BEYOND SHAKESPEARE: EXPANDING THE AUTHORSHIP THEORY

by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

The question of who actually wrote the Shakespeare canon is one that goes back many years, decades, even, possibly, centuries—how far back we can only guess. Some think, not without reason, that the question is as old as the canon itself, that originally there was—there had to have been—a community of writers, theater devotees and patrons who knew for a fact the identity of the true author, and who therefore must have handed down their certain knowledge, from one generation to another, to close friends and intimate family members, at first as a secret, later as the kind of knowledge that couldn't be allowed (for reasons of politics or class solidarity) to enter the public record, until what began as certain knowledge gradually faded to uncertainty, then to rumor, then finally to silence.

When it rose to the surface, whether again or for the first time, in the nineteenth century, it took the form in which we have it today, namely, that Shakespeare must have been one candidate or another, first Francis Bacon, then, with the failure of Bacon, a handful of others, among them the Earl of Oxford. From some point the need for a single candidate was matched by the so-called group theory that attempts to solve the problems posed by this plethora of candidates by imagining that some or all of them worked together in some way to create the canon we label Shakespeare's.

The big drawback to this lack of certainty is that it leaves us open to ridicule. Who hasn't heard the standard opening line from journalists and other commentators, that anti-Stratfordians attribute the authorship to anyone and everyone from Bacon to Queen Elizabeth? Ha ha ha! We must be fools if after all this time we still can't agree on a viable candidate! Oh how ridiculous, Queen Elizabeth! When would she have the time? Luckily they don't know that someone has actually suggested Cervantes!

What most of them also don't know, thank goodness, is that there is a whole other layer to this problem of too many hands, namely, too many works. Once you get into the material and begin to read the works of other writers of the period, you realize that there are quite a few plays and poems that sound too much like early Shakespeare to be ignored. Confronted with the possibility that Shakespeare, whoever he was, wrote a great deal more than the 38 plays and 200 poems attributed to him, plays and poems that either have no known author or are attributed to a dozen otherwise unknown individuals, one is forced to come up with an explanation, and not surprisingly the explanations have been as various, and some as ridiculous, as the theories of who wrote the accepted canon.

Forced by our rejection of the untenable Stratford biography we are left with something, one can hardly call it a theory, that on the one hand gives us no certifiable candidate and on the other, gives us no certifiable canon. After a century and a half of study, we are not only still without an author, we have added an immense new problem, that the canon itself may be a good deal larger and more diverse than what we had thought. No wonder that at a conference of the orthodox Shakespeare scholars, Shakespeare Association of America some years ago, when the authorship question arose, one of the conferees dismissed it as "a can of worms." We may disagree with their adherence to the Stratford biography, but we can hardly condemn their distaste for the alternatives.

Because too many candidates have accumulated, the discourse has become stuck at a point we should have passed long ago. Too much time and energy is being spent arguing which one (or

ones) wrote the Shakespeare canon. Since it seems impossible at this point to reduce the size of this group, to which new names are being added all the time, the better path may be to open up the question in a way that will admit all of them. We need to stop focussing on the candidacy of Shakespeare, stop fighting over who should be eliminated, and embrace a more comprehensive authorship thesis, one that includes all the writers of the period, and all the works.

This does not mean endorsing the idea that there were co-authors of the Shakespeare canon, at least, not in the sense that Brian Vickers advocates, whereby Shakespeare and some other sat down together and decided who would write which act of the so-called "late plays," a process he describes in his recent book, *Shakespeare Co-author*, a process that, according to Dean Keith Simonton, professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis, is most unlikely.

Simonton, the leading force behind the newly-developing branch of psychology known as the psychology of creativity, has spent much of his career studying the nature of genius. With facts derived from scientific methods and clinical studies, he assures us (as if our own experience and common sense did not) that creating art by committee just doesn't work. According to Simonton: "Experimental research has actually demonstrated rather conclusively that group problem-solving using more egalitarian 'brainstorming' techniques usually yields dismal results in comparison with more solitary forms of problem solving. Individuals working alone will generate more and better ideas than will the same individuals working in a group" (91-2). Which should explain why those plays that, as Vickers demonstrates, were "co-authored" by lesser writers, are among the weakest in the Shakespeare canon. Nor does Vickers, for all his grasp of things literary, pause to consider why in the world Shakespeare—unlike every other artistic genius under the sun—would stoop to sharing a work with a poor fish like George Wilkins. Did the world's greatest writer, at the peak of his career, lose interest in writing? This would make him unique among the world's great writers.

