

Shakespeare Authorship Question A contemporary Approach to Anti-Stratfordian Argument

Md. Bagbul Islam
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya,
Haripal, Hooghly, India

Abstract

Shakespeare's works though four hundred years old, have never lost their flavour of timeless cultural elegance. His preternatural influence pervaded all the boundaries of time and space. Yet it looks astounding that many parts of his life are shrouded in mystery of which we have very little documentary evidence. Shakespeare's authorship was first doubted in the middle of nineteenth century. There is some disparity between Shakespeare's genius and his humble origin and obscure life. Shakespeare authorship question has spawned a vast body of literature till now proposing as many as 80 authors to be real Shakespeare. This book chapter discusses at length various drawbacks in Shakespeare's

biographies and proposes an alternate mode of approach by which a near-true narrative of his-life history is attainable.

Key words: Anti-Stratfordians Argument, Shakespeare's Authorship Question, Shakespeare's Biography, Shakespeare's Lives.

John Shakespeare, the father of William Shakespeare was a businessman of Stratford. He was a 'whittawer' and a 'glover' or glove-maker by profession. In his later life, he served as an alderman, a bailiff and lastly as the mayor of Stratford. He married Mary Arden, with whom he had eight children. Notable fact is both John Shakespeare and Mary Arden signed their names with a mark. Except that mark, no other evidences of their writing are to be found.¹ One of William Shakspeare's daughters, Judith, signed a legal document using a mark. His another daughter Susanna's signature was "drawn" in a practised hand instead of written. As for the older daughter, Susanna, Joseph Quincy Adams, a former director of the Folger Library, reproduced her [Sussana's] wobbly signature in his Life of William Shakespeare, but it does not encourage confidence that she was literate."² Sussana was married to Dr. John Hall after whose death a surgeon visited her at Stratford with the purpose of seeing her husband's manuscripts (surprisingly not of her father). It seems odd when she could not recognise her own husband's handwriting. On the basis of these facts Anti-Stratfordians often argue that Shakespeare was born and brought up in an illiterate family. Shakespeare's birthplace

Stratford was a market town with about one thousand and five hundred people. Stratford was a centre for meat industry where the main occupation was slaughtering, marketing, and distribution of sheep. It is likely that such an industrial urban neighbourhood was a cultural hinterland which cannot culturally nourish a genius like that of Shakespeare. As a result, the Anti-Stratfordians tend to portray Shakespeare as illiterate and unlettered.³

Shakespeare's works are laced with topics like court politics, international relations, foreign culture, deep knowledge of urbane aristocracy- their delicate manners, pastime, dealings with others, communication system, hunting, falconry etc.⁴ Anti-Stratfordians believe that Shakespeare's humble background possibly could not have offered such encyclopaedic treasure of knowledge. The author's astounding vocabulary is calculated to be around thirty thousands. Shakespeare's vocabulary is often stated to be the richest ever employed by any single man. It has been "*calculated to comprise 21000 words (rough calculation, found in Mrs. Clarke's concordance....without counting inflected forms as distinct words*" or, according to others 24000 or at least 15000.⁵

Shakespeare's profound knowledge could not be fathomed only by counting the number of words employed by him, but by the fact that he wrote upon such an array of subjects that he needed such a vast treasury of words. He had shown splendid adeptness with jargons and technical

terms belonging to different atmospheres. Such lexical exchequer demands equal level of studying, learning and life-long pursuit. It arrests our attention to his education which also lacks documentary evidence. It is true that King's New School in Stratford was established in 1553⁶ and it was within a kilometer of John Shakespeare's home. This free school in line of the other schools of that time would have taught a curricula of Latin grammar, the classics, and rhetoric at no cost.⁶ Documentary evidence suggests that the headmaster, Thomas Jenkins and other instructors of this school were Oxford graduates.⁷ No student-register with Shakespeare's name was to be found; No teacher or student of that school ever claimed that they were his teacher or class mate. An orthodox biographer of Shakespeare Joseph Quincy Adams thinks that Shakespeare served some time as an instructor [no documentary evidence] in a school. "*If we are forced to think of him as early snatched from school, working all day in a butcher's shop, growing up in a home devoid of books and of a literary atmosphere, and finally driven from his native town through a wild escapade with village lads, we find it hard to understand how he suddenly blossomed out as one of England's greatest men of letters with every mark of literary culture.*"⁸ This lacunae in documentation has strengthened the Anti-Stratfordian view that Shakespeare was illiterate or at best semiliterate.⁹

