

## "My Library Was Dukedom Large Enough": Academic Libraries Mediating the Shakespeare Authorship Debate

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### **Abstract**

The "Shakespeare Authorship Question"—regarding the identity of the poet-playwright—has been debated for over 150 years. Now, with the growing list of signatories to the "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt," the creation of a Master's Degree program in Authorship Studies at Brunel University in London, the opening of the Shakespeare Authorship Research Studies Center at the Library of Concordia University in Portland, and the release of two competing high-profile books both entitled *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, academic libraries are being presented with a unique and timely opportunity to participate in and encourage this debate, which has long been considered a taboo subject in the academy.

### **Keywords**

Shakespeare, William; academic freedom; intellectual freedom; collection development; information literacy; bias in collection development

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Among the 256,000 books and 60,000 manuscripts held in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. is a heavily-annotated Geneva Bible once owned by Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. According to doctoral research conducted by Roger Stritmatter (now a professor at Coppin State University in Maryland), the underlined passages and marginal annotations correspond significantly to language and allusions in the works of William Shakespeare, some long-recognized in the literature but 81 of which were revealed for the first time by the researcher (Stritmatter 2001). For many skeptics of the tradition of the "Divine William," de Vere's Bible is taken as something of a "smoking gun," compelling evidence which confirms the nearly 100-year-old claim that de Vere was, in fact, the nobleman behind the famous name "Shake-Speare." While the Folger Shakespeare Library is apparently not prepared to go that far, it does appear to have been anticipating something like this discovery, for it includes the following statement on its website:

The Folger has been a major location for research into the authorship question, and welcomes scholars looking for new evidence that sheds light on the plays' origins. How this particular man—or anyone, for that matter—could have produced such an astounding body of work is one of the great mysteries. If the current consensus on the authorship of the plays and poems is ever overturned, it will be because new and extraordinary evidence is discovered. The Folger Shakespeare Library is the most likely place for such an unlikely discovery ("Shakespeare FAQs").

The "Shakespeare Authorship Question" (as it is known) has been debated for over 150 years and has engaged the interest and commentary of such notables as Sigmund Freud, Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman ("Past Doubters"). It is a singular phenomenon that one of the most studied literary figures of all time should remain unknown to us—and essentially unknowable—yet almost all expressions of Shakespeare studies represent some attempt to locate the author of the works, be it in the historical person, in relation to contemporaries, or his place in history. According to OCLC, there are more than 2,125 books currently available relating to the authorship of the plays and poems of Shakespeare, some of which speculate on collaboration but many more that argue against the "Man from Stratford," or propose another candidate entirely, such as de Vere, Francis Bacon or Christopher Marlowe, among others.

Now, with the growing list of high-profile academics, scholars and Shakespearean actors (including the great Derek Jacobi) signing on to the "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt" about the identity of the poet-playwright ("Declaration"), the significant books challenging the traditional attribution that have been published since 2000 (e.g., Anderson, Chiljan, Price), the creation of a Master's Degree program in Authorship Studies at Brunel University in London<sup>1</sup>, and the 2011 release of the film *Anonymous* (which depicted Edward de Vere as Shakespeare), the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has finally offered its own response on the issue, having been content until now to ignore it entirely.

*Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (Edmondson and Wells 2013) defends the traditional "Stratfordian" view on Shakespeare's biography—that the great poet-playwright was the self-made businessman from Stratford-upon-Avon. The Shakespeare Authorship Coalition, meanwhile, swiftly countered with their skeptical, "Anti-Stratfordian" response, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?: Exposing an Industry in Denial* (Shahan and Waugh 2013) arguing that there is actually no such evidence the "Stratford Man" was an author and that most English Departments are adhering to a hoary and untenable tradition.

These twin publications and the current swell of interest in the Shakespeare Authorship Question presents academic libraries with a unique and timely opportunity within their respective campus communities to participate in and encourage an historical, cultural and literary debate of the first order. What follows establishes the necessary contexts

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk/pdf/macourse.pdf>

for such an engagement and concludes with a summary of benefits and suggested implications for academic libraries.

