine him as the master mind of a group of writers in cooperation.

The earl of Oxford, launched in 1920, had the reputation of being an author, although no mature works by him are extant or even known by name. Since he was 14 years older than Shakspere, the puzzling early versions could have been his own and late but “inferior” plays early works by himself, which had been put aside, maybe reworked later but left incomplete by his death in 1604, and in some cases finished by others when performed later. This accords with Shakspere leaving no traces of either

¹ For the sake of convenience, this study, like a good deal of relevant literature, will use the form “Shakspere” for the theatre man from Stratford and “Shakespeare” for the author, whoever he was.
correspondence or collaboration with colleagues in these years, when he visited London occasionally. In the scholars’ new canon made to fit Oxford’s lifetime, Shakespeare appears more convincingly as a man of early creative talent, rather than a compiler, and concerned about the final state of his works.

Since the approaches of both parties are quite incompatible, their arguments have incessantly missed their targets, making the debate biased and emotional. Stratfordians have not only refuted the circumstantial evidence piece by piece, often successfully, but also ignored its much raised value when accumulated. Oxfordians have criticized the others for defending an unverified myth and wrongfully claiming monopoly of authority on the subject. While the Oxfordians have been accused of snobbism and elitism for ascribing to a nobleman what a long tradition attributes to the natural genius of a man of the people, Stratfordians have been accused of improper motives like care for the business depending on Shakespeare’s person, especially in Stratford. Mutual understanding and respect are scarce.

An example as late as 2010 offers a work by Harold Love, expounding the theory and practice of attribution. Its author is instructive and objective right up to a chapter repudiatingly called "Shakespeare and Co.", where he, at a low level of the debate, takes sides against anti-Stratfordians in general and Oxfordians in particular:

An implied assumption of anti-Stratfordian claims that would father the plays on a member of the aristocracy is that such endowments are primarily genetic and therefore more likely to emerge in noble families [...] But the Tudor aristocracy was emphatically not the product of natural selection over many generations for literary and artistic skill but purely for political and military prowess. Darwinian imperatives were extremely severe in their case, since failure in either criterion was likely to lead to death on the battlefield or on the block. [...] Genetic distinctiveness of the extreme kind assumed by these writers for Shakespeare is infinitely more likely to have arisen from the population at large than from the very small number of males bred for power who held the rank of earl or lord in Elizabethan England. (201.)

Thus he excels in the prejudice of which he is accusing his opponents, and quite wrongly; no Oxfordian with the aim of being taken seriously would give vent to such genetic reasoning, nor snobbism or elitism. To understand the bluntness of the parties, modern conflict theory could be applied, as the inability to assimilate facts from the opposite side bears much resemblance to that of parties in politico-religious conflicts.
The literature about Shakespeare, including bibliographies over this literature, continually expands. Since literary scholarship regained interest in authors’ conditions and intentions, the publication of works on Shakespeare’s identity, and the discord about this, have accelerated remarkably, much in favour of Oxford. The Stratfordians’ Shakespeare biographies are necessarily repetitive, and their position has become more and more defensive. The opposition criticizes the established scholars’ rigidity and brings about more new evidence, and sometimes another alternative candidate.

In 1984, the American journalist Charlton Ogburn Jr finished a huge polemical summary of the Oxfordian view. During the past few years both parties have achieved thorough and ingenious works, whose authors know each other’s approach from their recent works and yet adhere to their own one. Rather than a more subjective selection these may be justified as representative sources for describing the controversy:

- Diana Price (2001), an independent scholar, names no candidate, deals with the reasons of doubt about the author’s identity, evincing that he in his own texts and the judgments of others appears like two persons.
- Alan Nelson (2003), a professor, denies that any controversy exists but, attempting a Stratfordian character murder of Oxford, hunts out many documents, mainly English, of great value also to opposing scholars.
- Mark Anderson (2005), a journalist, not polemic, scrutinizes Oxford’s travels and whole life, much for possible incentives for plays or poems, with the correspondencies of a topical kind convincingly demonstrated.
- James Shapiro (2010), a professor, whose comprehensive Stratfordian view with historical and stylistical arguments is partially very striking.

Each has an own approach: anti-Shakspere, anti-Oxford, pro-Oxford, pro-Shakspere. All are Americans, and two of them not academics, like many of the early prominent Shakespeare scholars. Articles by Oxfordians cited on occasion reflect the width of their activity. Among the omitted is a recent study of the typical development pattern of a creative genius, denoting precocity, voracious reading, passion, nonconformism, perseverance, and death with pen in hand rather than early retirement. The later years’ extensive literature on the controversy itself has not been useful for this essay; even from Leahy’s comprehensive anthology is quoted only an ingenuous interviewee.

Brought together, the disagreeing authors demonstrate the unique sequence of events behind the creation of “Shakespeare”, with an abundance of correspondencies when relating the life and journeys of the Earl to the content and location of the plays. An alternative chronology clearly appears, often dating plays 10-15 years earlier.
Many hitherto inexplicable details fall into place, and still more by psychological considerations on Oxford’s life situation when he may have conceived a work.

Without the aim of taking Oxford’s part, the following survey is dominated by his situation, since both old and new evidence for making a case turns out to have reference to him, not to Shakspere. Since new facts that prove anything hardly can be expected, new evidence is of a topical kind and almost all provided by Oxfordians. By Stratfordians, this is not refuted with alternative views of the same matter but by rejection on principle as circumstantial, besides dismissal of correspondencies with some other author’s life as coincidental, and of reference to personality as irrelevant because literature was not autobiographical at that time. No text passage claimed by Oxfordians to be reflected in a play or poem has been found criticized and interpreted differently by a Stratfordian; for *vice versa* there are a few examples.

Oxford had the advantages of the best possible classical and literary education and a literary talent. Yet, according to Anderson, in his twenties he had servants who “appear to have been retained based on their recklessness and wild abandon” (66). On May 20th, 1573, maybe in retaliation for the delay of the delivery of his dowry, he let three of them ambush two of his father-in-law Lord Burghley’s men on the main road between Gravesend and Rochester (66, 68; Jimenez, no pag.). Such an episode, very similar and located by “Gad’s Hill”, with that very date mentioned, occurs in the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (Anderson 453-54). This could have been created by Oxford as a play for the court already in 1574; it was reworked for the public stage but printed only in 1598, in a bad state, and the plot seems to be founded on tales of the historical Prince Hal’s escapades (Jimenez).