Perhaps the disparity among the six specimens of Shakespeare's extant signatures provide the strongest

evidence for Anti-Stratfordians. We have six signatures of William Shakespeare at our disposal in legal documents to validate the documents as legal. Their sources are: i) 1612 Mountjoy suit deposition of 1612 in which the signature is as Willm Shackper; ii) Blackfriars Gatehouse deed of 1612 which is only signed as Shakspear; iii) Blackfriars mortgage of 1612 which is signed as Wm Shakspea; iv) Page 1 of 1615 will which is signed as William Shackspere; v) the second page of the same will is signed as Wllm. Shakspere; and vi) the third page of the will has the signature – (by me William) Shakspear. Two facts are evident from the above signatures. Firstly, the spelling of all six signatures differs from each other. Secondly, all his signatures are appended to some legal documents. No other documents or manuscripts contain his signature. There is not any letter or manuscript written by him. Besides, none of the signatures conform with today's spelling of William Shakespeare. These six authenticated and uncontested signatures are explained as an "*illiterate scrawl*"¹⁰ written in an embarrassed unsure hand. A test was conducted upon Shakespeare's signatures by Joseph M. English, Jr., a professional documents expert with a forensic laboratory. He deduced that the signatures were characteristics of an illiterate man. This quality of different signature may also indicate that he was not the same person who wrote 36 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems. He was rather a different person than the actual author and the name "William Shakespeare" was a pseudonym for that actual author.¹¹

Study suggests that Shakespeare's surname was hyphenated as "Shake-speare" or "Shak-spear" on the title pages of 15 of the 32 individual quarto (or Q) editions of Shakespeare's plays and in two of the five editions of poetry published before the First Folio.

There is not a single trace in documentation which would identify beyond doubt the dramatist born in Stratford upon Avon as the true creator of his works.¹² The evidences we have alternatively indicate an industrious businessman whose only connection with the theatres of London was through lending, shareholding, dealing in theatrical props and items, and occasionally taking parts in acting. Anti-Stratfordians have argued that the then Elizabethan and Jacobean people associated with the stage knew that the name Shakespeare was a nom de guerre for the real creator or creators of those works. Alternative authorship theorists argue that the contemporary Elizabethan and Jacobean world knew that the name Shakespeare was a kind of façade, a disguise to hide the identity of the real playwright. They identify Shakespeare with lowly characters in several contemporary works of other writers.¹³ Most popular comparison is the literary thief Poet-Ape in Ben Jonson's poem On Poet-Ape. The playwright Shakespeare is praised excessively in the first folio edited by Heminges and Condell. Anti-Stratfordians claim the praise was for the original writer of those plays, and Shakespeare was only a pen-name.¹⁴ Circumstances surrounding Shakespeare's death also sound

quite 'un-Shakespearish.' The language of his will is unpoetic and unremarkable without any mention of any of his works or his unpublished 18 dramas. It is quite surprising that after his death on 23rd April 1616 there was no public mourning, eulogies, commemorating poems or elegies etc.

There are many biographies of Shakespeare like *A Life of William Shakespeare* by Sir Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare* by J. Q. Adams. Their inadequacy is deepened by the fact that they are merely continuous narrative describing some facts about the literary maestro based on their general knowledge and interpretations of social history of Elizabethan period. These books do not bother to analyse in detail the documents on which these biographies are established. Sir Edmund¹⁵ directed our focus towards four types of sources in getting a clear picture of Shakespeare's life. First is Records; second is any contemporary literary allusions which can be found in the writings of others; third is conspicuous traditions that could have come into practice after his death and are connected with his lifetime; and fourth is rational illation from his own writings that could shed some light upon the blank pages of his lifetime. The fourth option might look like some fond imaginings. But "*Records, in the widest sense, do not exhaust the material available for the study of Shakespeare's personal life.*"¹⁵

