

The Reader's Companion to  
**S** The Death of  
SHAKESPEARE

by Jon Benson

**W**illiam Shakespeare is believed by many to have written the greatest plays the world has ever seen. There is no record of his education, if he had any. His parents, wife, and children may have been illiterate. He left no books. No one reported in any diary or letter that they had met him or talked to him, or even talked *about* him.

He left six signatures, all different. Three were on his last will and testament, which makes no mention of any plays, poems, or books; two were on deeds to real property; the last was on an affidavit he gave in a court case.

The records show a businessman who acquired considerable property during his lifetime, hoarded grain during a famine, and engaged in a number of lawsuits, one over as little as five pounds. He was connected with the theater, but there is nothing that *independently* proves he was the author of the plays attributed to him. Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, Orson Welles, Sir Lawrence Olivier, Sir Derek Jacobi, Walt Whitman, and many others, including a number of United States Supreme Court justices, have all concluded that William Shakespeare did not write the plays. But if he didn't, who did? And if someone else was the greatest author who ever lived, why was Shakespeare given the credit? *The Death of Shakespeare* explains how this happened, and why the Bard of Avon paid with his life for his part in, to use the words of Henry James, "the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world."



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ISBN-13: 978-0-9970899-0-5

Library of Congress Control Number: NRC110174




Published by Nedward, LLC, Annapolis, Maryland

Typeset in Garamond 11



Cover Design by Gerard A. Valerio, with Sherri Ferritto

Maps drawn and hand-lettered by Joan B. Machinchick

The  at the end of each chapter is the crown in the Earl of Oxford's signature.

The story of how The Earl of Oxford wrote the poetry and plays attributed to William Shakespeare

Begins in *The Death of Shakespeare – Part One*

*The Death of Shakespeare Part One* and *Part Two* and *The Reader's Companion* are also available as E-Books. Both print and E-Book versions can be purchased at amazon.com. For more information, visit [www.doshakespeare.com](http://www.doshakespeare.com).

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## Introduction

There has been a persistent belief that Shakespeare was not the author of the plays and poetry attributed to him. Doubters have included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Sir Derek Jacobi, Mark Rylance (actor and Founding Artistic Director of the Globe), Orson Welles, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun, Otto von Bismarck, Charles De Gaulle, Benjamin Disraeli, John Galsworthy, James Joyce, Sir John Gielgud, U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, and hundreds of others. Go to [www.DoubtAboutWill.org](http://www.DoubtAboutWill.org). For a longer list, visit <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/famous-shakespeare-authorship-skeptics/> to see a longer list.

Who, then, wrote the plays? Consensus is building around Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. *The Death of Shakespeare* imagines how Oxford wrote the plays and poetry attributed to William Shakespeare. Unlike the outpourings of new biographies about Shakespeare, much of *The Death of Shakespeare* is based on fact. Since it is not customary to add footnotes or endnotes to works of fiction, *The Death of Shakespeare* explains what is supported in the historical record and what is not.

The author could say, as Moses Hadas wrote in the Preface to his *Ancilla to Classical Reading*: “I have not written [this] merely to salvage what had to be left in the inkwell and what could be swept up from unemptied filing drawers. Long preoccupation with a subject begets curiosity about matters essentially peripheral or even irrelevant to its main issues, and I have thought that others ... might enjoy such partial satisfaction of similar curiosity as I am able to offer.”

The initial plan was to imagine how Oxford wrote all of the plays attributed to William Shakespeare and do it in one volume, but this proved impossible. Oxford wrote at least 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a great deal of other verse. He married twice, fathered six children, and had a tempestuous relationship with his contemporaries, including the queen. And then there is his relationship with William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon...

Why is knowing who the author is important? “If we don’t know who the author ... is, then interpretation becomes in effect moot.” *Early Shakespeare 1588-1594 – Shakespeare and his Collaborators*, Cambridge University Press, 2021. Indeed.

Yuri Tynianov called his historical novels “experiments in scholarly fantasy.” In a draft introduction to his novel *Young Pushkin*, he wrote: “What I want to do in this book is to get as near as possible to artistic truth about the past, which is always the goal of the historical novelist.” (Quoted in a review by Sophie Pinkham in the March 10, 2022 issue of *The New York Review*.)

The goal of *The Death of Shakespeare* is the same. With so few hard facts known about William Shakespeare, and how he came to write the greatest literature produced by any writer at any time, filling in the gaps as an ‘experiment in scholarly fantasy’ may lead to ‘the artistic truth’ about what happened as Elizabeth I’s reign came to an end.

