

A Rose By Any Other Name

Thomas R. Schuck

2/27/17 Budget

Who was William Shakespeare? Answering this question has used more ink (and gigabytes) than any other topic in English literature. We know something of the man, although there are significant gaps and inconsistencies in the story; scholars give us theories with little evidence. Beyond the bare facts of his life, much of what is commonly accepted was invented and embellished by the Shakespeare industry that started around 100 years after the man's death. For example, in 1693 – 77 years after Shakespeare died – an antiquarian named John Dowdall wrote an account of his visit to Stratford-upon-Avon, in which he asserted that Shakespeare wrote the following epitaph for himself:

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forebear
To dig the dust enclos'ed here.
Bles't be the man who spares these stones
And curs't be he that moves my bones!

The problem with Dowdall's doggerel is that William Shakespeare was buried in an unmarked grave.

Over the years, more than 80 historical figures, as well as various groups, have been nominated as the authors of Shakespeare's works. In 1931, Gilbert Slater theorized that they were written by seven different authors: Sir Frances Bacon; Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford; Sir Walter Raleigh; William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby; Christopher Marlowe; Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke; and Roger Manners, 5th Earl of Rutland. In the early 1960's, de Vere, Bacon, Roger Manners, William Herbert, and Mary Sidney were proposed as members of a group known as the "Oxford Syndicate." Marlowe and fellow playwrights Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe have also been proposed as participants in the group and possible contributors to Shakespeare's plays, and Sir Henry Neville has been proposed as the author. Anyone who has seen the Star Trek film *The Undiscovered Country* knows that William Shakespeare was a Klingon.

Shakespeare the Man

We know that William Shakespeare was born in April, 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon in the county of Warwickshire. He allegedly attended grammar school there, but there is no record of it. His father was a merchant and sometime high bailiff (or local official), but was illiterate; he signed documents with an X. Not one piece of handwriting, not one letter, not one note, no

journal or diary, no poem, not even a scrap of a manuscript exists in handwriting attributed to William Shakespeare. Six signatures on legal documents within the last four years of his life (three of them on his will) spell his name differently each time. In 1582, at the age of 18, after taking out a license to marry Anne Whately, he was apparently dragooned into a marriage with Ann Hathaway, eight years his senior and pregnant. They had three children by the time he was 20. His mother, his wife, and his daughters were also illiterate (his son died at age 11).

Sometime between 1584 and 1594, William Shakespeare left Ann and the children for London, where he was occasionally an actor and shareholder in various acting companies. He often returned home, and in 1597, paid £60 in cash for the deed to the second-largest house in Stratford, called New Place. In May, 1602, he paid £320 in cash for 107 acres of land in Stratford; he made subsequent purchases there and in London. Nonetheless, there is no record of his income. He died in April, 1616 at the age of 52 and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Stratford churchyard. His First Folio was published beginning in August, 1621, five years after his death. So much for the historical record.

Shakespeare the Dramatist

Whoever wrote Shakespeare's plays, we know the most about the author(s) from the plays themselves. They bespeak a classical education and familiarity with pastimes such as falconry and lawn bowling and the esoteric subject of alchemy, which was known as "the royal art," associated with the nobly born rather than commoners. The argument in favor of one nobleman or a group over another is ultimately unconvincing; the more interesting argument is that the plays (and other pieces) were the work of a woman, namely, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke.

Mary Sidney was born in 1561, three years before Shakespeare, to the sister of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's confidant and possibly lover. So close was the family to the throne that Mary's mother nursed Queen Elizabeth through a case of smallpox, caught the disease herself, almost died, and was so horribly disfigured by the pox that she never appeared in public again without a veil. Mary grew up at Penshurst Place, the palatial Sidney home in Kent, with summers at Ludlow Castle on the border of Wales. She was exceptionally well educated, as were her brothers and sisters, especially Philip Sidney, who became a noted author. Mary's father, Henry, served as Lord President of the Marches (the border counties

between Wales and England) and later Lord Deputy Governor of Ireland under Elizabeth. At the age of 13, Mary became a maid-of-honor to the Queen, a role apparently invented for the adolescent. At court, she caught the eye of Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, 24 years her senior. They were married in 1576, when Mary was 15, and went to live on Lord Pembroke's 14,000 acre estate, Wilton House, in Wiltshire, just outside Salisbury. Stratford-upon-Avon is about 80 miles to the north.

Mary cultivated a passion for alchemy, chemistry, mineralogy, and medicine and developed a complete laboratory at Wilton House. Sir Walter Raleigh's half-brother, Adrian Gilbert, was an assistant in her lab. Mary developed an extensive private library. Wilton House became a country base not only for the Herberts but also for the Dudleys and Sidneys.

Unfortunately, Mary's life was filled with tragedy. Within a little more than a year, she lost her first-born, her father, her mother, and her brother, Sir Philip Sidney (who died in 1586 fighting for the Queen in the Protestant war against the Spanish in the Netherlands). The sonnet entitled "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" was arguably composed in his memory, but she was not allowed to participate in the public eulogies at his funeral because of her gender. She spent two years in mourning, writing. The publication of her first works coincided with her

reentry into London society in 1588 and the issuance of *Titus Andronicus* (1588), followed by *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590), *Taming of the Shrew* (1591), and the early history plays (1591-93). Meanwhile, William Shakespeare was busy sorting out which Ann(e) he was going to marry.