Space limitations prevent reiterating the case against the traditional biography of William Shakespeare (see "Declaration"; Chiljan 2011; Price 2000). Suffice it to say that, despite the weight of scholarly authority and tradition, there is almost no documentary evidence that connects the plays and poems of Shakespeare to the Stratford businessman with the similar name. Yes, centuries of dedicated research have uncovered some 70 documents relating to the life of William Shakspere<sup>2</sup> of Stratford, but none of them relate to anything remotely literary, instead depicting the absolutely conventional affairs one would expect of a provincial businessman. As Diana Price observes:

If the Shakespeare plays had been published anonymously, *nothing* in William Shakspere's documented biographical trails would remotely suggest that he wrote them. Shakspere of Stratford is not, in fact, a viable authorship candidate, and if he were discovered today as a new contender, his candidacy would not be taken seriously (p. 294, emphasis in the original).

All things being equal, this highly problematic biographical narrative should have been dispassionately discarded decades ago and the correct author identified<sup>3</sup> and accepted. However, because Shakespeare is the nearest thing in our culture to a secular religion, it is almost impossible to have a reasonable debate about the evidence concerning the Great Author's life. It doesn't help that debate is so often reduced to the thought-stopping tautology "Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare?" when the more accurate question is "Yes, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, but who was Shakespeare?"

The standard "biographies" in our libraries may demonstrate a deep appreciation for his writings but are otherwise astonishingly reliant on the imaginations of their authors to create a "life" of the poet-playwright. Their authors having so few records outside of business transactions and lawsuits to go on, these books are replete with variations of "must have," "we can assume that" and "it seems possible that." Historian William Rubinstein, remarking on this tendency, observed that

all orthodox biographies take liberties with, or actually invent facts about the supposed playwright, such as no historian would allow for a moment in an academically credible biography of an important man or woman of the past (p. 53).

Despite this, most English professors see no authorship problem and therefore reject it as the purview of cranks, or of "snobs" unwilling to concede a commoner could have been the Author. Any and all mention of the problem is not just frowned upon but generally treated with abject hostility and contempt such that few aspiring English literature scholars who hope to receive tenure will broach it for fear of ridicule. The

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<sup>2</sup> The difference in spelling is deliberate, and helps to distinguish the Stratford businessman from the playwright.

<sup>3</sup> The current leading contender is Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. See Anderson 2006; Destro 2013.

standard rhetoric used against Anti-Stratfordians generally includes psychoanalyzing and impugning the motives of doubters, and engaging in *ad hominem* attacks, rather than addressing the substance of their arguments. For example, Stratfordian and University of Warwick professor Jonathan Bate compares doubt about the Author to Holocaust denial—a common “slippery slope fallacy” tactic used in this debate—as well as insisting that it's "dependent on a conspiracy theory" and so may be dismissed (Stephenson 2002). At the same time, Bate readily admits elsewhere that

[i]n the period when Shakespeare was writing his plays, the Queen and her ministers had come to rely more and more on coercion, threat and surveillance in order to maintain authority...Shakespeare lived in a world of government spies, Catholic conspiracies, supposed Catholic conspiracies that were really secret service frame-ups, and public executions of traitors...The world of oaths and factions, plot and counterplot, murder and seizure of the throne, vengeance and blood in Shakespeare's tragedies and histories should be understood in this historical context (Bate 2007, p. 42-43).

Clearly Bate and his Stratfordian peers have no problem accepting a host of irreconcilable propositions. They recognize a culture of conspiracy surrounded the Elizabethan throne but ridicule conspiracies; extol an author whose work represents the pinnacle of erudition and culture, but see nothing in his work a grammar school education couldn't provide, and was in any case only done for the money; and praise the *Sonnets* as the most powerful, profound and fascinating poems in English but refuse to seek biographical details in them because they were only a "literary exercise" on the part of their author (see Ogburn, pp. 68.90). As Stritmatter notes in his dissertation, the contortions necessary on the part of orthodox scholars to defend the standard biography result in a "sometimes fabulously constricted and deformed knowledge of [their] own subject" (p. 7-8).