Be assured, we're not looking for more than one Shakespeare, but we are looking for the other characters in his story. If we wish to find Shakespeare, we must seek him among his fellows, the actors, patrons, publishers and, most important, the other writers who shared in the creation, not just of the Shakespeare canon, but of all of English Renaissance literature. If Shakespeare were the only authorship problem of the period, scholars would have found the solution long ago.

If a doctor questions a patient suffering from a mysterious disease, his diagnosis for that patient must be affected when he learns that the patient's entire community suffers from the same symptoms. Diagnosing the patient will do little good if the real problem lies with his environment. For it is not just the authorship of Shakespeare, but the authorship of just about everything that qualifies as the literature of the Elizabethan era, by which I mean literature of the imagination, that is, all poetry, all plays, all romance tales, songs, and satires—for when it comes to authorship, all are just as dubious as Shakespeare! It is a fact that we do not know for certain who wrote, not just Shakespeare, but just about everything that qualifies as imaginative literature that was written during the very period in English history that saw the most ebulliant uprush of literary art ever produced in the West!

The authorship question is not just about Shakespeare; it's about Shakespeare plus Bacon plus Philip Sidney plus Mary Sidney plus Christopher Marlowe plus Ben Jonson plus Robert Greene plus Thomas Watson plus George Gascoigne plus Richard Edwards plus a host of names that most readers have never even heard of. The problems that plague Shakespeare's authorship plague every single member of his creative community to a greater or lesser degree. Whatever the reasons for this, they go well beyond the problems of Shakespeare alone.

So for now we'll leave aside Shakespeare's problems, such as the fact that, like many of his comic characters, his name is a pun on his function—"Will shake spear!" How often do authors have such names as a matter of sheer coincidence—a name that not only provides a perfectly-tuned

pun, but that also forms a sentence, complete with subject (understood), verb in the future tense, and object, one that describes the intention of the author of some of the most stirring battle scenes and sword fights ever staged? Or that the biography of William of Stratford shows no evidence of an education of the sort that could produce plays like *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet*, or even the ability to produce a legible signature? Or that no solid evidence has ever surfaced to indicate that he—I mean the great playwright—was personally known to anyone in what must have been his community of writers—or to any community at all, for that matter.

For now, let's set Shakespeare (the writer) aside and look at the problems that concern his entire community.

TWO GROUPS OF WRITERS

This community can be roughly divided into two groups. We'll call one group Commoners and the other Court writers—an awkward division, not strictly accurate, but for now it will serve. For there are two distinct groups—and class identity is the most obvious means of distinguishing them. Within each of these groups there are certain problems that affect most or all of the members of that group, problems different from those that affect the members of the other group.

The Commoners Group includes, in somewhat chronological order: George Gascoigne, Edmund Spenser, George Peele, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, John Lyly, Robert Greene, Thomas Watson, Thomas Nashe, Gabriel Harvey, William Shakespeare—and, moving forward a bit into the reign of James—Ben Jonson and John Webster. There are many more names than these, but these are the most prominent.

The Court writers group is much smaller. It consists (at the moment) of six names: the Earl of Oxford, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Francis Bacon, Lady Mary Sidney (aka the Countess of Pembroke), and Sir Walter Raleigh. Many Elizabethan courtiers wrote poetry, and some are quite good, but these are the ones whose works have lasted, and whose reputations as poets have survived the centuries.

THE COMMONERS

Most of this group shows the same problems as William of Stratford: a pressing need to put bread on the table, troubles deriving from a Catholic or otherwise problematic family background, an anomalous career pattern, and no evidence of the kind of education required to support the erudition of the works that bear their names. Not all of the Commoners have all of these problems, but all have at least two of them and some have all of them. In any case, with every one there is something seriously amiss with the record. What is most obviously true of all of them is that their biographies fail to support the aristocratic nature of their works. True, that is, of all but Marlowe. Marlowe is the classic case of the exception proving the rule.

THE COURT WRITERS

Although some in this group show some of the same problems as the commoners— anomalous career patterns for instance—for all but one the predominant problem is that their reputations as writers far exceed the evidence of their published works, leaving us (and their biographers) to assume that they wrote a good deal more than they published—or, we should say, than they published under their own names.

