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978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

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## SHAKESPEARE BEYOND DOUBT

Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare? The authorship question has been much treated in works of fiction, film and television, provoking interest all over the world. Sceptics have proposed many candidates as the author of Shakespeare's works, including Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe and Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. But why and how did the authorship question arise and what does surviving evidence offer in answer to it? This authoritative, accessible and frequently entertaining book sets the debate in its historical context and provides an account of its main protagonists and their theories. Presenting the authorship of Shakespeare's works in relation to historiography, psychology and literary theory, twenty-two distinguished scholars reposition and develop the discussion. The book explores the issues in the light of biographical, textual and bibliographical evidence to bring fresh perspectives to an intriguing cultural phenomenon.

PAUL EDMONDSON is Head of Research and Knowledge and Director of the Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival for The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. His publications include: *Twelfth Night: A Guide to the Text and Its Theatrical Life* and (co-authored with Stanley Wells) *Shakespeare's Sonnets, Coffee with Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare Bites Back* (an e-book about the Shakespeare Authorship Discussion, published in October 2011). His other publications include work on Shakespeare and the Brontës, the poetry of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and the musicality of Shakespeare's words. He is curator of *60minuteswithShakespeare.com*, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's response to the authorship debate. He is also a priest in The Church of England.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
<i>General introduction</i>	xi
<i>Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells</i>	

## PART I SCEPTICS

1	The unreadable Delia Bacon <i>Graham Holderness</i>	5
2	The case for Bacon <i>Alan Stewart</i>	16
3	The case for Marlowe <i>Charles Nicholl</i>	29
4	The life and theatrical interests of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford <i>Alan H. Nelson</i>	39
5	The unusual suspects <i>Matt Kubus</i>	49

## PART II SHAKESPEARE AS AUTHOR

6	Theorizing Shakespeare's authorship <i>Andrew Hadfield</i>	63
7	Allusions to Shakespeare to 1642 <i>Stanley Wells</i>	73

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
8	Shakespeare as collaborator <i>John Jowett</i>	88
9	Authorship and the evidence of stylometrics <i>MacDonald P. Jackson</i>	100
10	What does textual evidence reveal about the author? <i>James Mardock and Eric Rasmussen</i>	111
11	Shakespeare and Warwickshire <i>David Kathman</i>	121
12	Shakespeare and school <i>Carol Chillington Rutter</i>	133
13	Shakespeare tells lies <i>Barbara Everett</i>	145
PART III A CULTURAL PHENOMENON: DID SHAKESPEARE WRITE SHAKESPEARE?		
14	‘This palpable device’: Authorship and conspiracy in Shakespeare’s life <i>Kathleen E. McLuskie</i>	163
15	Amateurs and professionals: Regendering Bacon <i>Andrew Murphy</i>	178
16	Fictional treatments of Shakespeare’s authorship <i>Paul Franssen</i>	189
17	The ‘Declaration of Reasonable Doubt’ <i>Stuart Hampton-Reeves</i>	201
18	‘There won’t be puppets, will there?’: ‘Heroic’ authorship and the cultural politics of <i>Anonymous</i> <i>Douglas M. Lanier</i>	215
19	‘The Shakespeare establishment’ and the Shakespeare authorship discussion <i>Paul Edmondson</i>	225
	<i>Afterword</i> <i>James Shapiro</i>	236

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*Contents*

vii

*A selected reading list*

241

*Hardy M. Cook*

*Notes*

249

*Index*

279

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Illustrations*

- Frontispiece *William Shakespeare, his method of work*, 1904,  
by Max Beerbohm. Photo: The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.  
© The Estate of Max Beerbohm. Reproduced by permission  
of Berlin Associates Ltd. *page* ii
- 7.1 Gheerart Janssen's memorial to Shakespeare in Holy Trinity  
Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. Photo and copyright John  
Cheal. 83
- 19.1 The Gower memorial statue of Shakespeare in  
Stratford-upon-Avon veiled. Photo: The Shakespeare  
Birthplace Trust. 232
- 19.2 Warwickshire road sign, 26 October 2011. Photo: The  
Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. 232