For example, did Oxford participate in the Gad’s Hill robbery? A letter was found in Burghley’s papers written by two servants who complained that Oxford’s men assaulted them on Gad’s Hill. This incident became the central event in the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* which was written too early for Shakespeare to have penned it. Did Oxford? The scenes in *Famous Victories* are followed in *Henry IV, Part One* and *Two* and in *Henry V* (the *Henriad*). Was the author borrowing from someone else or was he following an earlier juvenile effort? Oldcastle was a character in *Famous Victories* and was going to continue his role in the *Henriad* but his name was changed to Falstaff. Oldcastle was a Lollard martyr and ancestor of Baron Cobham. The name change was made when Cobham became Lord Chamberlain. Did he object to Oldcastle being made a laughingstock? How far is Gad’s Hill from Cobham Hall. A mile? Think Cobham heard about the Gad’s Hill Robbery? Is that why Oxford put Oldcastle in *Famous Victories*? Cobham was Lord Chamberlain for less than a year (August 1596 until his death on March 6, 1597) but *Henry IV* was being prepared for the stage during his tenure. Cobham couldn’t do anything about *Famous Victories* when it was written – Cobham was only a *baron*; Oxford was an *earl* – but as Lord Chamberlain, Cobham may have finally had the power to make Oxford change the character’s name from Oldcastle to Falstaff. After all, Gad’s Hill is only a little more than a mile from Cobham Hall. Surely, Cobham heard about the incident.

Many people have concluded William did not write the plays traditional scholarship attributes to him. That is the easy part. The more difficult question is how he became known as the author. He must have worked with the true author. The movie *Anonymous* relegates Shakespeare to being little more than FedEx, a messenger from Oxford to the theater impresarios who put on his plays. But it must have been more complicated than that. Life, as we all know, is always more complicated than we thought.

*The Death of Shakespeare* takes the plays and events in Oxford’s life and comes up with a narrative that imagines how, why, and when he wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare.

## The Order of the Plays

The order in which the plays were written has never been settled. It is a minor industry in Shakespearean studies. *The First Folio* of 1623 contained 36 plays. Two more have been added since then. Of the 36 plays in *The First Folio*, 18 of them had been printed before. Nothing in *The First Folio* or other sources indicate the order in which the plays were written. The best source for questions about when a play was written and/or performed is found in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays: A Critical Review of the Evidence*, edited by Kevin Gilvary. Parapress, 2010, Turnbridge Wells, Kent TN2 55D.

The following is the order in which the plays and poetry appear in *The Death of Shakespeare*:

### In Part One:

<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	Chapter 9
<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	Chapter 17
<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	Chapter 23
<i>Pericles</i>	Chapter 34
<i>King John</i>	Chapter 39
<i>Henry VI – Part 2</i>	Chapter 46
<i>Henry VI – Part 3</i>	Chapter 64
<i>Love's Labour's Won</i>	Chapter 68
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	Chapter 69
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	Chapter 77
<i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i>	Chapter 87
<i>Richard III</i>	Chapter 91
<i>A Double Maske (Love's Labour's Lost)</i>	Chapter 92

### In Part Two:

<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>	Chapter 100
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Chapter 102
<i>As You Like It</i>	Chapter 111
<i>The Jew of Venice (The Merchant of Venice)</i>	Chapter 115
<i>Timon of Athens</i>	Chapter 100
<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	Chapter 123
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>	Chapter 123
<i>Richard II</i>	Chapter 128
<i>Prince Hal &amp; The Boar's Head (Henry IV – 1)</i>	Chapter 130
<i>Prince Hal &amp; The Boar's Head (Henry IV – 2)</i>	Chapter 132
<i>Falstaff in Love (The Merry Wives of Windsor)</i>	Chapter 133
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	Chapter 138
<i>Henry V</i>	Chapter 140
<i>Cymbeline</i>	Chapter 145
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	Chapter 151

<i>The Phoenix and Turtle</i>	Chapter 170
<i>Coriolanus</i>	Chapter 171
<i>As You Will (Twelfth Night)</i>	Chapter 178
<i>Antony &amp; Cleopatra</i>	Chapter 188
<i>Iago (Othello)</i>	Chapter 193
<i>Hamlet</i>	Chapter 197
<i>The Tempest</i>	Chapter 200
<i>Macbeth</i>	Chapter 203
<i>Lear</i>	Chapter 207

Plays not mentioned: *Henry VI – Part 1*; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; *Henry VIII*; *Edward III*. As to the latter play, see Sams, p. 101.

See footnote 42 below, page 37, and Chapter 16, page 94.

### Front Matter

The cover is a portrait of the Earl of Oxford, circa 1575. The quotations are from *Troilus and Cressida*, Sonnet 76, and a poem by John Marston that speaks for itself (try to think of an Elizabethan poet other than Edward de Vere whose name begins and ends with the same letter).