Such robberies were included in the anonymous manuscript *The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth written in 1513* (printed only in 1911; Anderson 453-54), copies of which were easily accessible to Oxford. He wilfully staged the matter live, on the road. If *The Famous Victories* was his work, it may have been written even before his law studies at Gray’s Inn from 1567, as it lacks the legal terms that are so abundant in the later history plays (Jimenez). Apparently it was the source of the Shakespeare trilogy, *Henry IV, 1-2*, and *Henry V*. The incident reappears there, in *King Henry IV, Part 1*, act 1-2, located at Gad’s Hill, suggesting a kind of apology to Elizabeth and Burghley “for the author’s callow rebelliousness as a youth” (Anderson 66). No Stratfordian seems to have judged these correspondencies as coincidental.
Poems by Oxford were printed from 1573, under plain signatures like E. O., E. Ox., or E. Oxf., later in anthologies in 1576 and 1591, each of those given a second edition. They are all accounted for and harshly criticized by Nelson (157-63, 384-91). Of the 16-20 poems attributed to Oxford no one is datable after 1593; no dramatic or mature poetic works have survived under his own name (Anderson XXVII).

Yet, apparently not least for his activity in theatre and masque entertainment within court, Oxford soon obtained a reputation as both a poet and a playwright, eventually confirmed by others than his peers. In *A Discourse of English Poetrie* from 1586, William Webbe praises “many honorable and noble lords and gentlemen of Her Majesty’s court, which in the rare devices of poetry have been and yet are most excellent skilful; among whom the right honorable earl of Oxford may challenge to himself the title of most excellent among the rest” (Ogburn 687). This discourse concerns poetry in manuscript, read within the court or in private circulation.

Corresponding to this is the reference to Oxford in *The Art of English Poesie* from 1589, often attributed to George Puttenham, which was “a guidebook to courtly writing and courtly writers that became the gold standard upon which literary criticism of the age was based” (Anderson 235).² The author notes:

> Among the nobility or gentry as may be very well seen in many laudable sciences and especially in making poesie, it is so come to pass that they have no courage to write & if they have are loath to be known of their skill. So as I know very many notable gentlemen in the Court that have written commendably and suppressed it again; or else suffered it to be published without their own names to it: as if it were a discredit for a gentleman to seem learned. (Quoted Ogburn 687.)

Here is included publishing, which may necessitate pseudonyms, well-known or not. Puttenham separately mentions “courtly makers, noblemen and gentlemen […] who have written commendably well – as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest – of which number is first that noble gentleman Edward, earl of Oxford”. Only a fragmentary note implies theatre, exclusively in court, and not for printing: “Th’earl of Oxford and Master Edwards of Her Majesty’s Chapel for comedy an interlude” (Anderson 236; cf. note, 422).

When he staged a historical legend live on the road in 1573, Oxford displayed his inclination for mixing fancy and reality. He had also recently sponsored an edition

---

² The motives for anonymity are unknown. Recently, this first treatise of literature has been ascribed to Oxford himself by R. M. Waugaman (2010). That would be what first granted him the Queen’s favour.
of Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (1572), which notes that a nobleman who wrote literary works must “take care to keep them under cover” (Anderson 52, 65), and contributed a poem to a translation of the philosophic tract *Cardanus’s Comfort*. By the ideals he set forth in these works he had “laid out his recipe for literary mischief [...] that he would follow for the rest of his life: Treat the court as if it were a theater and the theater as if it were a court; write, but only do so covertly” (65).

Anderson’s assessment of Oxford as an author connects life and work: “For such an autobiographical artist as the earl of Oxford, extreme agony and disturbance in life ultimately provided profound inspiration” (118). Shapiro argues quite the opposite: “The evidence strongly suggests that imaginative literature in general and plays in particular in Shakespeare’s day were rarely if ever a vehicle for self-revelation”, and assumingly specifies this general statement: “Those who believe that Elizabethan plays were autobiographical ought to be able to show that contemporaries were on the lookout for confessional allusions” (304).

Certainly, expectations of spectators and readers in that direction were nothing compared to those developed in later times, but as to the authors, the variety and amplitude of their introspection, presumption, and attitude to authority and uniformity could stand a comparison with those of our contemporaries. Examples may be sought for in London’s literary and theatrical circles, showing diverse talented, self-centered, and self-displaying individuals, ambitious but often with little success, and practitioners or nonentities from the theatre world – like Shakspere, of whose presence in London early evidence is ambiguous and disputed. In late 1592, a pamphlet, *Groats-worth of Witte*, attributed to Robert Greene, ends with a warning to playwrights against actors:

> Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger’s heart wrapped in a Players hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country (Quoted in Price 26).

This is generally mentioned as the first trace of Shakspere in London, much cherished by Stratfordians. However, the target of the attack may instead have been the actor and theatre owner Edward Alleyn, as Anderson reports (525). The accusation could have implied unfair appropriation of others’ works, or plagiarism. This pamphlet is the more crucial as the *only* hint during Shakspere’s lifetime that he was also a playwright (Price 42-44, 137-39). Nothing “remains to suggest even remotely that
Shakspere was a writer – and little enough that he was an actor” (Ogburn 59). Yet he may well have moved in these spheres.

In a pamphlet from 1593, one playwright addressed in Groats-worth, Thomas Nashe, mentions one “fellow” of theirs, “Will. Monox”, which suggests the earl of Oxford (to Anderson 255: “the pidgin-French ‘My Ox.’”). He may have appeared in this circle, preferably on a pseudonym basis. Ogburn supposes that Shakspere and the earl met in London (746) and that Nashe’s strong denial of any part in the Groats-worth, by which a playwright was said to have taken offence, suggests that someone more important than a newcomer from the provinces was the offended one (64-65).

An English nobleman, especially a courtier, should not have his name exposed as the author of printed matter. How powerful this stigma was is disputed. It was not just a matter of dignity; “a nobleman in Shakespeare’s time who wrote literary works for publication would have felt under obligation and been under strong social pressure to conceal his authorship. The Stratfordians do not dispute this fact” (Ogburn 189). The obligation was strongest with writing for the theatre, a business with money in circulation, with which a courtier should not be associated. Price even maintains that a playwright who could be recognized as a court insider was not only exposed to social disgrace but also posed a security risk, because many of the plays contained politically charged material. If the courtier-playwright remained anonymous, then at least some of the satire would be lost on the general public. Some theorists are therefore convinced that the state erased certain records and set up elaborate schemes to divert attention away from the highborn author. (217.)

These remarks are essential, bearing in mind what would follow in Oxford’s case.