And we must note that, as with the commoners, this is true of all but one, in this case Sir Philip Sidney, who died too young to have written much more than he published, and whose work would probably not have survived had he not been assiduously promoted after his death by his sister in much the same way that, 200 years later, Mary Shelley promoted her dead husband, Percy Bysshe. Thus, each of these groups has their great exception, Sidney among the Court writers, Marlowe among the commoners. Also, unlike the rest of his fellows, Marlowe shows evidence of, if not a presence at Court, at least a genuine connection with two leading Court figures: Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and Lord Strange, soon to be Earl of Derby. Unlike the other Court writers, Sidney published only under his own name, while unlike the other commoners, Marlowe gave voice to the impulses and visions of his own class, not the aristocracy. Sidney and Marlowe show us what we should expect to see in all writers of their groups, and that we do not see what we should see must be the driving force behind our expanded inquiry.

NO INTERACTIONS

Now let's look at some problems that affect, not just one group, but the entire community. One such problem is that all (but Sidney and Marlowe) have anomalous career paths, that is, all have writing careers that fail to follow what we would consider to be the normal curve of activity for writers capable of rising to the high level of artistic effort that distinguishes the English Renaissance. A full examination of this problem will have to wait.

A problem common to both groups that we can consider here is the peculiar fact that, if we were to rely strictly on the record, these two groups of artists would seem to have had no interaction with each other. In 1580, Edmund Spenser, a commoner, referred once or twice in letters he wrote to Gabriel Harvey, another commoner, to having associated with Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Edward Dyer, both Court writers. As far as I recall, that's pretty much it for interrelations between the groups during the forty years of the Elizabethan era.

So separated are these two groups in the academic mind that the author of a recent and extremely valuable book on the Elizabethan Courtier poets treats the commoners as if they didn't exist! By ignoring such works as the first edition (1574) of *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* and the poems of Robert Greene, Steven May is free to hand over the credit for all innovations in English versification during this period to Sir Philip Sidney! (185, 225, 367)

Consider also how limited are the interactions that we know about even among the tiny community of genuine Court writers, who not only must have known each other but known each other well and who, like all true artists, would certainly have been watching each other like hawks as they tried on one style after another. Apart from Philip and Mary Sidney, whose relationship is a given, all we have is the 1580 tennis court quarrel between Oxford and Sidney. We can guess that their literary rivalry had something to do with this power play, but where's the evidence? Both innovative poets, both considered at one time or another to be the best at Court, the two were at Court together from at least 1574 on. They were also both at Cecil House during the Christmas holidays of 1568, when Sidney was fifteen and Oxford was eighteen. Bacon joined them at Court in 1579 at the age of eighteen, when Oxford was twenty-nine and Sidney twenty-five.

Raleigh came aboard in 1582 when he was thirty, Oxford was thirty-two, Sidney twenty-eight, and Bacon twenty-one. The following year, when Raleigh helped Oxford get back into the Queen's graces after his two-year banishment from Court, Raleigh's reference to Aesop's tale of the ungrateful snake that bit his rescuer may refer to Oxford's (possible) tendency to lampoon his rivals onstage, or it may not. In 1588, when Mary Sidney came to Court to take her dead brother's

place as a voice for her family interests, for the Protestant cause, and as a leading patron of the arts, she and Bacon were twenty-seven, Raleigh was thirty-six, and Oxford was thirty-eight.

Are we to assume that these five young writers, all burdened with excessive leisure, all burning with Renaissance ambition and bursting with talent, had nothing to do with each other beyond a single argument on a tennis court or an aspersion lightly cast in a letter?

The only evidence of a connection between Oxford and Bacon is a single mention made by Oxford of his "cousin Bacon" in a 1595 business letter to Robert Cecil, while many years later Bacon passed on an unsubstantiated rumor about the thirteenth earl of Oxford in his history of Henry VII. There's also the rumor handed down by the seventeenth-century gossip-monger John Aubrey that, early in the reign of James, Mary Sidney went to Wilton, by then her son's estate, to beg the King for Raleigh's life. But to what extent should we be trusting Aubrey's testimony? All? None? Some? And if some, where do we draw the line?

We're not much better off with interactions among members of the commoners group. Apart from a number of dedications to each other in their published works we know only that in 1592 Marlowe and Watson got into a brawl on Hog Lane near the Bishopsgate theaters in which a third man was killed and that Kyd and Marlowe once shared a room. Marlowe and Matthew Royden have been frequently mentioned by historians as members of Raleigh's "School of Night," but where's the evidence? And then there are the various comments made by Jonson about Shakespeare, such as that "he wrote so much he should have been stopped."