The first stanza and the last couplet of the poem *To The Gentle Reader* are a parody of the loopy poem Ben Jonson wrote that is printed opposite the engraving of Shakespeare in *The First Folio*:

*This Figure, that thou here seest put,  
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;  
Wherein the Graver had a strife  
With Nature, to out-doo the life:  
O, could he but have drawne his wit  
As well in brasse as he hath hit  
His face; the print would then surpasse  
All, that was ever writ in brasse,  
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke  
Not on his Picture, but his Book. – B.J.*

The second stanza is based on a second poem Ben Jonson added to *The First Folio* entitled *To the memory of my beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and what he hath left us*, which reads, in part:

*I will not lodge thee by  
Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lye  
A little further, to make thee a roome:  
Thou art a Monument, without a tomb.*

It may come as no surprise that Ben stole these lines (and more) from a poem entitled *On Mr. Wm. Shakespeare, he died in April 1616* by William Basse:

*Renowned Spenser, lie a thought more nigh  
To learned Chaucer, and rare Beaumont lie  
A little nearer Spenser to make room  
For Shakespeare in your threefold, fourfold tomb.  
To lodge all four in one bed make a shift  
Until Doomsday, for hardly will a fifth  
Betwixt this day and that by fate be slain  
For whom your curtains may be drawn again.  
If your precedency in death doth bar  
A fourth place in your sacred sepulcher,  
Under this carved marble of thine own  
Sleep rare tragedian Shakespeare, sleep alone,  
Thy unmolested peace, unshared cave,  
Possess as lord not tenant of thy grave,  
That unto us and others it may be  
Honor hereafter to be laid by thee.*

Both poets were suggesting that Spenser, Chaucer, and Beaumont in Westminster Abbey be shifted to make room for Shakespeare.

The third stanza and couplet are based on the comment in the Preface to *The Arte of English Poesy* (1589):

*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. There are sprung up a crew of Courtly makers, Noblemen and Gentlemen of Her Majesty's servants, who have written excellently 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.”*

The following is a comparison of the front matter to *The Death of Shakespeare* and the front matter to *The First Folio*:

<i>To The Gentle Reader</i>	<i>To The Gentle Reader</i>
<i>This Booke, that thou here seest put,</i>	<i>This Figure, that thou here seest put,</i>
<i>It was for gentle Oxford cut;</i>	<i>It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;</i>
<i>Wherein the Author had a <u>strife</u></i>	<i>Wherein the Graver had a <u>strife</u></i>
<i>With History to show Lord Oxford's Life.</i>	<i>With Nature, to out-doo the life:</i>
<i>O, if only those who knew his <u>wit</u></i>	<i>O, could he but have drawne his <u>wit</u></i>
<i>Had said the plays by him were writ,</i>	<i>As well in brasse as he hath <u>hit</u></i>
<i>There'd be no need to here <u>reclaim</u></i>	<i>His face; the print would then surpasse</i>
<i>The name purloined by Shakespeare's fam.</i>	<i>All, that was ever writ in brasse,</i>
<i>Grave Spenser need not shift more <u>nigh</u></i>	<i>I will not lodge thee by</i>
<i>Great Chaucer, nor Beaumont nearer</i>	<i>Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lye</i>
<i>Spenser lye;</i>	<i>A little further, to make thee a roome:</i>
<i>Let them sleep, Westminster lords.</i>	
<i>The world now knows the plays are</i>	
<i>Oxford's.</i>	
<i>Their every word sings he wrote the plays,</i>	<i>Thou art a Monument, without a tomb.</i>
<i>And in his Monument Shakespeare slays.</i>	
<i>Elizabeth knew of noble <u>lords</u></i>	
<i>Who wrote well but suppressed their words,</i>	
<i>Or had them published in another's name,</i>	
<i>Thereby losing deserved fame.</i>	
<i>Therefore, Gentle Reader, looke</i>	<i>But, since he cannot, Reader, looke</i>
<i>Not <u>on</u> his name but on his booke. – J.B</i>	<i>Not on his Picture, but his Booke. – B.J.</i>

Ward quotes the poem written by Henry Lok, a long-time servant of Oxford's (printed by Richard Field in 1597), which concludes, after the usual fulsome praise: *Whereof your own experience much might say, / Would you vouchsafe your knowledge to bewray.* P. 298. Why Oxford would not 'bewray' his knowledge is not explained in the poem.


Ben Jonson's poem has been parodied before. There is a drawing in a copy of the 1644 Third Folio in the Colgate University Library that believe may be a portrait of Anne Hathaway. If accurate, Anne looks like she was someone to be reckoned with. The quality of the verse gives meaning to John Clarke's dismal view of teaching students how to write poetry: "[T]he best you can make of it is a Diversion, a Degree above Fiddling. . . . The Scribbling of paulty, wretched Verse is no Way for them to improve their Parts in." Quoted by Schoenbaum in a footnote at p. 70.