A narrative poem Venus and Adonis by a William Shakespeare appeared in print in 1593. “As a piece of contemporary allegory, the poem portrays Venus as the queen of England” (Anderson 268). A commoner could publish such a poem, gaining fame and profit, as Edmund Spenser had done recently with The Faerie Queene. A courtier, reputedly decadent and an ex-favourite of the Queen, could not. If Oxford was the author, loyalty to the Queen and convention, perhaps more than pressure from his father-in-law the Lord Treasurer on the Queen’s behalf, forced him to choose a pseudonym. ”Shakespeare” was suggestive; Ogburn relates two motives scholars have claimed for it: “His crest as Viscount Bulbeck was a lion brandishing a broken spear”, and from classics he knew that “Pallas Athena, [...] the spear-shaker, was the patron goddess of the Athenians, who created the drama as we know it” (729).
The Oxfordian theory assumes some agreement, impossible to prove, between Oxford, Shakspere and the authorities, that Shakspere, whose very name may have been an incentive, could embody this elusive pseudonym when needed. To remain anonymous, Oxford would need a “front man”, sooner or later. The few records of Shakspere that remain, so far solely about money-lending and lawsuits, “show that Shakspere was a tightfisted businessman with a selfish streak, and that he was viewed by others as a source of loans or financing” (Price 53). The economical prospects of his new commitment were good, if he remained reticent. As a result of this design, if there was one, Shakspere eventually was supposed to be the author.

If Oxford wrote *Venus and Adonis*, he had followed the recipe mentioned as laid out in Castiglione’s *Courtier* and Cardanus’s *Comfort* (Anderson 271). The poet Thomas Edwards in the concluding verses of *Narcissus*, one of the poems in *Cephalus and Procris* […]. 1592, praises *Venus and Adonis*. Its author, whom he calls “Adon”, alluding to the plot, had distinguished himself from some brawling in the Blackfriars (Anderson 181). With this hint and a “reference to privileged ‘purple robes,’” Edwards became the first to imply that the poet was an aristocrat (Price 224-25).

A much exploited and disputed piece of evidence is an entry in the accounts for 1594 of the Treasurer of the Chamber, attesting a payment of £20 to “Will Kempe Will Shakespeare & Richard Burbage servants to the Lord Chamberlain […] for two several comedies or interludes shewed by them before her Majesty […] upon St. Stephens day & Innocents day”. If this referred to Shakspere, he would “in a bound” have reached a position that the foremost, very famous players of the company “had taken years of work to achieve” (Ogburn 65). This is the only record from Elizabeth’s reign associating a “Shakespeare” with any acting, and not valid, as Ogburn relates:

On Innocents’ Day 1594, the Admiral’s company, not the Lord Chamberlain’s, had appeared before the Queen. “The official responsible for making payments for theatrical performances at Court” was Sir Thomas Heneage, but “who rendered the Bills” in 1592-95 was Mary, Countess of Southampton, a widow, remarried with Heneage 1594 but widowed again in October 1595. When finding the records of payments lacking from September 1592, and “receiving an unpleasant letter even from the Queen herself about the deficit”, she would have had the problem “to come up with vouchers accounting for the expenditure of as much as possible in order to reduce the amount”. She would have known the poet named William Shakespeare,
who had dedicated to her son, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, the only two works he had then published under that name, and who was probably also “the directing hand within the Lord Chamberlain’s company” (65-66). By just this entry, Ogburn shows, “Shaksper is made a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Company from 1594 on. We read [...] as if we were reading matters of plain fact, that ‘His company put on about fifteen new plays a year and Shakspere, as a regular acting member of the company, must have appeared in most of them’” (65; quoted from M. Chute, Shakespeare and London, 1949). The myth exposed here still retains its power. As Stratfordians generally choose not to answer such assertions, neither does Shapiro.

In 1598 the name Shakespeare also appeared on a play. This should have required the consent of the new Secretary of State, Oxford’s brother-in-law Robert Cecil. Whether it was part of a deal or not, it was high time to do it, as ca 16 of his plays had already been printed anonymously. “Between 1594 and 1598, six plays [...] were printed and sold in London by piratical publishers” (Ogburn 3). The changed policy coincided conspicuously with Lord Burghley’s demise from power and life, and with the publication of a treatise by Francis Meres, Palladis Tamia (1598).

In the chapter “A comparative discourse of our English Poets” which “gathers an assortment of sixteenth-century English literary criticism”, the “best for comedy among us” starts with Oxford, because of his rank (Ogburn 195). It has been indicated by others that Shakespeare was singled out for extended comment (196). Meres praises “mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare” for his narrative poems and “sugared Sonnets among his private friends, &c.” and as “most excellent in both kinds for the stage”, comedy and tragedy, 6 of each. Only 12 of ca 17 known plays are named, 5 of them were not published, 6 printed without author (Price 134-35).

Ogburn argues: “There must be a reason for all this, and the only realistic one I can find is that the decision had been reached that the author of the hitherto unattributed dramatic masterpieces was to be ‘Shakespeare’ and Meres had been selected to launch the artifice unobtrusively” (196). If that was the purpose, the treatise ought to have been better: to Anderson, it is “drawing heavily from the anonymous 1589 book [Puttenham’s]” and “overrated” (306, 517). Shapiro, however, calls it “an invaluable account of what Shakespeare had achieved a decade into his career”. “Crushingly” for Oxfordians, he says, “Meres includes both ‘Edward Earl of Oxford’ and Shakespeare in his list of the best writers of comedy (while omitting
Oxford from the list of leading tragedians)” (267-68). Anyway, as Price points out, *Palladis Tamia* was a breakthrough “for classifying dramatic works as literature and for establishing the name ‘William Shakespeare’ as a dramatist” (134-36).

Ogburn suggests that a “front man” plan would include dispatching Shakspere to his hometown, “so that his glaring disqualifications for the role of the dramatist would not queer the game” (194-95). As a broker of plays and paymaster of playwrights, he had been successful (Price 52). He purchased New Place in Stratford already in 1597 (33). “Shakspere’s absences from London strongly suggests that his primary role with the acting company was one for which his continuous presence was not necessary” (42). His only sufficiently known involvement in theatre is that of a shareholder. Still in 1602, an anecdote told by John Manningham, a discerning spectator, indicates that the actor Shakespeare was neither well known nor connected with the author of that name (Ogburn 8-9).

The conduct of Shakespeare’s younger colleague and competitor Ben Jonson leaves other hints of a double game being played. During Shakspere’s lifetime Jonson “wrote nothing about Shakespeare – or Shakspere – by name” (Price 68). In his play *Every Man In His Humour* from 1599, however, he satirizes Shakspere as a social climber in the character Sogliardo, who purchases a coat of arms, like Shakspere then was trying to do for his father (68). In another play from 1601, Jonson also ridicules such pretentions, using the term “poet-ape” as a derogatory epithet for untrustworthy, callous actors (92). In an epigram “On Poet-Ape”, dated sometime between 1595 and 1612, Jonson casts himself as the victim of a dishonest play broker, whom Price identifies as Shakspere (92-94). The poem is one of the only three that Jonson wrote in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet (95). In spite of this clue and of his familiarity with works by the popular author which he seems to be ridiculing, “the parody did not so much as hint that Jonson recognized Shakspere as a fellow playwright or poet. It suggested instead that Jonson was contemptuous of Shakspere’s pretensions” (73). Jonson’s many comments together present an elusive doubleness.

