

# William Shakespeare and Apocrypha: A Contemporary Glimpse

## Abstract

The expression 'Apocrypha' has obviously biblical links. Deriving from the Greek word ἀπόκρυφος, meaning 'hidden', it is defined as a writing or statement of suspicious authorship or genuineness; specially those books included in the translation of Septuagint (Greek version of Hebrew Bible) and Vulgate versions (The principal Latin version of Bible) of the Old Testament, which were not originally written in Hebrew and not considered genuine by the Jews, and which, at the Reformation, were expelled from the Sacred Canon by the Protestant party, as having no confident claim to inspired authorship. The authorship of Shakespeare is questioned by many of his contemporaries and present literary artists and critics. There are group of plays and poems which are considered as they were not the creation of Shakespeare but by some other person named Shakespeare. There are many authors and readers who doubt the existence of Mr. William Shakespeare. Shakespeare Apocrypha is a group of plays and poems that at various times have been attributed to William Shakespeare, but are now generally deemed to be the work of other authors. Some were attributed to Shakespeare during his life time, others long after his death.

**Keywords:** Apocrypha, Bible, Old Testament, Reformation Authorship, Contemporaries, Attribution, Fake.

## Introduction

As the abstract of the paper highlights, the meaning of Apocrypha means works that are falsely attributed to the author. There is a doubt among the critics and other reviewers that some plays and poetry of Shakespeare are not his own creation, which are famous as the works of Shakespeare in fact it does not belong to him but to some other person having the same name, William Shakespeare. Lot many studies had been done and are still in continuation that Shakespeare was no one existing. Now the question arises if there was no one like Shakespeare, what about studies been done and still going on considering him as a genius of playwrighting. Were the critics and other writers who appreciated Shakespeare all useless? This also puts question to our established "Shakespeare English literature communities" which since ages had been applauding Shakespeare for his versatile genius; it would be rightly quoted here what an eminent dramatist Ben Jonson quotes in praise of William Shakespeare "Soul of the age! Applause... Thou wert not for an age but for all time". (First Folio, 1623)

## Aim of the Study

The present paper will throw light on the conclusions gathered by such eminent men of letters who concluded that Shakespeare and his writings are but fake.

Shakespeare Apocrypha says that all the eminent writers of the past were nothing but unwise, who made such statement for a person who did not exist. There's an old joke which goes like this "Shakespeare's plays were not in fact written by Shakespeare in fact they were written by some other guy Shakespeare. Modern literary scholars claim that the early English public was tricked by fraudulent publishers and book sellers into buying false Shakespeare plays that William really did not write over a period of decades. This sounds like an unfounded conspiracy theory. May be two different bodies of work attributed to William Shakespeare because two different men were writing under the same name.

When considering what is and what is not, Shakespeare historians normally look to the first Folio. This was a collection published in 1623 containing 36 plays-14 Comedies, 10 Histories and 12 tragedies. The first folio contains all the plays we know so well today such as Romeo Juliet, Macbeth, etc. and is generally viewed as fairly reliable and definitive

**Parul Mishra**  
Associate Professor,  
Deptt.of English,  
Amity University  
Rajasthan,Jaipur

collection of Shakespeare's plays. Scholars normally add to this body of work the plays *Pericles*, *Price of Tyre* and the *Two Noble Kinsmen*, as they believe there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Shakespeare had a hand in these works too. However, there are many other plays that have at times been attributed to Shakespeare but aren't now included in the Shakespeare canon, for example in the 1660s a "The Third folio" was published which included an extra 7 plays. These plays were *Lochrine*, *The London prodigal*, *The Puritan*, *Sir John Oldcastle*, *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and the above mentioned *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*. Although English public of the day accepted these plays as being genuine works of Shakespeare, they were all with the exception of *Pericles*, subsequently stripped of their Shakespeare status by their later commentators. Other plays included in the Apocrypha include works such as, *Mucedorus*, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, *The Birth of Merlin* and *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. It seems shame that all these plays have now been relegated to the shadows of history, especially given that there is still so much contention over who Shakespeare actually was. If we are not certain who he was how can we be 100% certain when it comes to what he wrote? May be these plays deserve a little more limelight. Shakespeare as far as the word implies both the man and the work, is a product of his presence in his material books. In the absence of significant personal or secondary documentary evidence, Shakespeare's oeuvre is determined primarily by the published materials that bear his name. Even recent approaches to authorship that rely on internal evidence draw their comparison samples from the plays attributed to him in print. As Jaffrey Matson says, "Dramatic authorship emerges from the publishing house and only indirectly from the theater... authorship in its emergence is as much about marketing as about true attribution (371)