The verse reads:

*This figure, that thou there seest put  
It was for Shakespear's Consort cut  
Wherein the Graver had a strife  
With Nature to outdo the Life  
O had he Her Complexion shewn  
As plain as He's the outline Drawn  
The plate, believe me, would surpass  
All that was ever made in brass.<sup>1</sup>*

Since the assumption of *The Death of Shakespeare* is that Oxford wrote the plays but his work appeared under Shakespeare's name, the author of *The Death of Shakespeare* must also 'feign' his name lest his reputation in academia be 'slain.'

The  is the crown in Oxford's signature.

### The Maps

The maps of England and London were drawn for *The Death of Shakespeare* by Joan B. Machinchick of Annapolis, Maryland.

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<sup>1</sup> Schoenbaum, pp. 92-93. The drawing is dated 1708. If accurate, Anne looks like she was someone to be reckoned with. The quality of the verse gives meaning to John Clarke's dismal view of teaching students how to write poetry: "[T]he best you can make of it is a Diversion, a Degree above Fiddling. ... The Scribbling of paulty, wretched Verse is no Way for them to improve their Parts in." Quoted by Schoenbaum in a footnote at p. 70.

## Prologue

### April 23, 1616 - The Death of Shakespeare

There is little evidence about the life of the man we know as William Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> His most prominent biographer, William Schoenbaum, once remarked that everything that is known about Shakespeare could be written on a post card with room left for the address.<sup>3</sup> His birth date is assumed from the record of his baptism -

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<sup>2</sup> As was common in Elizabethan times, Shakespeare's name was spelled different ways. The six signatures that have come down to us are all different. See Hamilton, pp 70-72 for the three pages of his will and p. 39 for a table showing all six signatures. The six signatures are:

*William Shacksper* (Belot-Mountjoy deposition);  
*William Shakspear* (conveyance for a gatehouse in London);  
*Wm. Shakspea* (on a mortgage to the gatehouse);  
*William Shackspere* (page one of his will);  
*Willm. Shaksper* (page two of his will); and  
*William Shakespeare* (page three of his will).

Thus, the sly allusion in the movie, *Shakespeare In Love*, when Shakespeare sits down to write and the camera, coming over his shoulder, shows him practicing his signature. It appears that the six signatures the actor writes are all different, each a reproduction of the six signatures that have been found; three on the will, two on a deed, and the sixth on a deposition taken in a case in London in 1612.

Notice that none of the six signatures has an 'e' between the 'k' and the consonant that follows it, which indicates that William's last name was pronounced "*Shack-spear*" in his day and not "*Shake-spear*" as we pronounce it today. (Although William's brother, Gilbert, signed as witness to a lease in 1610 as 'Gilbert Shakspear' in very fine handwriting. Gilbert was two years younger than William. He earned his living as a haberdasher – seller of buttons, ribbons, threads, etc. – in London, before returning to Stratford and dying in 1612.) In *The Death of Shakespeare*, William is referred to as "William Shackspear" and not "William Shakespeare." Justice John Paul Stevens referred in his article, "The Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 140, no. 4, April 1992, after examining the six signatures, that Shakespeare's "name was Shaksper rather than Shakespeare." Spelling William's name 'Shackspear' instead of 'Shaksper' makes it clear that Shakespeare's name was spoken with a short 'a', and is the name adopted in *The Death of Shakespeare* for the character who acts as the mask for the Earl of Oxford. References to William Shakespeare in *The Reader's Companion* are to the historical man and not the fictional character in *The Death of Shakespeare*. The first publication to spell the name "Shakespeare" was the 1593 *Venus & Adonis* poem. In Chapter 88, Richard Field will suggest that Shackspear have his name spelled "Shakespeare" on the poem. Shackspear agrees, and decides he will henceforth pronounce his name "Shakes-pare." However, many publications examining the life of William of Stratford-upon-Avon spelled his name "Shaksper," or a close variant. For example, Cowden Clark's *Life of Shaksper* and Edward Dowden's *Shaksper: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*.

<sup>3</sup> "We are told that that all the facts [about Shakespeare's life] can be written on a postcard – with plenty of room for an address." Schoenbaum, Samuel, *The Life: A Survey.* In *William Shakespeare: His Worth His Work, His Influence*. Ed. John F. Andrews. 3 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985. Vol. 2, pp 281- 90. Schoenbaum, of course, went on to disagree with his own statement. A well-organized treatment of the facts known about Shakespeare up to 1594 is found in Sams, Eric, *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564-1594*, Yale Univ. Press 1994, particularly p. 197-226 - *The Documents 1500-1594*. But few scholars, including Schoenbaum, distinguish facts about the *life* of the man from Stratford (his wife, marriage, children, birthplace, involvement in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, etc.) and facts that identify Shakespeare as the