The community of writers in Shakespeare's time was small, very small. Compared with ours today, it was tiny. There were only a handful of printers who could publish their works—all located in London—and a handful of booksellers who could sell their wares, and that only in Paul's churchyard. Writers, publishers, printers and patrons would all have been well known to each other. The small size of their community makes that a certainty. But where's the evidence?[1]

The history of Art should assure us that all such arts communities gather together as a matter of shared instinct. Most innovative artists are drawn to each other by their common passion. For an artist, there is no audience like other artists. In fact, some works of art have been conceived for the eyes or ears of just one other artist—witness Picasso and Matisse, who, late in life, seemed to be producing works for each other's eyes alone. Sidney wrote *The Arcadia* for his sister, "only for you, only to you . . . being done in loose sheets of paper, most of it in your presence, the rest by sheets sent unto you as fast as they were done." What about the other works of the English Renaissance? For whom were they written?

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[1]   I want to make it clear that when I say there's no proof of a particular thing, I mean there's no evidence of the sort that comes from sixteenth-century sources outside the realm of literature, from things like unpublished letters, journals, diaries, letterbook entries, holograph marginalia in privately owned books, entries in the Stationers Register and in parish records and the like. Because of the problems I'm about to outline, I'm purposely not giving evidentiary weight to anything that was obviously, or even possibly, written for publication.

Not that poetry, romance tales and plays are lacking in important evidence, quite the contrary. But we must begin with the non-literary evidence, because we need to know, first, how much of it there actually is; second, what kinds of non-literary evidence we have; and perhaps most important, what kinds of non-literary evidence seem to be in unreasonably short supply. Literary historians tend to lump the two sources of information together: that deriving from the writers themselves plus their publishers and printers, and that deriving from outside sources, private letters, etc. For purposes of comparison, we must begin by separating these.

During the 1950s in America, writers Laurence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, and Alan Gins-burg, later to be labelled "the Beat Generation," all as yet unpublished, were drawn thousands of miles to find each other. Much of the history of this group consists of trips taken back and forth across the country together and to see each other. During another supernova of English literature, we know what Keats was to Shelley, what Shelley was to Byron, what Wordsworth was to Coleridge. We know what Byron was to Goethe and to several generations of budding writers from Tennyson to Carlyle to Walt Whitman. We know what Carlyle was to John Stuart Mill, what Whitman was to Emerson, what Sylvia Plath was to Ted Hughes, and so forth throughout the entire history of innovative art.

Why then is there no solid record of which members of the Elizabethan Court writers' community were important to members of the commoners' community (beyond that of employer or patron) and vice versa? Or even what members of the Court community were important to each other (apart of course from the Sidneys)? Or what members of the commoners group were important to each other? In most cases, all we have to connect the so-called University Wits are a handful of published dedications. Nor can we explain away these missing interactions by attributing them solely to the losses of Time. We know more about the relationships among the writing community of first-century Rome, or, even further back, of third century BC Athens.

Where other people might just talk or think, writer's write, and they don't just write poems, pamphlets and books. Of all people writers are the most apt to write letters to friends and to keep journals, letter books and diaries, records in which they rarely fail to comment on the other writers of their time, both their personalities and their work. Where are the letters among this group? Or even letters to others that refer to members of these groups as writers? The only ones we have are the ones that were published, which—until we know for certain that they were originally written as private letters and that the names they carry are the names of their real authors—are of no use as genuine evidence. Why is there information for every similar period in literary history and not for this one? Although the problem is most obvious with Shakespeare, it's true of every single member of this writing community, Court writers and Commoners alike.

MORE PROBLEMS WITH THE COMMONERS GROUP

With the Court writers it is their works that are hidden—with the commoners it is their biographies that are hidden, or at least anything that might connect them to the world of playwrights and audiences, novelists and readers. Why, if we've found anything, has it been only the most banal notice of baptisms, marriages, deaths of wives and children, and, for some, a family connection with some kind of business, unrelated in most cases to anything literary or theatrical?

That so many of these commoners have this problem suggests that such connections have not been lost, that, in fact, they do not and never did exist. Were it only one, or even two, out of a large group for whom we had sufficient evidence of their actual functions as writers (as is the case in the early seventeenth century), we might shrug it off, but there are at least six of these Elizabethan commoners that I can think of right off the top of my head for whom we have no absolute proof that they ever wrote anything (Edmund Spenser, George Pettie, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, William Shakspere, John Webster). The writing community of mid-to-late sixteenth century England is by no means large enough to sustain so many anomalies of this nature.