The same effect appears in three satirical *Parnassus* plays, performed at Cambridge University between 1598 and 1602. In their both explicit and indirect allusions to Shakespeare, references to the poet are sufficiently unlike those to the actor as to suggest two different individuals, and seem to distinguish between the arrogant actor colleague and the admired poet; Jonson is also satirized (Price 81-89).
Statements about Shakspeare as an actor are all conjectural, except Jonson’s, and his are unexpectedly late. The first is in his edition of his own collected Works (1616), where “Will. Shakspeare” is listed in the casts that performed in premieres 1598 of Every Man In His Humour and 1603 of Sejanus (Price 41). In Shakespeare’s Works (1623), of which more below, Jonson let Shakespeare head the roster of “The Names of the Principal Actors in all these Plays” (41). It is the only evidence of Shakspeare performing in his own plays (Price 41).

Shapiro describes a performance of The Second Part of Henry the Fourth at Whitehall Palace, in the presence of the Queen; it had earlier been “staged for popular audiences at the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch” (262). The actor playing the part of Falstaff spoke the Epilogue, which mentions his legs and dancing, alluding to the following gig. For the court, where plays did not end with gigs, an alternative epilogue was made. In 1600, the play was printed, with both epilogues in succession.³

Shapiro claims that the court version was written to be spoken by the author, to him meaning the Stratford man: “It’s the closest we ever get in his plays to hearing Shakespeare speak for and as himself. It’s a brassy and confident speech” (263). In his reading of the epilogue he suggests: “The apology for Oldcastle in The First Part of Henry the Fourth (if that’s the ‘displeasing’ if enormously popular play he never quite gets around to naming) is nicely finessed, as Shakespeare offers in compensation the Falstaff play they have just applauded as a way of making amends” (264):

First, my fear; then, my curtsy; last my speech.
My fear is your displeasure. My curtsy, my duty.
And my speech, to beg your pardons. If you look for a good speech now, you undo me. For what I have to say is of my own making. And what indeed (I should say) will (I doubt) prove my own marring. But to the purpose and so to the venture. Be it known to you, as it is very well, I was lately here in the end of a displeasing play, to pray your patience for it, and to promise a better. I meant indeed to pay you with this, which if (like an ill venture) it come unluckily home, I break, and you, my gentle creditors, lose. Here to your mercies. Bate me some, and I will pay you some, and (as most debtors do) promise you infinitely. (Epilogue, 1-15.)

³ In 8:o. In the Folio edition 1623 the kneeling for the Queen in the end of the first epilogue was moved and merged with the second end, into one long epilogue, unwieldy and “running together two speeches with wildly different purposes” (Shapiro 265). No later edition has separated the epilogues but follows either of the two first ones; the latest Oxford edition, careful about alternative texts, follows the Folio.
This first speech ended with mentioning a kneeling, in the Folio merged with the end:

And so I kneel down before you; but indeed,
to pray for the Queen (32-33).

Shapiro’s reading seems to aim at stretching the essence of this Epilogue towards the relation between the author, rather than the actor, and the audience. “Beyond this point, the epilogue’s initial acceptance of social deference [...] gives way to the novel suggestion that playwright and spectators are bound in a partnership, sharers in a venture” (264). His final claim for the speaker could be seen as a weighty argument:

It’s inconceivable that any of the rival candidates for the authorship of the plays associated with the court [...] could possibly have stood upon that stage at Whitehall Palace, publicly assuming the socially inferior role of player, and spoken these lines. And it is even harder, after reading these powerful and self-confident lines, to imagine the alternative, that the speaker, who claims to have written the play they just saw, was merely a mouthpiece for someone else in the room, and lying to both queen and court. (265.)

To those involved, the last alternative would be no lie, however, just theatre, as the epilogue still is; nor is it clear what is claimed. As each party generally rejects what the other presents as support, no equivalent anti-Stratfordian interpretation would be expected, but in a newspaper review of Shapiro’s book William Niederkorn answers:

Shapiro seems to lose rationality completely in his insistence that Shakespeare himself delivered this speech on the Elizabethan stage. [...] If the speaker were the playwright, he would need no apology and would be able to make a good speech. A substitute speechmaker is more likely an actor or actor-manager. He could even be anti-Stratfordian Will. (No pag.)

To Niederkorn, the likely speaker would be the actor Kempe, who by extemporizing may have been the “displeasing” one and now has to take responsibility of his words.

There is a widespread notion that at least Hamlet has features in common with his author. Stratfordians also search the sparse known facts to support their candidate. Oxfordians are more favoured, as the abundant knowledge of the Earl allows them to see many characters in the plays as his alter ego or persona. Ogburn has listed at least one in each of twenty plays (885). For example, Oxford is supposedly Prince Hal in 1 & 2 Henry IV and Henry V, first undisciplined, disorderly, then virtuous (669), but also Falstaff, “a bitter-comic caricature of himself in later years” (254). The voluble Hamlet surviving and aging into Falstaff is conceivable – although not for a stage.
It is remarkable that Shapiro, with his view of circumstantial evidence, tries to imagine “Shakespeare” at all, and even, as in the Epilogue, in performance. Anderson would rather be expected to seek this voice behind a character. His analysis of Love’s Labour’s Lost aims at showing that the ruse in progress to make Shakspere a “front man” is mirrored in this play, which he dates to about 1593. He ascribes two personae in the play to Oxford: the noble Berowne and the clownish Don Armado, who makes use of an ambitious country gentleman, Costard (261). Anderson argues: “There is no documentary record of de Vere and Shakspere ever meeting. Costard’s banter with de Vere’s personification [Don Armado] [...] is the closest to such a record that has yet been found” (263). He continues to focus on the actor behind Costard, to find private attitudes and characteristics. The play ends with a masque “The Nine Worthies” About one of them Costard says: “For mine own part, I know not the degree of the worthy. But I am prepared to stand for him” (Love’s Labour’s Lost, V.2.504-5). "Stand for” can be made to hint at the ruse, the rest to characterize: “The players [...] are relentlessly heckled by the courtly audience [...]. The character who handles the tough crowd best, though, is Costard. He plays the audience like a pro [...] When the actor playing Alexander the Great leaves the stage in tears, Costard jumps in to keep the show rolling” (Anderson 263, referring to Love’s Labour’s Lost, V.2.569-80).