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

x

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *General introduction*

*Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells*

In August 1856, a 45-year-old American lady by the name of Delia Bacon paid a visit to Stratford-upon-Avon, where she lodged initially at 15 College Street, not far from Holy Trinity Church. She met with the vicar, George Granville, who allowed her access outside normal visiting hours to Shakespeare's grave, which she wished to investigate in the hope that it concealed solutions to an imagined code which would demonstrate that there were reasons to question received ideas about the authorship of Shakespeare's works. "If I only had the proper tools", she complained to herself, "I could lift the stone myself, weak as I am, with no one to help" . . . A strange weariness overcame her. She left, her mission unaccomplished.<sup>1</sup>

We can relate these events around Shakespeare's grave to numerous aspects of the intellectual and cultural climate of the time which occupied the popular imagination: Gothic fiction and drama with their tales of subterranean passages and arcane messages; the questioning of religious orthodoxy; geological discoveries; the authorship of the Homeric poems; archaeological investigations; and the search for the origins of life. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was to be published three years later, in 1859. Detective fiction with its emphases on the solving of mysteries and the imposing of an all-controlling pattern on a world uncertain of itself was beginning to appear. One of its earliest exponents was Edgar Allan Poe, whom Bacon herself had beaten to the prize in a short story competition.

Delia Bacon published her disintegrationist work *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded* in 1857. Her doubts about Shakespeare's authorship had been anticipated by an eccentric New York lawyer, Colonel Joseph C. Hart in a curious and highly derivative book called *The Romance of Yachting* published in 1848.<sup>2</sup> Credulous of John Payne Collier's Henslowe forgeries, Hart was influenced also by a denigratory 'Life of Shakespeare' in Dionysus Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopaedia*, which found that the plays 'absolutely teem with the grossest impurities, – more gross by far than can

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

be found in any contemporary dramatist'.<sup>3</sup> Hart ramblingly and rantingly fantasized that Shakespeare, who 'grew up in ignorance and viciousness, and became a common poacher . . . purchased or obtained surreptitiously' other men's plays which he then 'spiced with obscenity, blackguardism, and impurities'. He did not identify the original author or authors. We cannot tell whether Bacon knew Hart's book. It is her work that has proved to be seminal, and her name will recur frequently throughout the rest of this volume. Doubting that someone with Shakespeare's educational background could have written the works, she proposed that they were produced by a committee led by the philosopher, scientist and statesman, Sir Francis Bacon. A significant cultural foothold had become established. In early years, interest centred on Francis Bacon. An American Bacon Society, dedicated to propagating the theory that he wrote Shakespeare's works, was founded in 1885 and an English one in the following year. Since that time the proposition that the works were written by anyone else apart from Shakespeare has found expression in many forms.

Throughout this book we use the term 'anti-Shakespearian' to describe those who propagate any theory which disputes Shakespeare's authorship and co-authorship of the works attributed to him. In the past the term has been 'anti-Stratfordian', which allows the work attributed to Shakespeare to be separated from the social and cultural context of its author. But to deny Shakespeare of Stratford's connection to the work attributed to him is to deny the essence of, in part, what made that work possible. Michelangelo cannot be separated from Florence and Rome; Charles Dickens would not be Charles Dickens without London. Shakespeare was formed by both Stratford-upon-Avon and London. The phrases 'the Stratford man', 'actor from Stratford' and even 'anti-Stratfordian' perpetuate this kind of divide. These terms concede that it is possible to separate an artist from his or her background and cultural context. 'Anti-Shakespearian' seems to us to be a more accurate and honest term to use, even when we are referring to great Shakespeare writers and actors of the past and present.