Certainly facts have been surpressed—there can be no other explanation. These writers knew each other. They had relationships with each other, relationships that affected their work. The long history of art requires it. But the suppression of their connections with each other has to be something voluntary, something that goes beyond the possibility of a systematic eradication of

records by some third party. No one, not even the Queen or the Cecils, had the power required to eliminate records on this scale. There may very well have been some eradication of records, but it can't explain the volume of this thundering silence.

FOUR WIERD BIOGRAPHIES

There's no room here for a full examination of all the anomalous biographies of the Commoners' group, but let's just look briefly at four of the strangest:

Robert Greene, author of thirty-seven pamphlets written between 1581 and 1592, was an innovative writer whose popularity sparked the evolution of the pamphlet, the first ever English periodical. Yet although Greene had the longest-documented career of any Elizabethan writer (over a decade), years of research by his biographers failed to turn up any solid evidence of his existence, until his name was discovered in the Earl of Leicester's household account book as having received payment for a Greene pamphlet. Until this discovery we had nothing that connected any one of the many Robert Greenes listed in various parish and university records with the production of these popular periodicals. Yet even this does nothing to qwell our suspicions that he was not their true author, suspicions based on the fact that Greene's favorite themes reflect an aristocratic upbringing rather than that of the Yorkshire cordwainer or the Norwich saddler that hopeful biographers have dug from the records.
> Not that Greene lacks a biography; on the contrary, Greene's problem is that he has too much biography. No author of the period has as fully developed an image as does Robert Greene. Unfortunately it was provided entirely by Greene himself, with flourishes added by fellow pamphleteers Nashe and Harvey. Although he, and they, claim that he was well-known to his readers, no corroboration from a non-literary source has ever been located. The suspicion remains that the writer as he is described in these pamphlets is as fictional as everything else by Greene. His biographers know perfectly well that neither he nor his fellow pamphleteers are to be trusted, yet they continue to repeat his self-portrait. Why? Because the page must be filled and they have nothing more substantial to offer.
> Greene's style, fluid, easy, rich in Shakespearean tropes and metaphors, was—according to the current wisdom—the model for the soon-to-be-popular Bard, who, according to the academics, kicked off his illustrious career by plagiarizing poor impoverished Robert Greene. Greene's death—as described in his supposedly final pamphlet—while entertaining, is ridiculous as an account of a real death, which may say something about the generations of academics who have, and continue, to swallow it whole.

Thomas Nashe, pamphleteer, is equally innovative, equally entertaining, and equally suspect. Like Greene, Nashe seems a purely literary being. Born fully formed, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus, he appears to have been gestated by the Martin Mar-Prelate pamphlet war of the late 1580s. Unlike Greene, however, who appears only once as a name in a household record, biographers have managed to find a slightly more substantial Thomas Nashe. The son of a provincial vicar, the real Nashe earned his BA at St. John's by washing dishes and peeling turnips, hardly sufficient to explain either the depth of his erudition—he was, apart from Francis Bacon, the most obviously learned writer of his generation—or his sheer gall, astounding in a society where a libel suit could cause a man to lose an ear or a hand. How on earth did this humble vicar's son manage to escape and real form of reprisal while continuing to produce one merciless satire after another?

Edmund Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* was the great Court entertainment of his generation, is credited with the second influential style development since Chaucer (Lyly's euphuism being the first). The real Spenser is a shadowy figure who got his degree at Cambridge by means of a scholarship for poor boys. Following a few years "in obscurity," he sailed for Ireland at age twenty-eight (as secretary to Lord Grey). After two decades in Ireland, where his life would surely have resembled that of the early English settlers in America, Spenser finally returned to England when his staked claim was burned to the ground by angry natives. Despite the baroque nature of *Faerie Queene*, based on the kind of Greek romances and Arthurian-type legends that the Court community had enjoyed for centuries and the obvious if opaque references to Court gossip of his prose works, there is no record that he was ever so much as introduced at Court.

Why would a poet of Spenser's stature, one who produced a canon far greater in size than either his fellow commoners or the Court poets, one whose books were obviously aimed at a Court audience, why would such a one not be absorbed into the Court community by means of a small sinecure[2] so that he could continue to entertain his primary audience, the nobility, close at hand, as would have been the case had he been born in France or Italy? Why instead was he allowed to suffer the slings and arrows of the angry Irish for twenty years until they finally drove him back to England, where, at the age of forty-seven, he died a pauper's death within weeks of his arrival?