Price reports that Shakespeare’s plays were published without authorization in corrupt versions, “with unprecedented frequency for a living writer” (129). This makes sense if the name concealed a courtier: “his privately circulating manuscripts presented an opportunity for printers – or brokers”. A gentleman could not protest (133). Besides, “Shaksperes’s vocation as play broker could account for a number of plays, known today to be somebody else’s, but published then over the name [...] or over the initials ‘W. S.’” (Price 298). “Any financial interest in play scripts that Shakspere retained as a theatre shareholder was subverted by the theft of the Shakespeare plays”, hinting that “either this aggressive businessman with a financial stake in the Shakespeare plays inexplicably did nothing to stop the piracy – or he was the play pirate (299).

To this frustrating piracy came Oxford’s annihilation as an author and perhaps, in the long run, also oblivion. His situation was observed by his literary friends and admirers. A few lines of verse from Scourge of Villanie, printed anonymously in 1598 by the satirist and dramatist John Marston, have been brought up by Ogburn (401):
Far fly thy fame,
Most, most of me beloved, whose silent name
One letter bounds. Thy true judicial style
I ever honour, and if my love beguile
Not much my hopes, then thy unvalu’d worth
Shall mount fair place when Apes are turned forth.

“Who had a ‘silent name’ that ‘one letter bounds’? Who but Edward de VerE?” (402).

Such letter and cipher codes, which we have little chance to evaluate, were frequent.

The works may reflect the author’s identity, but there are not found obvious hints deliberately left in them to elude the suppression, as the enforced transfer of the authorship to a front man proceeded. More than once, however, the author seems to have tried to leave clues to his identity in a play by alluding to some text outside it, in a work known to everyone. According to Nina Green, there are references that seem quite uncalled for, as if they were made to point something out. They refer to William Lily, An Introduction of the Eyght Partes of Latin Speache (1567), a Latin grammar read and memorized by every Elizabethan schoolboy, commonly known as The Accidence. Inserted in some plays printed in 1594-1602, these allusions are written before or during that time.

One comes in Titus Andronicus, IV.2. 18-24, where the contemporary school grammar figures in a play taking place in classical antiquity, making what Green calls “perhaps the most egregious anachronism in Shakespeare”:

Demetrius:
What’s here – a scroll, and written round about?
Let’s see.
‘Integer vitae, scelerisque purus,
Non eget Mauri laculis, nec arcu.’

Chiron:
O, ’tis a verse in Horace, I know it well.
I read it in the grammar long ago.

Aaron:
Ay, just, a verse in Horace; right, you have it. (Green 1.)

A survey on nouns or names is shown in the first page of this grammar [in Facsimile]:

A noun adjective [...] bonus, Good. Pulcher, Faire. [...]

A noun substantive either is proper to the thing that it betokeneth, as Edwardus, is my propre name, or else is common to more, as Homo is a common name to all men.

[...] The singular number speaketh of one, as Lapis, a stone.
Green suggests that passages in two other plays seem to refer to that very page:

In *Henry IV, P. I*, II: 1, 95:

Gadshill: [...] Thou shalt have a share in our purchase, as I am a true man.  
Chamberlain: Nay, rather let me have it as you are a false thief.  
Gadshill: Go to, *homo* is a common name to all men. (Green 1.)

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV: 1, in a scene without “relationship to the rest of the play”, Sir Hugh Evans is requested to ask the boy William “some questions in his accidence” (line 15) and talks with him on the definition of the words “lapis” and “pulcher” (line 23-58) as if pointing at the name Edwardus between them (Green 2-3).

As Anderson shows, “John Bodenham’s 1600 quotation anthology *Belvedere* claimed to excerpt verse from contemporary authors including both ‘Edward, earle of Oxenford’ and ‘William Shakspeare’ [sic].” Its list was mainly “bylines that the editor could use to sell books. De Vere is mentioned for his title, Shake-speare because he was a best seller”. To Oxford the list was a “reminder that the author was being bound and tied down on all sides, like Gulliver [...]. One can begin to appreciate the bitter frustration in Shake-speare’s Sonnet 66: Tir’d with all these, for restful death I cry; / As [...] art made tongue-tied by authority - - -” (Anderson 329-30). The quote displays the quintessence of Oxford’s psychological situation, not much focussed here.

To authority, presenting the deposition of a British monarch in a play, like in *Richard II*, was a criminal offense; even portraying a contemporary figure as a character was “enough to bring the playwright before the Star Chamber. Yet, as few would deny [...] Cecil, Lord Burghley [...] was lampooned as Polonius in *Hamlet*” (Ogburn 11). So was Christopher Hatton as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, and other courtiers. To Oxfordians, this excludes a commoner as the author and undoubtedly points at Oxford. Burghley and his son Robert would have seen the value of “those plays which fired the spirit of English nationalism”, and on their account “have been willing to forgive their author a great deal” (203). The Queen obviously did so and, as the records indicate, generously encouraged their author in writing them. However, as Ogburn emphasizes, “on no account would the Cecils have wished to have de Vere seen as the author of Shakespeare’s plays – ever” (203).

The Cecils’ motives were abstruse and mixed, and not only conventions of hierarchy and court. They were upstarts in a position of absolute power, on many levels. Lord Burghley was notorious for saving the most trivial scrap of paper, but
selective, erasing all that could threaten the prestige of England, the Queen, or his own family. No significant documents of Oxford’s are extant and of letters to him only some from his wife, and those in Burghley’s files, as drafts, not copies, by his hand (Nelson 278). Oxford’s extant letters to the Cecils are few, arousing “a suspicion amounting to certainty” that the surviving ones would put them in a generous and forbearing light (Ogburn 400). Oxford’s house may have been searched after his death.

Ogburn points out that “every contemporary document that might have related authorship of Shakespeare’s plays and poems to an identifiable human being”, every paper that would have told who Shakespeare was, Shakspere or anyone else, simply vanished (183). A suspicion “voices itself that the papers on which Shakspere had set his hand in Stratford were made to disappear because they showed the great writer signing with a mark [...] the record of the Stratford Grammar School of his early years [...] because they showed he did not attend it, just as ‘the volumes of the Lord Chamberlain’s Warrants,’ [...] because they would have showed how little consequential a figure Shakspere cut in the company” (123).4 Such infringement “would have made no sense if the author had been the Stratford man” (198). Stratfordians assume that this would imply a conspiracy impossible to hide, but no conspiracy was necessary. Autocratic societies like the Elizabethan are run under central direction (183), and the Cecils’ power also extended to distant archives.