The category of apocrypha remains one of the least studied aspects of Shakespeare. Full length studies in English consist solely of H. Dougdale Sykes's *Sidelights on Shakespeare* (1919) and Baldwin Maxwell's *Studies in the Shakespeare Apocrypha* (1956), both of which are primarily concerned with establishing the authorship of selected plays. The critical response to Maxwell's volume speaks to the markdown in which the plays are held on account of their grouping together: G.K. Hunter remarks that 'nothing except the accident of historical error now links these plays together'; and I.B. Cauthen Jr argues that 'except for the specialist, no-one reads the apocryphal Shakespeare; this able study clearly shows that there is no reason that we should'. (588) this shows that there are enough of facts which are trying to tarnish the image of real Shakespearean theory and his plays. The notion of 'Shakespeare Apocrypha' defined by its inauthenticity cannot survive when the authenticity of the canon it is defined against is undermined. As James P. Bednarz argues, 'the concept of a Shakespeare Apocrypha assumes an absolute distinction between authentic and fake versions of his plays and poems, since its very existence is predicated on the idea of a

Shakespeare Canon against which it is defined'(252) But if validity itself is a rickety concept in respect of mutual authorship, multiple versions of texts and the fluid nature of performance, then the plays of the Canon and Apocrypha might better be seen to exist at different points on a continuum, rather than in two completely opposed groups.

For much of the twentieth century, as evidenced by Cauthen's remarks, the issue of the Apocrypha was easy to avoid on grounds of artistic judgment; but while the tricky nature of this category has become urgent in the wake of developments in textual-canonical theory, this has only been directly addressed in recent years in three articles by Christa Jansohn, Richard Proudfoot and John Jowett.(318). In 1901, Bernard Shaw coined the term 'Bardolatry' to give a name to the religion of Shakespeare, and Brooke's use of 'Apocrypha' continues the process of formalizing this religion, absolutely dividing works credited to Shakespeare into a Canon-Apocrypha dichotomy. The reference to 'inspired authorship' in the OED's entry on 'Apocrypha' is especially relevant to post-Romantic conceptions of Shakespeare's authorial genius, which derive their authority from as far back as the 1623 folio's claims that 'His mind and hand went together: *And what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee have scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers*', which Bate notes 'paved the way for the later apotheosis of Shakespeare as pure genius untrammelled by art'.(29). Brooke's use of the term is the terminating moment of a two-hundred year critical tradition that treats the apocryphal plays in opposite relation to Shakespeare's ongoing adoration. The history of Shakespeare's works is inseparable from the history of the Bard: as Christa Jansohn points out, 'The Shakespearean canon is a historically grown, not a universally available fixed construct', and understanding the processes that have led to the formation of the printed canon can help objectively reassess this means of organization (324).

The history of the Apocrypha is a patchy and disappointing one, and I make use of this division to focus on a sequence of chronologically overlapping shifts in this history that occur within the more extensively accepted narratives of Shakespeare's textual, performative and cultural history. In doing so, I go to the extent of thinking that modern attitudes to the Apocrypha are built on a critical foundation of woolgathering and superficial. By unpacking the history of the apocryphal model, I suggest that critics can move away from conventional philosophy of the quality of the plays to an understanding of their importance in constructing the modern Shakespeare. The easiest way to understand this concept is accepting that the material forms of Shakespeare are available to early readers.

### **Conclusion**

As Tyrrell goes on to say, 'let us run no chance of losing that which is really his'. Assessment of the apocryphal plays continues to rely on subjective opinion, which Tyrrell here argues is the 'only just and correct mode of proceeding'. Whether critics are defending or attacking the plays, then, their standing

remains a matter of connoisseurship and personal taste. At the end of the nineteenth century, treatment of the disputed plays was more diverse than ever before. Several of the plays believed to be more likely to contain Shakespeare's hand were receiving attention in their own right. For example, between 1883 and 1888, Karl Warnke and Ludwig Proescholdt published a series of disputed plays under the series title of Pseudo-Shakespearian Plays, marking the conclusion of the German apocryphal tradition with editions of the six plays most strongly supported by their predecessors.(Apocrypha IV) The creation of numerous editions of the plays in different formats, groupings and hierarchies, however, perpetuated the impression of the disputed plays a vague and inconstant grouping, in constant unrest and lacking tangibility. The titles of the 'Doubtful' collections underlined this uncertainty while continuing to attach the plays to an indefinite fringe space of the core Shakespeare canon.

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