John Lyly, who may (or may not) have been the grandson of the famous grammarian, had a degree from Magdalen College, Oxford, afterwards working for Lord Burghley, then for Burghley's son-in-law, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. Although Lyly is credited with two immensely popular novels, and with being the first real English novelist, and with creating the most innovative and popular prose style since Chaucer, and with seven plays that entertained the Court throughout the 1580s, why, after losing his post at Court in 1590 at the age of thirty-six, did he never, for the sixteen years left to him, publish another word? Why did this popular writer, despite the fact that he seems to have been in great need of paying work, cease to write so early in his career?

All of the commoners group show similar problems. You may ask why has it taken so long to realize that all these writers share the same kinds of authorship problems that until now have been seen only as Shakespeare's?

Most readers rarely read enough by or about one of these authors for such questions to arise. Those with no time for the sort of in-depth studies required must depend upon academics who have chosen it as their life work. Unfortunately, since university training nowadays is highly specialized, academics themselves often don't read widely enough to see the extent of the problem. They tend to focus either on Shakespeare or on one of the other writers, such as Sidney, Jonson or Marlowe, or they may concentrate on a group such as the University Wits or the Courtier poets. Although they are certainly aware of the anomalies in their own subject area, they may assume that their chap is the only one with problems. Read the biography of any one of these writers and—if the biographer is honest—you will find that he or she is well aware of the anomalies peculiar to that writer, but when they're asked to write for the encyclopedias or to introduce a new edition of the plays, they tend to smooth out the rough patches. Why confuse the ordinary reader? No expert will willingly display his or her confusion over some problem within their domain before an ignorant and unforgiving world.

Shakespeare scholars are certainly aware of the authorship question, but they don't want

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[2]   Spenser was finally given an annuity of £50 by the Queen, but the history of this is another series of peculiar anomalies.

to open it for discussion, mostly because their primary interest—I might say their sole interest—is the text. Problems of provenance are no more than annoying distractions, so they continue to cling to the names on title pages, refusing to take the question any further. As for those who focus on the other writers of the period, they simply accept what the Shakespeare scholars choose to tell them about The Great One. Should questions arise, they trust their colleagues to be telling them the truth, and in any case, do not want to make trouble, since Shakespeare Studies represents an elite club, the cream of the Humanities Division.

Even problems arising from the text, such as why it is that one occasionally hears exactly the same phrasing in Shakespeare as in Marlowe, or in Shakespeare as in Robert Greene, or in Robert Greene as in John Lyly, though they may be noted in passing, are usually brushed aside in discussion because any comment quickly leads to questions of who wrote what when, and whether these guys knew each other—questions for which no one can give them an answer, and—oops! here we are at that darned authorship question again! Run away! Run away!

AN EXPANDED THESIS

Let's not run away. Let's come up with a workable thesis that we can all embrace.

- First—let's consider how small the English writing community was at that time, far too small for these two groups to be as separate in fact as they appear to be from the records.

- And let us also consider the nature of the works in question, most of which are based on the kinds of plots and themes long favored by the nobility, themes of no great interest to the intermediate classes, who would have known the countryside well enough to be bored by the kind of artificial pastoral fantasies that pleased their so-called betters.

- Let us in addition consider the quality of the works in question, many of them huge watersheds in the development of English literature.

- Let us also consider the relentless drive a group of genuinely gifted writers feels to connect with as wide an audience as possible, a drive felt by all genuine writers, one comparable to that of a thirsty desert traveller in search of water.

Thus, matching the need of the authentic Court writers to publish to the equally pressing need of the commoners to survive during the uncertain economy of the mid-sixteenth century, and BINGO! we end up with the same scenario for the entire Elizabethan writing community that we have for the poet Shakespeare and his standin, the Stratford entrepreneur with the remarkably punnable name.

Here then is the expanded form of the Authorship thesis that I wish to present. It is actually already well-established, the only difference between the new and the old being the addition of a few dozen names. The old authorship thesis goes something like this:

> The works of Shakespeare were written by the Earl of Oxford (or Bacon or Marlowe or whoever), and, due to his desire for privacy, were published under a pen name derived from the real name of the financially needy William Shakspere of Stratford (who apparently could barely write his own name).

The new and expanded thesis might go something like this:

The English literary Renaissance was created by a small group of highly-educated and talented writers who, for the most part, like their European counterparts, were born into Court society, and who bypassed the social constraints of their class and the religious and political constraints of their times by publishing over the names of commoners who lent or sold them the use of their names in exchange for cash, patronage or other benefits.