Yet, for all this, it is Anti-Stratfordians who are accused of "ignorance; poor sense of logic; refusal, willful or otherwise, to accept evidence; folly; the desire for publicity; and even...certifiable madness" ("Authorship Debate"), and it is this popular conception that has for so long dominated the public discourse and perceptions about this issue. Stanley Wells of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has also remarked that "the time for tolerance is over. There is no room for reasonable doubt" (Waugh 2013)—the sentiment of which has been transferred to the title and purpose of his aforementioned new book, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*.

It is difficult to think of another current scholarly pursuit in the humanities in which debate is being conducted in such a manner: in which the partisans on both sides are so completely at odds that they are essentially speaking different languages while charging the other of misreading history and being willfully blind to the facts.

I believe therefore that an “intervention” is necessary: Shakespeare Studies needs to be relieved of the tensions that lie beneath the surface of the field and the associated rhetorical excesses to which it is subject. To do so, the present proscription against the issue of Authorship in the academy must end; it needs to be brought into the open and

discussed within the context of curricula in a number of disciplines. This is not likely to happen in most English or theatre departments, which are for the most part far too invested in the conventional mythology.

I would suggest instead that the only entity on most universities naturally equipped for this task is the academic library, which is ideally situated to create a neutral space for interested students and faculty members to engage with issues of a controversial nature, including this one. After all, librarians are professionally bound by our codes of ethics to

guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable ("Statement on Intellectual Freedom").

These professional ethics are underscored by an unwavering and broad commitment to intellectual and academic freedom, free inquiry and the provision of information sources representing as diverse a range of views as possible. It is these principles which give the academic library a distinct advantage over Wikipedia, which has a far more limited code of ethics emphasizing neutrality and stressing the need to give correspondingly less space to minority views ("Wikipedia: Ethics"). Such a stance is far from being the same as a commitment to academic freedom, the expression of diverse viewpoints and support for free inquiry. When it comes to this issue in particular, Wikipedia editors have maintained a draconian regime over the "William Shakespeare" page, such that dissenting views on the Authorship Question are swiftly deleted (Anderson 2011; "William Shakespeare").

The categorical exclusion of any area of inquiry is anathema to librarians—at least for those areas not otherwise compromised by unethical methods or racist assumptions. Through such activities as Canada's Freedom to Read Week and Banned Books Week in the United States, we publicly resist all calls to suppress intellectual expression. Tell us that the Shakespeare Authorship Question is like a belief in UFOs or JFK assassination conspiracy theories, and we'll hand you a slip of paper with the call numbers TL 789 and E 842.9, respectively, so you can go read about these topics and make that determination for yourself.

As such, I believe we should not only welcome this debate and contribute to it through collection development, research tools and programming but also consider how its resolution may affect our holdings and processes. After all, an officially-sanctioned recognition that the name "William Shake-Speare" was not that of the Stratford businessman but was, in fact, a pseudonym disguising another author—likely a nobleman—will mean that tens of thousands of books concerning the world's most famous writer in the English language will have been rendered immediately obsolete. Such an event would have significant implications for collection development, cataloguing and reference services.

One university library that has openly embraced the Shakespeare Authorship Question is the George R. White Library & Learning Center at Concordia University in Portland Oregon, which houses the Shakespeare Authorship Research Studies Center. First opened in 2008 following a \$300,000 endowment, the Center provides space and information resources for faculty, students and visiting scholars as well as hosting an annual conference ("Welcome"). That Authorship research and education has been institutionalized this way in a university library demonstrates the tremendous potential for the academic library to bridge this significant scholarly divide.

