

Looking Not on His Picture, but His Books: Two New Histories of Folger's Quest for First Folios Shed Unintended Light on the Authorship Question

A Review Essay by Michael Dudley

The Millionaire and the Bard: Henry Folger's Obsessive Hunt for Shakespeare's First Folio by Andrea E. Mays. Simon & Schuster, New York, New York (2015). 350 pages. Hardcover, \$27.00.

Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger by Stephen H. Grant. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (2014). 244 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.



literary-minded gentleman who sits close to the levers of power, and with talents recognized by only a few insiders, embarks on a hidden career to develop his country's nascent culture, inspired by that of an older European civilization. Living a double life over several decades and working in secret—his identity concealed by a front man—he lavishes his substantial fortune on theatrical works to the point of exceeding his income and going repeatedly into debt, leaving contemporary observers to wonder in print about his real identity.

For readers at all acquainted with the Oxfordian theory of Shakespearean authorship, this description will immediately recall the life of Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford, whom many believe to have been known as Shakespeare during his lifetime as an open secret among the nobility and in literary circles—a “noted weed” (Sonnet 76)—but has yet to receive mainstream recognition in the 21st Century.

It is, ironically, also a highly apt description of the life of Henry Folger, president (and later chairman of the board) of the Standard Oil Company of New York, who, for the better part of half a century kept his dealings with an elite number of high-end book dealers and auction houses secret in order to secure a vast horde of Shakespeareana, in particular virtually every copy of the First Folio that came to market. In meticulously planning and cataloguing his purchases and eventually establishing his eponymous library, Folger invested his nation—and the world—with a superlative cultural heritage, albeit one deliberately and methodically drained from

England.

Although far from intentional on the part of their respective authors, this parallel with de Vere does emerge easily from an Oxfordian reading of two recently-released books, *The Millionaire and the Bard* by Andrea Mays and Stephen Grant's *Collecting Shakespeare*. Henry and Emily Folgers' shared obsession with collecting First Folios and other Shakespeareana is a fascinating story, and in the hands of two very different authors—both from disciplines other than English literature—illuminates not only the origins and formation of one of America's most important libraries, but, more interestingly, the current state of the Shakespeare Authorship Question.

While concerning the same topic and released within a year of each other, the books do nonetheless differ significantly: Mays' *Millionaire and the Bard* is an entertaining (if lightly-sourced) work of popular nonfiction that focuses exclusively on a narrative the Folgers' pursuit of First Folios, one suited to her background as an economist. Former career diplomat Grant adopts a more sober and thematic approach for his *Collecting Shakespeare*, devoting chapters to each of the Folgers, Henry's oil career, their collecting methods and strategies (in particular their use of antiquarian book dealer Henry Sotheran as their primary front man), as well as their longstanding rivalry with railroad magnate and Shakespeare enthusiast Henry Huntington, leaving only one chapter to focus on the First Folio itself. While in many ways more informative than Mays' book, Grant's *Collecting Shakespeare* nevertheless lacks *Millionaire's* enjoyable and occasionally sequential and exciting Folio-by-Folio narrative.

A highlight of both books is the story of the evolution of the Folger Shakespeare Library, from the Folgers' realization of both the extent of their hoard and their own mortality, through to the selection of Paul Philippe Cret as architect of the Art Deco neoclassical building, to the meticulous care with which the Folgers planned and finished the Tudoresque interior. Grant's discussion of the library—a third of his book—is by far the more substantial of the two.

It is these authors' respective treatments of Shakespeare biography and the Authorship Question, however, which make for particularly fruitful comparisons. As ostensible outsiders both to the Shakespeare establishment, Mays and Grant tackle these subjects quite differently, but each, in their own ways, provocatively.

Mays makes a number of unfortunate observations that belie her claim to have been "obsessed" with Shakespeare all her life, including that "everyone knows William Shakespeare" (xv) when even orthodox writers admit to his inescapable elusiveness¹, and that Shakespeare did not "believe that his writings would last" (xv)—this in spite of directly quoting Sonnet 81 on the book's penultimate page, and its prediction that "eyes not yet created" would still be reading him. Her traditionally speculative biography consists of the usual combination of hoary chestnuts ("we know more about him than any of his contemporaries, save playwright Ben Jonson" [27]) and eyebrow-raising overstatements: Shakespeare "enjoyed the patronage of earls and monarchs" (27, emphasis added) and that *Green's Groatsworth of Wit* was the "first mention of Shakespeare's name in print," when its status as a mere allusion is

in doubt (8).