Since Delia Bacon's time, thousands of books and articles have been published questioning Shakespeare's authorship and putting forward an extraordinary range of alternative nominees. An online search for 'Shakespeare's authorship' will reveal an abundance of proponents of anti-Shakespearian theories, and they are by no means confined to Britain and America. Some emanate, for example, from France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Russia and Sweden. And though some of them are amateurs, others are persons of high intellectual ability fully conversant with the techniques of academic scholarship.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01759-7 - Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*General introduction*

xiii

Some of the candidates proposed over the decades were more or less contemporary with Shakespeare (most of them university educated or aristocratic, such as Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earls of Southampton, Rutland and Derby, and even including both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Others (such as Sir Philip Sidney) were dead by the time some of Shakespeare's plays and poems were written, and at least one (Daniel Defoe, born around 1659) lived long after Shakespeare's time. Fashions in candidature constantly fluctuate; beyond Francis Bacon, the most popular have been Christopher Marlowe and, currently, Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Over the years, authorship has figured in innumerable newspaper reports, prominent public discussions, debates, radio and television broadcasts and in several mock trials, most notably in Washington, DC, in 1987 (with three Supreme Court justices) and in London in 1988 at the Inner Temple (with three Lord Justices) – the Shakespearian cause prevailed on both occasions. Many works of fiction have taken the topic as a point of departure. During the first decade of the twenty-first century the doubters began to achieve a higher profile through, especially, the proponents of the online 'Declaration of Reasonable Doubt' (see Chapter 17) which is proud to put to the fore various famous people who have signed it, including leading actors such as Sir Derek Jacobi, Jeremy Irons, Mark Rylance and Michael York. At least two universities actively encourage doubts about Shakespeare's authorship (see Chapters 17 and 19). The discussion achieved a high public profile in consequence of the prominent Hollywood film *Anonymous* (Sony Pictures, 2011, directed by Roland Emmerich) in which Shakespeare is portrayed as a drunken, inarticulate buffoon, acting as a front-man for the Earl of Oxford whom the film depicts as the covert author of Shakespeare's plays (as well as the illegitimate son of Queen Elizabeth I and illegitimate father, with Queen Elizabeth, of the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron). The poster advertising the film portrays a figure representing Shakespeare with his back to the viewer accompanied by the question 'Was Shakespeare a Fraud?' The film's distributors circulated educational materials designed to encourage teachers to doubt Shakespeare's authorship and to spread that doubt among their pupils.

At least until the end of the twentieth century the subject was the province of amateurs (that is, people with no professional commitment to literary or historical studies). What became known as 'the Shakespeare Authorship Debate' was largely ignored by many Shakespeare scholars who stood aloof from it, regarding it as a topic unworthy of their attention, even as a supreme expression of human folly. Shakespeare organizations

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and scholars are accustomed to being slandered with the accusation that they are defending Shakespeare's authorship, and what is often slightly referred to as 'the Shakespeare industry', for selfish, commercial reasons.

Nevertheless the authorship discussion is a complex intellectual phenomenon well worthy of objective consideration. It raises questions about the nature of historical evidence, the moral responsibility of academic enquiry, the place of artists' works in relation to their lives, the cultural and intellectual formation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the status of scholarly and expert authority, the relationship between the professional scholar and the general public, the psychology of conspiracy theories and the practice of collaborative playwriting in Shakespeare's time.

It is partly in response to these developments that The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust felt the time had come to take a more active part in discussion of a topic which is of central importance not only to its activities but to those of innumerable other organizations world-wide and indeed to anyone interested in the works of the world's best-known and most influential writer (see Chapter 19).

This collection of essays is divided into three parts. Part I is concerned with some of the most conspicuous alternative nominees for Shakespeare's authorship and with the history of the claims that have been made for them. Part II examines various aspects of Shakespeare's authorship including his collaboration with other professional writers. Part III engages with ways in which the Shakespeare Authorship Discussion has found expression in the popular imagination. It is our hope that the collection will both illuminate the phenomenon and shine a Shakespearian light on a too-long-established heresy.