Although this subterfuge operated on a fairly broad scale at the beginning, it continued in full force for a relatively brief period of time, beginning at some point in the 1560s and gradually diminishing in the seventeenth century as the commercial stage and press became sufficiently lucrative that members of the entrepreneurial classes, who had no need to hide their identities, began to earn their livings as writers. Even so, for a variety of reasons, publishing under pseudonyms would continue well into the nineteenth century.

It was not just Shakespeare the Poet who used a standin to publish during the Elizabethan era, but all the court writers, that is, all but Sidney. And if we feel squeamish about taking the glory from commoners Greene, Nashe, Watson, etc., let us not forget Marlowe, the genuine working-class genius, who was, in some ways, greater than all the Court writers. All that is, but one.

PROBLEMS SOLVED

Although admittedly this scenario raises new problems, let's see what problems it solves right off the bat.

- First: It returns the Elizabethan Renaissance to its expected source, the Court community, which, as with every other European nation, was the only group with enough education and leisure to devote to the time- and mind-consuming business of creating a vernacular literature of the imagination.

- Second: Shakespeare is no longer a wierd anomaly, but simply one (though possibly the first) of a number of similar writer/standin combinations.

- Third: It helps to explain why authors like Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Watson and John Webster, are so lacking in biographical particulars, why they show such peculiar career paths, and how it is that, at the end of their careers, rather than be accorded real funerals and notices in parish burial records, they simply vanish.

- Fourth: It explains why Court writers like the Earl of Oxford and Mary Sidney lack enough published works to support their reputations.

- Fifth: It explains why so many of the early greats of the English Renaissance, unlike their European counterparts, never appeared at Court.

- Sixth: It helps to explain some strange coincidences, such as the fact that the two most anomalous writers of their time, Robert Greene and Thomas Watson (probably both covers for the same Court writer) supposedly died within days of each other—or, how the development of euphuism seems to migrate from one writer to another, as it leaves one appearing in another, like a thieving servant who goes from one master to another, leaving a trail of paltry thefts behind.

OTHER PROBLEMS

It may in time also help to explain a number of other problems, such as:

- Why there is no juvenilia for Shakespeare, who, like Nashe, appears to have emerged fully developed at the age of twenty-five.

- Why similarly there are no early works for the brilliant, energetic Francis Bacon, whose long and impressive writing career seemingly commenced only in his mid-thirties, despite his obvious boredom at having nothing important to do throughout his twenties and early thirties.

- Why, conversely, John Lyly, after blazing a literary trail with his Euphues novels in his late twenties, fell silent just as he was reaching the apex of his career in his late thirties and, despite his apparent need for work and money as expressed in letters begging the Crown for a job, seems never to have published another thing for the remaining eighteen years of his life.

- How Thomas Kyd managed to write one smash hit play when everything published under his name was mediocre to poor, and why his one great success was never published under his name.

- How George Gascoigne managed to write, in a single year, two plays that permanently raised the artistic level of English dramaturgy, then settled into a dull style that would have ensured his obscurity were it not for these two plays.

- Who wrote *Greene's Groatsworth* and why. Who was "Shake-scene," and who wrote the "posthumous" Greene pamphlets and why.

- What was the real cause of the Nashe-Harvey pamphlet war.

And scores of so far equally intractable problems.

This expanded theory of authorship does not, and probably never will, answer every single question that we have about this period, but it does offer solutions to some of the most perplexing, and for that alone it is worth our attention. At the same time, like every new thesis, it raises a number of new questions, perhaps the most pressing being: Why were the English Court writers forced to use subterfuge in order to publish when those of the Continent were not? There are answers to this, some obvious, some that will require a good deal more thought than has yet been given to them, but here we have room only for the questions in their simplest form.

IN CONCLUSION

Of course by expanding the authorship question beyond Shakespeare to include all the poets, playwrights and novelists of the Elizabethan era we are also expanding the nature of the problem. No longer is it: Why did Shakespeare hide his identity?—the question now becomes: Why did they hide their identities? And then: Who were they? And above and beyond all, of course, comes the ultimate question: Who wrote what? And when? And why? For these we are going to have to buckle down and examine the extra-literary records to see just what we know for certain about these writers, and what we don't know that we should know.

We must also begin to do the kind of work on the works themselves that we see demonstrated in Brian Vickers's recent book, *Shakespeare Co-author*. I urge everyone who is genuinely interested in the authorship question to read this book. It is dense, it is difficult, particularly for those like myself who do not have training in statistics or much of a gift for numbers, but I believe that most will agree that this is the way of all future attribution studies. As Vickers so thoroughly proves, writers do reveal their identities through their styles when examined with processes developed by generations of word study scholars. With these tools we have far more solid means of identifying Elizabethan authors, I assure you, than the often misleading names on title pages, because we will be able to discern differences between voices based on something more solid than our personal subjective responses.