Between the open-mindedness of the Folger Shakespeare Library and the advocacy of Concordia University Library lies a large and fruitful middle ground. For starters, we need to ensure that the tremendous output in this field is sufficiently represented in our collections. While a thorough comparative collection analysis is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out that, for example, 37 Canadian university libraries hold Peter Ackroyd's conventional 2006 biography *Shakespeare: The Biography* while only 14 purchased Mark Anderson's Oxfordian *Shakespeare by Another Name* (2005); 31 purchased James Shapiro's skeptic-debunking *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare* (2010), but not a single library in Canada—let alone an academic one—owns Katherine Chiljan's *Shakespeare Suppressed: The Uncensored Truth About Shakespeare and His Works* (2011).

Another way is through our research tools. At the University of Winnipeg, our Shakespeare Studies Research Guide<sup>4</sup> is both interdisciplinary and author-neutral: in addition to giving its "Authorship Studies" tab equal weight to those for Literary, Performance, Film and Cultural Studies, links to Library of Congress Authorities in the catalogue are indicated through truncated headings (e.g., "Dramatic productions") rather than including "Shakespeare, William 1564-1616" in each. While avoiding redundancy and visual clutter, this also has the effect of leaving open the question of authorship. Developing such research guides can allow librarians to inform researchers as to the availability and legitimacy of Authorship resources, and within the context of information literacy sessions provide the opportunity for classroom discussion. It may also stimulate engagement with interested faculty.

However, librarians seeking to undertake these measures should be prepared to find that some of this engagement may not be enthusiastic. In fact, there may be resistance or outright hostility from more conservative faculty members who may be opposed to the use of English department library budgets, for example, to purchase such materials. It might be necessary to find alternative ways to fund the balancing of the collection with Anti-Stratfordian texts, perhaps through the use of Trust funds, or by building bridges to other interested disciplines such as history or cultural studies.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of engaging in this issue are many. This subject has engendered an enduring and high level of fascination which is certain to arouse the interest of our campus communities, as it represents a novel approach to

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<sup>4</sup> [libguides.uwinnipeg.ca/ShakespeareStudies](http://libguides.uwinnipeg.ca/ShakespeareStudies)

locating Shakespeare and provides professional and amateur scholars alike with new perspective. The historical, multicultural and, most importantly, interdisciplinary interest in Shakespeare—be it through a conventional or skeptical approach to the author—implies that an open-minded approach to the question of authorship would appeal to the widest audience.

This engagement can take a variety of forms depending on a given library's diverse strengths and audiences. There are a number of creative ways a university library could use the Shakespeare Authorship Question to further its own mission, chief among which would be to develop the capacity for critical engagement with scholarship and sources. Collections can be used to highlight important context-setting, such as literary and performance history of the canon, as well as illustrating the contemporary and historic uses of anonymity and pseudonymity in literature. For the purposes of information literacy, instructional librarians could also use the topic to introduce primary and secondary source research, digital humanities, the use of special archival collections and repositories and—significantly—the role of critical thinking in assessing the quality and veracity of information sources.

Finally, for librarians, the controversy over the identity of Shakespeare should give us pause to consider our own biases and the risk of self-censorship when it comes to acquisition processes and decisions (which can become largely invisible through reliance on—or outright outsourcing to—large corporate vendors) and how these can, as a result, privilege or suppress certain discourses (Moody 2005).

Given the nascent recognition of the Authorship Question at Brunel and Concordia Universities and the Folger Shakespeare Library, I believe it is incumbent upon us as information professionals committed to academic freedom to counter the current institutionalized prejudice against this field of study and to work with interested faculty, students and community stakeholders in promoting it as an issue worthy of scholarly attention. I can attest from personal experience that most students find this area of inquiry fascinating, as it lends a whole new dimension of interest to the reading, analysis and performance of Shakespeare.

Through thoughtful engagement with our campus communities—and enough time—perhaps our libraries can be "dukedom[s] large enough" to help open expansive new vistas of research possibilities in the humanities that are otherwise currently constrained by an increasingly ossified and controversial mythology.

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