We do not have an exact day of his birth. There is a record of Shakespeare's christening on 26 April 1564. His marriage license was issued in 1582 and six months after that

documentary evidence suggests that his daughter Susanna was christened. That he was a father of twins Hamnet and Judith is evident from a document of February 1585. We have Robert Greene's incessant slandering of him in *Groats-worth of Wit* (1592). Greene tried to malign Shakespeare by painting him as *'in his owne conceit the on Shake-scene in a countrey.'*¹⁶ This attack by Greene proved that Shakespeare was becoming a name worth criticising. He must have become a reputed actor and playwright in the Elizabethan theatrical world by then. But researchers get flabbergasted as to the deficiency of how he achieved this great success in London. What was he doing before rising as a luminary in the theatre world? Robert Greene tried to fill this missing link by christening those years i.e., the years between the christening of the twins and his prominence in London as the *'lost years'*. There is no record to suggest where he lived and for how many years, in which roles he acted in the theatre, who was/were his friends, was he really a beneficiary of royal patronage as we infer from the dedicatory page of his sonnets, what was his political leanings, sexual preferences, religious beliefs, considering all these unanswered questions we can assume that his life still remains enveloped in a cloud of mystery. We know for certain some matters like *"he was born at Stratford upon Avon, - married and had children there, - went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays, - returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried,"*¹⁷ But our knowledge seem ludicrously

inadequate compared to our vast ignorance.

It is a popular belief that Shakespeare in his boyhood attended the Free Grammar School. Nicholas Rowe in his *'Life'* argued that John Shakespeare was a dealer in wool, and he taught Shakespeare about his own trade. But Rowe did not discard the idea that Shakespeare was indeed a pupil of a free school although for a very brief period. There is no records of Shakespeare's attendance in Stratford Grammar School. Now, to explain the arrival of the master-playwright we have to take refuge in John Aubrey. In his *'Brief Lives'* he wrote that *"he understood Latine pretty well: for he[Shakespeare] had been in his younger yeares a schoolmaster in the countrey."*¹⁸ There is some controversy regarding Aubrey's another claim that "His [Shakespeare's] father was a Butcher." His source was William Beeston, the son of one of Shakespeare's former colleagues in the Lord Chamberlain's Company.

Where evidences are meagre, a commendable biography demands an accomplished literary critic who would understand the culture of the time of which the author was a product. It cannot be achieved by a mere chronicler. Joseph Roach compares the life history of Shakespeare with that of studying Astro-Physics, and finally comes to the conclusion that *"the more you see, the less you know."*¹⁹ The peculiar problem of amassing threads of truths from very little and thin evidences in knowing about Shakespeare's life is not of much avail. Because what the biographers think that they know for

sure is like a dark territory likely to remain forever unknown to them and to any future biographers. Roach made the comparison aptly: *“Evoking the awesome palimpsest of the galaxies as seen from the Hubble Telescope, a single color photograph epitomizes the problem of Shakespeare biography measured against the expanding universe of his celebrity.”*¹⁹

Biography was not a practiced genre in the ancient times. In England it came into existence when John Aubrey and others began to record gossip and short lives of others in the second half of the seventeenth century. Aubrey's records were often second or third hand, but the results were fantastic. Nicholas Rowe is credited to be the first biographer of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's other biographies have followed the timeline adopted by Rowe. He gave Shakespeare's life a beginning, a middle and an ending. He showed the playwright go from country to city and back to country again – from Stratford to London and back to Stratford. Rowe, however, failed to convince us as to how the son of a butcher ended up in London out of nowhere and became the best playwright of all time. According to my estimate, it is because of this lack of materials that Samuel Johnson had dropped the idea of a biography of Shakespeare in his last masterpiece *Lives of the most eminent English Poets*. Perhaps the problem lies with the tradition of the older times when the identity of an author did not matter and most of the works were anonymous, or ascribed to a legend or

common literary figure. Michel Foucault has minutely summarised this predicament in his book *What is an Author?* He wrote that “*There was a time when the texts we today call literary (were) valorized without any question about the identity of their author; their anonymity caused no difficulties since their ancientness, whether real or imagined, was regarded as a sufficient guarantee of their status.*”²⁰ The importance of author as the creator of his work and his/her identity became so important in the sixteenth century that a new word ‘anonymous’ was coined to identify those works without an author. With that knowledge in mind Brian Cummings commented that “*Johnson’s view of Shakespeare came close to describing him as beyond historicism, relinquishing him to the realm of the ancients.*”²¹