The real problem is, first, to ask the right questions, and second, to consider all possible conclusions. Where Vickers assumes that Shakespeare is writing at the same time as his Jacobean "co-authors," it does his conclusions no harm to propose that, in every almost every case they were adding to or amending work done many years earlier by an author who was no longer alive.

Possible misinterpretations by Vickers and others are minor in comparison with the certainty that will come from using these techniques to nail down, not just who amended Shakespeare's work after his death, but further, who wrote the Greene canon, the Nashe canon, the Spenser canon, and a number of other works that (may) have been attributed to the wrong authors, either purposely or by later guesswork. What did Bacon write before he assumed the grave persona of his later years? What did Mary Sidney write that she dared not publish under her own name? And how about Raleigh? Or Sir John Harington, Jr. Or even some new Court figure that so far we haven't identified? (Sir Henry Neville and Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, have been suggested.) The truth is, we cannot guess what we will find when we use these techniques to examine all the works of Renaissance literature.

Most important, we need to change our thinking about the works themselves. Until we can be certain who wrote what, we must first divest them of the mystique lent them by the author's name and reputation. This will allow us to examine them as though they were anonymous, with no identifying characteristics beyond what is offered by the text and publication data. In the same way that the text of the unpublished play "Sir Thomas More" has been broken down into its separate authors, or more likely, scribes, as Hand A, Hand B, and so forth, we must label all Elizabethan works of the imagination with similarly neutral identifiers. In other words, until a particular work passes a set of dependable tests of its validity, all published works of the imagination, their title pages, the names of their authors, their introductory material including dedications, printer's remarks, author's remarks, and authorship of dedicatory verses, each must be considered open to interpretation until its evidentiary value has been properly assessed.

A big job, granted, but I believe, after almost twenty years of study of the authorship problem, that this will be the only way we will ever totally resolve it to everyone's satisfaction: first, by expanding it to include all the writers of imaginative literature; then, by expanding it to include all the works of imaginative literature, subjecting them to the same kind of rigorous testing that Vickers describes in his book. Hopefully at some point Oxfordian scholars will begin to work together (possibly even, at some point, with orthodox scholars of the stature of Vickers, May and Simonton) in a common effort to assemble this very large and complex puzzle.

At the same time we may be venturing into an as-yet-unexplored and exciting new intellectual frontier. For by delving into the truth behind the production of these great works of the English Renaissance, we will be following in the footsteps of their authors, their real authors—as they studied the lives and works of the poets of ancient Greece and Rome, reading and translating them

into English, absorbing the inner processes of their style and thought and thereby laying the groundwork for a new literary language for themselves and generations of readers. It's much the same process by which those same predecessors, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, created the modern literary language of Italy, as they rescued the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome from the dust and decay of monastery libraries, translating them into vernacular Italian, evolving a new way of thinking, speaking and behaving, one that rapidly spread to all the nations of Europe via their royal courts. And so may we, by uncovering the truth, or at least by creating the most likely scenario, open up a new and hopeful vista for our own creativity, one sorely needed in this second, longest, and most deadly "drab era" in the writing of genuine poetry.

We may also achieve a much truer vision of what was really going on at the Court of Elizabeth and in the pubs and drawing rooms and bedrooms where these creative souls spent time together, all questions of religions and class division set aside by the overarching needs of creative artists to know each other, work together, drive each other crazy, and finally, some of them, ripen into full maturity. The clues are there. Once we know where to look we'll find them. And what a story it will be! Truly the story of stories.

THE PROCESS

- First: We must agree on an expanded authorship thesis, one that recognizes all the problems, not just Shakespeare's. We must also agree to work together and to not allow our differences in interpretation to stop us.

- Second: We must separate the literary evidence of authorship from the non-literary evidence.

- Third: We must remove the authors' names from all questionable works, identifying them instead by genre, subject, personality, age and sex of protagonist, and available date marks, and then translating them (if necessary) into modern English spelling.

- Fourth: We must subject them to a battery of stylometric tests as described by Brian Vickers in his book *Shakespeare Co-author*, providing a friendly statistician with the results so he or she can run the numbers and give us sufficient data to compare to each other and to an agreed-upon control group.

From this point on the steps should be obvious.

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