The lacunae testified by Ogburn are not brought up by Anderson or Price, nor by Shapiro, who leaves an ingenuous explanation for the scarcity of material: “One possibility is that Shakespeare went out of his way to ensure that posterity would find a cold trail.” The anguish over identity and oblivion that the last plays suggest can escape even scholars, and more easily others in a position to convey scholarly efforts to readers or audience. Interviews by William Leahy, the editor of Shakespeare and His Authors, present two Artistic Directors of the new Globe Theatre in London, the first a decided Oxfordian, the second a Stratfordian, exact about choosing his words:

So to lock him down and give him a rigorous biography, which I think certain biographers do – this happened, that happened, it’s exactly like

---

4 Shakspere’s alleged economic business indicates a sufficient background of mathematics, writing, etc. – Ogburn’s harsh tone does not imply that these accusations are his or even recent. He summarizes all allegations so far, derived from the lack of facts and documents and the insignificance of Shakspere’s will, by earlier research, among them his parents Charlton and Dorothy Ogburn, and his own. What comes from each source, what is original and what is commonplace, and how fair Ogburn’s judgments are, cannot be judged by laymen, nor from a student perspective, hardly even a native English one.
this, it’s exactly like that – one just thinks, ‘well come on, you know there is room for doubt there, there are questions there’. I think in some ways Shakespeare wanted that, I think he wanted to be elusive. (153.)

By such engaged but wilful thinking, learned or not, a myth is spread and maintained.

The aging Oxford became still more alienated and also politically regarded as persona non grata, although he was estimated and rewarded by King James I towards the end of his life (Nelson 422-23). After his death in 1604, the publishing of new Shakespeare plays was much reduced. Shakespeare’s Sonnets, with its continuous evidence of disgrace and despair that does not accord with the successful Shaksper, were released in 1609. A dedication by the printer indicates that the author then was dead (Ogburn 4). If Oxford wrote them, his widow could hardly be expected to have relished seeing his identity revealed (197). This rather strengthened the motives for the secrecy, and the ruse continued.

The historian William Camden, once the teacher of Jonson, in his Remains Concerning Britain (1605) named William Shakespeare among the “most pregnant wits of these our times”. Shapiro asks: “Are we to suppose that as reputable a historian as Camden must have been in on the conspiracy as well – and willing to lie in print?” (269). But in his Latin Britannia (1607, 1st ed. 1586), “when discussing the worthies of Stratford-on-Avon”, Shakespeare is not mentioned. Yet Camden had been in charge when Shakspere applied for the title of gentleman for his father (Ogburn 112, Price 140). Only in an English translation from 1695 is Shakespeare named in a supplement (Ogburn 113). Without objecting that editions of Britannia may have been unchanged, Shapiro tells about a copy of the 1590 edition where, by the passage on the worthies, is added: “et Gulielmo Shakespear Roscio planè nostro”. Comparing him to Roscius, a widely admired Roman actor, “was to acknowledge that he was a star of the stage” to Shapiro, not however to Paul Altrocchi, who discovered the note:

‘The annotation […] does confirm the remarkable early success of […] William Cecil’s clever but monstrous connivance: forcing the genius Edward de Vere into pseudonymity and promoting the illiterate grain merchant and real estate speculator, Shaksper of Stratford, into hoaxian prominence as the great poet and playwright, William Shakespeare.’

Shapiro concludes: “Debating such a conclusion is pointless, given the radically different assumptions governing how this document ought to be read. Virtually every piece of evidence offered by Shakespeare’s fellow writers has been similarly explained away” (275-76).
In 1609, the printer George Eld issued a Quarto edition of *Troilus and Cressida*, with a front-page, advertising that the King’s Men had performed the play at the Globe Theatre (Anderson 363). During the printing, this page was replaced by one not mentioning any performance, and a preface added, stating that the play had never been enacted before. According to W. W. Greg, however, “the statements are not in fact unreconcilable […] all it implies is that the play had not been acted before the vulgar multitude” (340). To an Oxfordian, the heading “A never writer, to an ever reader. Newes”, might imply that Oxford uses his name “E. Vere” as a cipher, as he does in some poems. To a Stratfordian this is of no concern. The text is enigmatic: “Eternal reader, you have here a new play, never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar”. This is “hardly the way one would speak of a product by a playwright of the people who turned out plays for money to meet the demands of performers on the commercial stage” (Ogburn 205). The continuation of the text is chaotic, with a visible aim to praise the author, and a peak towards the end:

> And believe this, that when he is gone, and his comedies out of sale, you will scramble for them, and set up a new English Inquisition. Take this for a warning, and at the peril of your pleasure’s loss, for not being sullied with the smoky breath of the multitude; but thank fortune for the scape it hath made amongst you. Since by the grand possessors’ wills I believe you should have prayed for them rather than been prayed.

“By ‘grand possessors’ the Stratfordians are constrained to maintain that an acting company is meant, though it would surely never have occurred to an Elizabethan to associate grandeur with a troupe of players” (205). Ogburn gives his interpretation:

> What the preface appears to be telling the reader is that the dramatist’s plays are held by members of the nobility and that *Troilus and Cressida* was somehow sprung from their control. [...] The reader is warned that the time is coming when he will have to scramble for the dramatist’s comedies and set up a new English Inquisition to get them.

And on “when he is gone” he claims: “one does not in any case in referring to a living writer coolly speak of how things will be with his works when he is dead” (206).

By 1609, only 18 of Shakespeare’s plays had been printed, “some in appallingly corrupt texts” (Ogburn 209). Any publisher had to go along with and further the public’s impression that they were “Shakspe’re’s” works. He would not leave behind him any “literary memorabilia such as an author would leave”. That could be counterbalanced when getting out Shakespeare’s collected plays (198-99).
An explicit attribution to him might challenge persons in London who still remembered him, and those “who had known and esteemed the actual author”. The problem “to establish Shakspere as the author without leaving oneself open to the charge of having done so” would appear insoluble. Yet the persons concerned “were equal to it” (Ogburn 209-10).

Including Shakespeare in the casts of two plays already in Jonson’s works in 1616 indicates “an intention to endow Shakspere with a shadow of a stage career (Ogburn 209). It seems more daring to have listed him “first among the principal actors in his plays, ahead of such truly prominent professionals as Burbage, Kempe, Heminge, and Augustine Phillips, quite unjustified – unless the primacy given him was based on rank of birth” (103-04), in a cast list “never found before in an English collection” (236). A monument to establish the image of Shakspere as the author “would escape the derision of Londoners by being placed in Stratford” and of the Stratfordians by not making claims due to a great poet-dramatist, but with “the possibility not entirely excluded”. The monument in the Trinity Church, installed before 1623, allowed each visitor to find insignificant confirmation (211-16).

An important step was taken by the London bookseller and printer William Jaggard. Oxford’s daughter Susan de Vere had married Sir Philip Herbert, later earl of Montgomery. In 1619, Jaggard acted to become the printer of Shake-speare’s works by dedicating a book to the noble couple (Anderson 371). Only in 1621, extraordinary political conjunctures made his appeal seem attractive as perhaps the last chance to print her father’s works (375). However, Anderson suggests: “The unveiling of the author’s identity would have to wait for less politically tumultuous times”. Jonson, now The King’s Men’s playwright, also a friend to the Herbepts and Oxford’s son Henry de Vere, “was hired to edit and oversee the Folio” (376). It was dedicated to Oxford’s son-in-law Philip Herbert and his brother William, earl of Pembroke.