Amidst these inflations and conflation Mays nevertheless includes several amusing—albeit surely unwitting—observations that would be quite at home in any post-Stratfordian book: that Shakespeare’s burial register noted him as *gent* rather than playwright, and “[i]n no way did the people of England respond to his death with a gesture that suggested they believed a great man had died” (4). Conceding that all records of his early life have vanished she wonders, “how exactly an outsider without proper university credentials or an established literary reputation was able to penetrate the tight-knit circle of wits poets and actors who orbited the London theaters”? She can only conclude that it “remains unknown” (7). The absence of references to manuscripts in Shakespeare’s will and his failure to retain his originals is “hard to fathom” (25) and, despite Elizabethan Britons being “efficient record keepers,” “not a single letter [of Shakespeare’s] has been unearthed” (27). Later, she mutters in frustration that, if only Heminges and Condell had included a biography in the First Folio, it would have “answered many of the questions that have gnawed at generations of Shakespeare scholars” (63). Reading passages such as these, one can’t help but recall Kevin Costner’s Jim Garrison in the Oliver Stone film *JFK* going over the witness interview transcripts in the Warren Report and saying out loud, “ask the question. Ask the question!”²

Such questions are, however, far from her mind. So far in fact that (in what is surely one of the strawest of straw men arguments ever) she makes the jaw-dropping accusation that skeptics claim Shakespeare’s manuscripts “never existed in the first place” (26) – an absurd mischaracterization. She writes that, while Henry Folger was pleased to obtain Edward de Vere’s Geneva Bible, he believed the Oxfordian theory “ridiculous,” but offers no documentation to support the claim (222). Such Stratfordian “debunking” could be dismissed as typical if it weren’t in her case so positively inexcusable: her classified bibliography includes not just James Shapiro’s *Contested Will* but *Shakespeare by Another Name* by Mark Anderson and Charles Beauclerk’s *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom* – none of which she has appeared to have so much as cracked open.

Grant too refers to Shapiro’s *Contested Will* but only in passing, similarly giving no indication of having read it. Unlike Mays, he eschews outright any kind of biographical treatment of Shakespeare, or indeed his own thoughts on the author; his focus is so exclusively on the Folgers as collectors, one could imagine him applying his energies equally well to the story of a pair of philatelists. Inasmuch as Shakespeare himself may be all but absent, Grant does take the liberty of addressing the SAQ openly, treating the question of authorship as both a dedicated focus of the Folgers’ collecting and as a legitimate, intentional category in their Library, along with source books, allusions, prompt books, manuscripts, music literature and period instruments. This would seem to undermine Mays’ assertion that Folger rejected Oxford out of hand; in fact, Grant reveals Folger to have been a long-standing member of the Bacon Society of America, and having deliberately collected Baconiana with—for a while at least—an open mind as to his authorship of Shakespeare (78).

In spite of the riches afforded by two books on the same topic, there are

some notable absences in each. Easily the most obvious missed connection on the part of Mays and Grant is that they both go into considerable detail about the notorious 1911 anti-monopoly case against John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil under the Sherman Antitrust Act, in which Henry would play a significant part and from which he would ultimately profit handsomely. Yet neither author recognizes that the enterprise in which Folger was engaged in the rare book market was also the creation of a monopoly of sorts in First Folios and other Shakespeareana. Grant acknowledges the frustrations expressed by contemporary Shakespeare scholars whom, towards the end of Folger's collecting career, came to realize the extent of what he held and how inaccessible it was.

However, because Mays rejects the mystery over authorship and Grant appears not to have given it a great deal of thought, it doesn't occur to either author what a loss this situation represented: for all the good work that the Folger Shakespeare Library has accomplished since it opened in 1932, it does beg the question of what potential discoveries into the authorship of the plays and poems might actually have been delayed for decades or prevented outright while the Folgers' treasures sat locked away in various warehouses, their contents unknown even to their owners. We need only recall the groundbreaking analysis of Edward de Vere's Bible at the Folger Library by the general editor of this journal, Dr. Roger Stritmatter, to appreciate what other discoveries might have been gained over this time period.

The other great absence in both books—as is so often the case with orthodox treatments of Shakespeare—is a true sense of the *object* of the Folgers' obsession: Shakespeare himself as an artist, an individual. Mays struggles to sustain a biographical narrative with frequently risible results, in the process posing hapless observations about the paucity of the available evidence, which had she had followed through upon, might have led her to contrary conclusions about the identity of the actual author. Grant for his part doesn't even bother trying.