Extensive research and searching did not produce any satisfying result. Halliwell-Phillipps examined not only direct references but also the records of Shakespeare’s relatives and other branches of the family-tree, and unearthed every small piece of paper indicating business conducted by Shakespeare’s father as a bailiff of Stratford. When an old well was found which could have contained potential evidences, this researcher had its contents checked four times. But needless to say that the search was futile. Other two researchers Charles William Wallace, from Hopkins, Missouri, and his wife thoroughly went through all the papers of that time in the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, a hub of London’s legal professionals. Finally, their search was

rewarded when they found a deposition signed by Shakespeare in the Belott-Mountjoy suit. He looked up from the document to meet his wife's eyes: "*They knew they had made the Shakespeare discovery of the century: "But we were looking for bigger."*" Andrew Hadfield has cautioned us to remember a few things when a cradle-to-grave biographer would try to remake the cultural history of Shakespeare's time. Firstly, "*collaboration was a common mode of writing in this period, and we ought to qualify our common belief that writers were solitary creatures who worked alone.*"²² Secondly, he advised them to think generally in spite of a single author. The focus point should be on cluster of biographies, group dynamics and relationship between different writers and people associated with them.

Bibliography and References

1. Dobson, M., & Wells, S. (2005). *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Education
2. Bethell, T. (1991). *The Case for Oxford: Were the Works of Shakespeare really by the Earl of Oxford*, Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/10/the-case-for-oxford/306478/?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share
3. Schoenbaum, S. (1970). *Personal Legends; Youth and Education, Shakespeare's Lives*, (pp 107-108). Clarendon Press Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

4. Price, D. (2013) *Chapter Twelve: Conspiracies and Chicanery, Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography, New Evidence of an Authorship Problem*, (pp 217-218; 59-62). Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press.
5. Jespersen, O (2006). *Shakespeare and the Language of Poetry, Growth and Structure of the English Language*, (pp. 199). India: Oxford University Press.
6. Baldwin, T. W. III. SHAKSPERE'S GRAMMAR SCHOOL TRAINING A. BACKGROUND XXII. *The King's Free Grammar School at Stratford, William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, (pp. 464, 164). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
7. Tom, B. (1991). *The Case for Oxford (and Reply)*, *Atlantic Monthly*. 268 (4): 45–61, 74–78.
8. J. Q. Adams, J. Q. *A Life of William Shakespeare* (pp. 95), Cambridge: The Riverside Press.
9. Tom, B. (1991) *The Case for Oxford (and Reply)*, *Atlantic Monthly*. 268 (4): 48
10. Nelson, A. H. (2004). *Stratford Si! Essex No!*, *Tennessee Law Review*, 72 (1): 164, 2004
11. Barrell, C. W. (1940). *Identifying Shakespeare: Science in the Shape of Infra-red Photography and the X rays Brings to Light at Last the Real Man Beneath the Surface of a Series of Paintings of the Bard*, *Scientific American*. University of Chicago Press. 162 (1): 4–8, 43–45.

12. Matus, I. L. (1994) *Shakespeare, IN FACT. (P. 26)* Continuum Publishing, Mincola, New York: Dover Publications Inc.
13. Frazer, R. (1915) *The Silent Shakespeare. Philadelphia: William J. Campbell. P. 116, 1915* Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/silentshakespear00frazrich>
14. McCrea, S. (2005). *The Case for Shakespeare: The End of the Authorship Question. (pp. 21)* Greenwood Publishing Group.
15. Greene, R. (2009). *A Groat's Worth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance, (pp. 19)* Ex-Classics Project, Retrieved from https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.exclassics.com/groat/groat.pdf&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjg79X9pvHzAhVKwjgGHebJAeoQFnoECAEQAg&usg=AOvVaw2bZuV3nY3AlqiRxc_380Et
16. Schoenbaum, S (1993). *Malone: The Supplement and Other Writings, Shakespeare's Lives (pp. 120)*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
17. Lynch. J. (n. d.). *William Shakespeare by John Aubrey* from *Brief Lives* Retrieved from <http://jacklynch.net/Texts/aubrey-shakespeare.html>
18. Roach, J., (2014). *Celebrity Culture and the Problem of Biography, Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4, 470-481*, Oxford University Press.
19. Rabinow, P. (1986). *What Is an Author? The Foucault Reader, (pp. 101-120)*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

20. *Cummings, B. (2014). Last Words: The Biographemes of Shakespeare, Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4: 482-490, Oxford University Press.*
21. *Hadfield, A. (2014). Why Does Literary Biography Matter? Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4: 371-378, Oxford University Press.*