In Jaggard’s edition, which became the First Folio, John Heminge and Henry Condell, fellow actors of Shakspere, have signed the dedication and the introduction and thence been generally supposed to have initiated the work, collected the plays, and warrant the authenticity of them. Oxfordians question this, and rule them out as editors or authors of the epistles, whose language and style have a “professional quality” and “numerous stylistic parallels with Jonson’s attributed works” (Price 170-71). A claim that the author drafted his manuscripts with “that easiness, that we have
scarce received from him a blot in his papers” is a prank by Jonson, who far later has admitted and explained this (197-98).

Ogburn acidly remarks: “The Stratfordians have their own version of the great Folio edition’s genesis.” Shakespeare had sold all his plays to “his” company and washed his hands of them. “(In the remarkable world the Stratfordians inhabit an author may have no curiosity about his published works.)” (218-19.) In fact “nobody knows how all thirty-six play texts got to the printers. Heminges and Condell [...] might have provided some”. But “the King’s Men could not possibly have provided all [...] because they did not own all of them. No records survive to show how the Folio publishers obtained those plays [...] already owned by printers and publishers outside the Folio syndicate. It would have been the publishing syndicate, not the actors, who negotiated for permission to print previously registered or published material” (Price 172-173).

Price asserts that this posthumous attribution is the first evidence identifying Shakspere as a dramatist, and “for no other writer of Shakespeare’s time period are we asked to trust such ambiguous and belated information” as the only evidence of authorship (194). Its value is “further undermined by factual inconsistencies, exaggerated claims, and outright misinformation”. One such piece of misinformation is that Shakspere was prevented by fate and death from publishing his plays, another the obviously false claim that the edition is based on original manuscripts. The epistles are largely “advertising copy and exaggeration” and seem “deliberately misleading” (Price 171-74).

Price further discusses the long eulogizing poem by Jonson, which also contains “mixed messages, conflicting information, and disparaging remarks” making it “inconsistent and unreliable” and allowing more than one interpretation (184, 191). His poems in general are ambiguous for uncomplimentary and satiric purposes but straightforward saluting friends, fellows and benefactors, and he exercises restraint out of respect for those of social rank. In the Folio, there would have been no need for ambiguity if Shakspere was the author and the tributes entirely complimentary and sincere. Yet Jonson alternates between both conventions. As Price sums up: “The nominal nature of Heminges and Condell’s involvement, Jonson’s pervasive ambiguities, his earlier parodies of Shakspere, and the extra-ordinary absence of
explicit references to the dramatist in Jonson’s earlier work” are irregularities which provide strong evidence of an unreliable and incomplete attribution (193).

One part of Jonson’s eulogy is both much misunderstood and very revealing:

I should commit thee surely with thy peers,
And tell, how far thou didst our Lily out-shine,
Or sporting Kid, or Marlowe’s mighty line.
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 Æschilus,
Euripides, and Sophocles to us.

Since ”though” also means ”even if”, and the verb, as scholars have pointed out since 1879, is in the subjunctive, “syntax would have called for ‘shall not seek for names’”, expressing mere futurity, if Jonson had meant that Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek (Ogburn 232). Before this crafty ambiguity comes a clear hint: Jonson should “commit” him with Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe, whose careers were over when Shakspere “was supposedly first establishing himself in literary London” (Price 190).

“Jonson was a methodical writer, and surely, he knew what he was doing” (240). He apparently wanted to plant double messages for those who could interpret them.

Jonson’s own biography is real and substantial, with one gap: no Shakespeare. While he was alive, Jonson never mentioned him by name. He deliberately bequeathed to posterity two Shakespeares, two distinct and inherently incompatible personas, one whom he respected, and another whom he made fun of, conflating the two into one and blurring the outlines (Price 196-97). “He knew better than to comment explicitly in print on the professionally performed plays of an aristocrat. When he took aim at the opportunistic and bombastic play-scavenger who associated himself with Shakespeare’s works, he took care to encrypt his satire” (211).

What Jonson was part of was “not a conspiratorial government cover-up, but a misinformation campaign” (Price 211). Products of their time, such writers were schooled in the art of ambiguity. [...] Their discretion suggests that they held “Shakespeare” at a respectful distance [...] No conspiracy was required to persuade Jonson and his tribe to push the myth of Shakspere as natural wit and presumed author. [...] Misleading poetry is not perjury. Jonson would hardly have flinched at writing ambiguous verse or letters, something he did just about every working day. [...] Jonson was conditioned to write between the lines on sensitive subjects, in this case confusion between the pen name of a man of rank and the name of a braggart shareholder and broker. (226.)
Thus the works should be published as Shakspere’s, with double messages. “Thanks to the man chosen as editor (it appears) to convey this impression – Ben Jonson – it would be more conclusively implied that they were not his” (Ogburn 199).

Jonson’s achievement, enforced by the delicacy of the task, also reflects his own dilemma. “That the hard-laboring Jonson, loading his plays with solid chunks of learning, was jealous of the iridescent genius of Shakespeare, whom learning served as Ariel did Prospero, and resented the success of Shakespeare’s plays, which his own could never equal, is easy to believe” (Ogburn 221). He confirmed Shakspere’s already mythic position for the time being, but with clues to an alternative, which the following war times with the destruction of archives would make too hard to discover.

Sometime between 1630 and 1637, in his commonplace book under the title *De Shakespeare nostrati* (printed in *Timber, Or Discoveries*, 1641, 35-36), Jonson returned to the author, whoever he was, his writing, and his character (Price 197-98):

> And to justify mine own candor (for I loved the man, and do honour his memory (on this side Idolatry) as much as any.) He was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature [...]  
> His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too. [...]  
> But he redeemed his vices, with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised, than to be pardoned.

Stratfordians take his silence as proof. “I find it difficult to read these recollections and imagine how anyone could believe that Jonson was a double-dealer and somehow put up to writing this, his tribute intended to further a conspiracy to delude the world into thinking that Shakespeare had written the plays” (Shapiro 273). However, Jonson could have said more, as secrecy eventually became less important. His motives and actions remain dubious; Jonson’s praise was a classical quote, as Price relates (206).

> He had his talents under his own control - but the degree of their application he left to another’s. [...]  
> But he made up for his faults by his virtues, and provided more to praise than to forgive. (Seneca, *Declamations*, 429, 431, 433.)

Jonson seems to have let his erudition speak, rather than his sincerity.