Yet, as this essay's opening paragraph indicates, there are some pretty compelling parallels to be mined between the careers of both Shakespeare and Henry Folger, ones which may be more than just ironic. They suggest perhaps that Folger, having read deeply of Shakespeare over his entire lifetime, sensed – as did J. Thomas Looney—the author's true character, spirit and intent and, in a kind of Freudian psychological transference, adopted a number of Shakespeare's attributes: apparent eccentricity, a man apart, an enthusiast for music and the culture of another country, and—while not at all improvident with money matters—holding money itself in low regard and only as a means to other ends. At the very least even orthodox scholars would admit that both men may be described as elusive.

Such transference is not merely fanciful musings on the part of the present writer, but a recognized tenet of literary theory. John Rodden, in his book *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation* describes both the *radiating reputation* of an author, in which an author's perceived “energy is ‘transferred’ and... absorbed” by the reader³ and *transference heroics*, in which readers identify with writers they admire and adopt them as models for their own development⁴. Both processes could well occurred in the mind of Henry Folger, so profoundly did he admire Shakespeare,

making him the focus of his entire non-working life.

The closest Mays gets to drawing connections between the two men is the rather pedestrian observation that both William Shakespeare and Henry Folger were successful businessmen who made lots of money but who didn't live to see the full fruits of their work, in the printing of the First Folio and the opening of the Folger Shakespeare Library. An author aware of—or at least open to—Oxford as Shakespeare would have had much more substantial ideas with which to work.

Certainly the Oxfordian reader will be frustrated with the face-value acceptance both authors give to the First Folio itself, Mays in particular. Her history of the First Folio is as fanciful as her Shakespeare biography: Her third chapter confidently describes John Heminges' and Henry Condell's decision-making processes as they secure the rights to the quartos and manuscripts and make arrangements with Jaggard's print shop and the authors of the Folio's preliminaries, only to concede at its close that no records concerning the production of the First Folio have ever been found. She calls Heminges' and Condell's production of the First Folio among "the most puzzling literary mysteries of all time," (56) but the possibility that they had nothing whatever do with it is apparently unknown to her. Grant's only concern is the Folio's physicality as a collectible. Neither admit to any skepticism over its origin, publishing history or contents.

In terms of the broader debate over authorship, *The Millionaire and the Bard* and *Collecting Shakespeare* reveal two important things. First, that the extent of anti-Stratfordian literature and the reach of its arguments are now so significant that they cannot easily be ignored, and certainly not by Shakespeare outsiders. Second, that in so dealing with the SAQ, conventional scholars are really left with only two choices: to attempt to debunk it with inevitably fallacious arguments (Mays), or to respectfully acknowledge its existence but to avoid the subject of biography altogether, such that Shakespeare himself no longer appears to matter as an individual (Grant). This latter approach was also adopted by the editors of the 2014 book *Shakespeare and the Digital World* in which "Shakespeare" was for all intents and purposes treated as an object and an industry, but not an actual author⁵.

Perhaps the most significant lesson authorships skeptics may draw from the story of Henry Folger is that, as a case study, it serves to demolish any attempt to ridicule the Oxfordian case as a "conspiracy theory", one about which "too many people" would have needed to have known. We must understand that Henry and Emily Folger and a close circle of confederates were able to operate an enterprise on a *global scale* in secret and at the same time kept his name out of the newspapers *for the better part of four decades* – and all this in an age of mass media, with British newspapers responding with outrage to the loss of their printed heritage at auctions to a faceless American millionaire. If, with the right mix of power and influence this could be accomplished in a democracy during the 20th Century, how much more likely is it that a similarly secretive and powerful man in an authoritarian 16th Century could have disguised his actions to contemporary observers—and thus to history?

These conclusions must all, of course, obtain from an Oxfordian reading; they do not originate from authorial intentions, which, constrained as they are by

Stratfordian thinking, are incapable of any similar kind of theorizing. *The Millionaire and the Bard* and *Collecting Shakespeare* once again demonstrate the profound and ultimately tragic limitations that the Stratford model imposes on even the best-intentioned writers – curtailing analysis, aborting connections, misdirecting investigation, and impoverishing their work of potentially valuable insight.

While Grant has produced an at times fascinating if bloodless institutional history, and Mays an engaging quest story, neither can be said to have successfully joined Henry Folger in a genuine pursuit of Shakespeare.

Works Cited

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