

Arguments about Shakespeare's Identity

Anti-Stratford

1) Name on Shaksper's (i.e., man from Stratford) birth certificate is spelled "Shaksper", The family name has various spellings: "Shaxpere", "Shakspeyr", "Shagspere", or even "Shaxbere" — none with the middle "e"; therefore pronounced differently (short "a"). Name on the quartos is "Shake-speare" or "Shakespeare"; hyphenated form suggests a pseudonym.

2) The idea Shaksper wrote plays first arose in 1623 (editors of First Folio hinted at it but did not say so directly) seven years after Shaksper died. Besides similarity in name, the only evidence that connects Shaksper with plays is title page of the quartos.

3) Shaksper's parents and daughters were probably illiterate.

4) There is no evidence that Shaksper could do more than write his name.

Pro-Stratford

1) These are normal Elizabethan spelling variants. Proves nothing.

2) So what if the plays did not have his name on them? Plays belonged to the company, not to the writer. Shakespeare was a real person who wrote under his own name.

3) So? To even mention it shows that the anti-Stratfordians are snobs.

4) That evidence is lost.

Pro-Oxford

1) De Vere's crest as Viscount Bulbeck shows a lion shaking a spear.

2) In 1578, Gabriel Harvey, in an address to de Vere, said: "thy countenance shakes spears." De Vere used pseudonym to avoid persecution for satirizing members of the court.

3) All De Vere's relatives were literate.

4) De Vere was a writer of poetry and plays, but published nothing in his own name after 1586

5) There is no evidence that Shaksper went to school.

6) Plays exhibit depth and range of learning in such specialized and courtly disciplines as classical philosophy, literature, music, law, military strategy, art history, ancient and foreign languages, ancient history, natural history, foreign lands, falconry, government, politics, rhetoric, and medicine, i.e., knowledge only a university-educated person of high birth could obtain.

7) Plays demonstrate awareness of inner workings of courtly intrigue and politics that Shaksper could not possibly have had.

8) Shaksper exhibited no commercial interest in printing the plays.

5) He could have attended grammar school (the evidence that he did is lost).

6) Shaksper could have seen plays in Stratford with such information (although there is no evidence he did). The allusions to various pursuits and careers are not as arcane as they appear—merely smattering of lore any artist could have picked up to give the illusion of knowledge. No big deal.

7) See no. 6 above.

8) It is impossible to infer anything about anyone's character on the basis of a

when he received a grant from Elizabeth I. *Venus and Adonis* (1593) was the first work to appear with the name "William Shakespeare" on it.

5) De Vere received his Bachelor's degree from Cambridge and his Master's in Law from Oxford.

6) De Vere was a university-educated person of high birth. Events and allusions in plays can be related to events in de Vere's life. De Vere knew Latin, French, and Italian, and traveled to the Italian cities described in the plays.

7) De Vere lived at court and knew Elizabeth I personally.

8) De Vere received a yearly stipend (£1000) from court and did not

Although pirated editions were published in his lifetime, he took no legal action against them. In contrast, in less important matters he prosecuted; concerned about protecting his property.

few legal documents and business records. His name in lawsuits indicates the Elizabethan age was like ours in being litigious.

need income from the plays. He was a patron of writers and actors himself.

9) There is no evidence that Shaksper owned any books or manuscripts. Last will does not mention any books or manuscripts.

9) Elizabethan age was not like ours in that they did not keep records the way we do. His MSS and personal papers could have been burned in the Globe fire of 1613 (although there is no evidence they were). He could have given books by oral bequest (although there is no evidence he did).

9) De Vere had an extensive library including Plutarch's *Lives*, Chaucer, and Geneva Bible. All are primary sources for the plays.

10) No one mentions having known or met Shaksper in London. Seems strange if he was already known as a great playwright in his own time.

10) A great writer does not need to "have lords and ladies in coaches driving up to his door" (Schoenbaum)

10) We have solid evidence from his contemporaries that de Vere spent much of his life in London.

11) There is no apparent reason for Shaksper to retire to Stratford in 1612 or 1613, presumably at the peak of his career.

11) Proves nothing.

11) Shaksper was paid to leave London by William Cecil (Lord Burghley) as part of a scheme to keep de Vere's authorship a secret.

12) Shaksper's death entry in the parish registry lists him as "Gent." No

12) "Gent." meant more than being a playwright, which was a lowly status.

12) We have reliable evidence that de Vere was very much involved in the

mention of him as either a dramatist or an actor.

There is no reliable evidence that Shaksper had anything to do with the theatre.

theatre as playwright, actor, and patron of acting companies.

13) First monument on Shaksper's grave showed him holding sack of grain, not a pen.

13) Being a playwright was a lowly status.

13) De Vere was praised during his lifetime as a great writer.

14) No elegies or homages from contemporary writers when Shaksper died in 1616. His death passed unnoticed among the literati of London.

14) Dedicatory poem by Ben Johnson in First Folio (1623) mentions him. In 1598, Francis Meres lists both Shakespeare's plays (as comedies and tragedies) and de Vere's plays (as comedies only). Indicates Shakespeare and de Vere were different people.

14) Cecil kept de Vere's identity as the writer of Shakespeare's plays a secret. Johnson's "mention" is ambiguous. Meres refers to de Vere's plays as those he wrote under the name of de Vere and Shakespeare's plays as those de Vere wrote under pseudonym.

15) No one living in Stratford at the time thought enough of Shaksper to remember an anecdote or save a letter he had written.

15) Why should they?

15) We have many of de Vere's letters and much testimony about him from his contemporaries.

16) *Shake-speare's Sonnets* were published in 1609 with a dedication by the printer indicating that the author was dead. Shaksper died in 1616.

16) The printer made a mistake. Besides, 12 of Shakespeare's plays first appeared after 1604, including *The Tempest* in which reference is made to a shipwreck off the coast of Virginia in 1610.

16) De Vere died in 1604, which accounts for the printer's dedication. The chronology of the plays, based on Shaksper's life, needs to be revised. The reference in *The Tempest* is not to that shipwreck.

17) No portraits of Shakespeare exist.

17) We have William Shakespeare's portrait.

17) Portrait of Shakespeare shows de Vere, wearing his own signet ring (initials of Earl of Oxford).

18) Some prominent anti-Stratfordians: John Galsworthy, Charles de Gaulle, Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, W. H. Furness, John Bright, John Buchan, Peter Sammartino, W. Barton Leach, J. Enoch Powell, Benjamin Disraeli, Otto von Bismarck, Lord Palmerston, Walt Whitman, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry James. As of 1942, there were over 4500 anti-Stratfordian articles and books published.

18) Anti-Stratfordians are a small group of disgruntled kooks. Schoenbaum calls their writing "lunatic rubbish."

18) Thomas Looney's book (1920), which first advanced the case for de Vere, has not been refuted. Since then, many books and articles have been published showing the connections between the plays and de Vere's life. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th ed.) refers to "a sizeable body of 'Oxfordians'" (pp. 727–728).

– compiled by Don Ostrowski