Some early Shakespeare plays are written in cooperation, without full agreement among scholars on the process. The same applies to a few of his last plays, known only after Oxford’s death and Shakspere’s return to Stratford. Among these plays some are regarded as inferior, either immature due to an earlier origin, made in cooperation, or unfinished and completed by others. To Oxfordians, any known
or suggested co-authorship after 1604, like for the following four ones, would necessitate a posthumous scenario.

For these, as for almost all plays, Anderson indicates situations in Oxford’s life which may have offered igniting sparks for the conception, often involving a drawn-out history. “Expelled from court and low on money”, as Oxford was in 1582, “he first sought to fix the financial blame on someone else, his trusted secretary”, John Lyly (181, 185). He would be the model to the faithful steward Flavius in Timon of Athens. In this play, “Shake-speare’s self-portrait as a downwardly mobile aristocrat” and “staged and known to London audiences by 1600” according to Anderson, “Timon is the very mirror of Castiglionian nobility” (323). Efforts around 1579 to reunite Oxford with his wife and daughter may have been an incitement to Pericles (Ogburn 595), staged about 1608. Henry VIII, a part of Oxford’s project of Histories meant to please Henry’s daughter Elizabeth, maybe with a theme too delicate to be released during her reign, was staged in 1613 (211). Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, and George Wilkins, respectively, were the alleged collaborators.

The most extreme example of postponement is The Two Noble Kinsmen. During the Queen’s visit to Oxford University in August 1566, a play entitled Palamon and Arcite was performed. Plot summaries are extant, but only a few excerpts of dialogue. “The surviving excerpts strongly resemble de Vere’s early poetry. Shake-speare’s The Two Noble Kinsmen also tells the same story with the same characters.” Its prologue “suggests it was the author’s first dramatic work (‘new plays and maidenheads are near akin’) [Prologue, 1], which it almost certainly would have been had it originated in de Vere’s pen in 1566” (Anderson 32-34). Oxford was born in 1550.

When the play was performed about 1613-14 and printed in 1634, an added subplot and most of the scenes were written by Fletcher (Anderson 440-41). The title page shows both names, but Shakespeare’s last. “By that time, Fletcher’s name was every bit as good”, E. M. Waith assures us (Shakespeare 1989, 5), and states the distribution of participation he has found likely, based on distinctive characteristics of style and of dramatic treatment (21), about which scholars mainly are agreed, while reconstruction of how cooperation was in act realized invites pure guesswork.

Shapiro rejects collaboration as imagined by the Oxfordians. “It’s impossible
to picture any of their aristocrats or courtiers working as more or less equals with a string of lowly playwrights” (294). Regarding the posthumous finishing of plays he claims that editors “have recently shown that some of these late plays could not have been started by one writer and later finished by another”. His example is a discord in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Act 2, between scene 1, by Shakespeare, and scene 2, by Fletcher, who “independently writing the scene that immediately follows, clearly had only a rough idea of what Shakespeare was busy writing in his assigned section” (294). He thus implies a parallel work process. “Such discrepancies [...] render highly improbable the argument that Fletcher is completing an old unfinished playscript that fell into his hands” (295). To Niederkorn, however, it seems “only too likely that Shakespeare was not present, because if he were, as ‘the more experienced partner’ he would have corrected Fletcher’s mistakes”. What Shapiro cites and honours as recent news is just an Arden edition of 1997, where a short note refers to more detailed ones in Waith’s Oxford edition quoted above (1st ed. 1989, 108-09).

Thus Shapiro’s conviction again was too easily won and refuted. He brings up evidence quite as circumstantial as that of his opponents – but also strong arguments which deserve closer examination, and his view is not narrow but part of a comprehensive total one. In 1596-99, the actor James Burbage purchased a building in the Blackfriars and turned it into an intimate playhouse. Resistance from local authorities made him give up and move to the Globe in Southwark. Only from about 1608 “Shakespeare” and his fellow King’s Men could secure the necessary permission and form a syndicate, playing at Blackfriars from October until Easter on a regular basis, with Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Fletcher, and Francis Beaumont writing for them (Shapiro 280-83).

Shakespeare’s plays had been written to be convertible to all venues, for outdoor amphitheatres to be restaged at royal palaces, at aristocratic houses and in touring productions. Blackfriars could not accommodate fight scenes. Afternoon performances were illuminated by candlelight. As the candles needed to be trimmed, intermissions, which were not made at the Globe(!), became necessary, and made creative use of, e.g. by the 16 year’s gap in the middle of *The Winter’s Tale*. For entertainment during these intervals, and in the acts, trumpets and drums were replaced by far more subtle “solemn music”. Dancing also began to figure in all later plays, and the court-centred art form of the masque appeared with surprising
regularity (Shapiro 284-85). The move to Blackfriars coincided with and maybe accelerated Shakespeare’s turn to a distinctive late style, “often too difficult, too knotty, and for some too self-indulgent” (286).

Nobody was writing in this often impenetrable style during the Elizabethan years; during the Jacobean period, many would […] It was a period style as much as a personal one. No playwright who had died in 1604 could have anticipated or responded to these unfolding opportunities and events as Shakespeare did. (288.)

This issue makes Shapiro’s argument complete but may not be the final conclusion.

Wondering “about the nature of each collaborative effort”, Shapiro wants “to come to terms with how profoundly it alters one’s sense of how Shakespeare wrote, especially toward the end of his career when he co-authored half of his last ten plays” (289-91). But “because we know almost nothing about his personal experiences, those moments in his work which build upon what he may have felt remain invisible to us, and were probably only slightly more visible to those who knew him well” (305).

Thus, pondering over these important questions, he does not even hypothetically consider the alternative of Oxford, of whom so very much more now is known. His attitude could make also his strongest arguments less seriously considered than they deserve. They will also be refuted. Oxfordians can rightly answer that Oxford was used to writing also for indoors venues, his seclusion during his last years gave him time to rework earlier plays in this more unconventional language, either they were co-worked or not, and he had co-worked on a large scale earlier in his life.

To find out whether and how the style of an old, utterly self-indulgent man like Oxford could also become a period style requires knowledge of literary ways of communication in his time. This is only one of the many tasks which call for scholars cooperating and judging differing arguments without prejudice and party boundaries. The conviction of those involved in the controversy show streaks of faith, which make them less susceptible to new facts and tending to mutual scorn, and even Shapiro, conciliatory in his words and with a wide view, has remained unyielding to even the heaviest Oxfordian arguments. The annihilation of an identity, even on the highest and most exposed level, has appeared improbable to many – by ordinary standards. But in the extraordinary Elizabethan political and literary world it was not. The party that presents coherency and new evidence, circumstantial or not, will recruit more scholars and achieve more. A new identity and a redated canon may be in sight.
Works Cited