At Mary's request, Sir Philip Sidney composed *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, a work of prose romance fiction. Around 1579, he composed *The Defence of Poesey* (in modern terms, *An Apology for Poetry*), a work of literary criticism that his sister published in 1595. She also published his cycle of 108 sonnets and 11 songs entitled *Astrophil and Stella* (meaning the Star Lover and his Star, thought to be Lady Penelope Devereux, who was his lost love). In 1592, Mary published her own *Antonius, a Tragedy*, a translation of a French play about the life and death of Marc Antony. This was followed by her *Discourse of Life and Death*, another translation from the French; and a translation of Petrarch's *The Triumph of Death*, which circulated in manuscript. She published *Arcadia* in 1593 and expanded and republished it in 1598. By 1599, she had completed her project of rephrasing and versifying most of the *Psalms of David* from the 1560 Geneva Bible, giving them a sophisticated 16th century tone and rhythm. Take, for example, the introductory verses of Psalm 69:

Here is the Geneva Bible version, which carried forward into the King James Bible completed in

1611:

Save me, O God, for the waters are
Entered even to my soul,
I stick fast in the deep mire, where no
stay is: I am come into deep waters,
and the streams run over me.
I am weary of crying: my throat is dry,
Mine eyes fail, whiles I wait for my God.

Psalm 69, vv. 1-3

Now here is Mary Sidney's version of the same verses:

Troblous seas my soul surround:
Save, O God, my sinking soul,
Sinking, where it feels no ground,
In this gulf, this whirling hole,
Waiting aide, with earnest crying:
Calling God with bootless crying –
Dim and dry in me are found
Eye to see, and throat to sound.

Hers has a more personal, troubled tone, which perhaps reflects her personal anguish at the time.

She also wrote several elegies to her brother but was not allowed to publish them in the collections issued following Sir Philip's death.

After moving to London, Shakespeare became one of Pembroke's Men, the troupe of players sponsored by Mary and her husband. Lord Pembroke died in 1601 and most of Mary's

power and influence died with him. William Herbert inherited his father's titles and estates.

Eventually, William became Lord Chamberlain under James I, in which position he was able to control the publication of plays, including his mother's. Following her husband's death, Mary became involved with a Doctor Matthew Lister, and they moved to Spa in Belgium to escape royal censure at home. The end of Shakespeare's supposed playwriting coincided with William Herbert's censorship of his mother's work.

So what is the argument for Mary Sidney's authorship of the plays? It stands out because of her gender. Many of Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a sensitivity to the feminine (both its strengths and the constraints to which it was subject during the times) that supports the argument that a woman wrote or contributed to the writing of the plays. They include domestic references that would have been the particular concern of women in the Elizabethan age. For example, in *Henry VIII*, the author has Norfolk say "Know you naught/The fire that mounts the liquor till it run o'er/In seeming to augment it wastes it?"¹ In *Pericles*, Gower says "Deep clerks she dumbs; and with her needle composes/Nature's own shape, of bud, bird, branch, or berry,/That even her

¹ *Henry VIII*, 1.i. 143-45.

art sisters the natural roses;...”² If William Shakespeare wrote the advice that the author has

Gertrude give in *Hamlet*, he would have done well to have heeded it himself: “Oh gentle

son,/Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper/Sprinkle cool patience!”³ And is this the

sentiment of a man, especially one writing of the most horrid deeds, in describing the fate of the

princes in the Tower in *Richard III*:

Ah, my poor princes! Ah, my tender babies!
My unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets!
If yet your gentle souls fly in the air
And be not fixed in doom perpetual,
Hover about me with your airy wings
And hear your mother’s lamination!⁴

Even in the history plays, which are part historical narrative and part apologia for the Tudor dynasty, particularly *Richard III* (1593), women play an active part in the story. They range from Mistress Quickly in *Henry IV* and *V* and the *Merry Wives of Windsor* to Queen Margaret in all three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. The author of *Richard II* added three women and invented three scenes that are not contained in the historical sources: Queen Isabel and the garden scene; the Duchess of York as a protective mother; and the Duchess of Gloucester

² *Pericles*, prologue to Act V.

³ *Hamlet*, 3.iv.126-27

⁴ *Richard III*, 4.iv.9-14.

in mourning for her husband. In *Henry IV, Part I*, the author added the wives of Mortimer and Hotspur, who were not included in the historical narrative. *Henry VI, Part II* develops Queen Margaret as a power to be, a role fleshed out in *Henry VI, Part III*. The longest scene in *Richard III*, which was invented by the author(s), is that featuring the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Margaret (the fourth of the plays in which Queen Margaret appears, although historically, she was back in France at the time of the action). What motivation would a man, enobled or baseborn, have had to develop these powerful female characters in plays that were about powerful historical male figures?

All in all, Mary Sidney's published works reflect the dignity and decorum required of her public face notwithstanding the tragedies in her personal life. Little wonder, then, that she may have expressed her literary soul in works that she could not publish under her own name. Ben Jonson composed a poem for the publication of the First Folio entitled "Sweet Swan of Avon," which he dedicated to his "Beloved...The AUTHOR":

Sweet Swan of Avon! What a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appear,
And to make those flights upon the banks of Thames,
That did so take Eliza and our James!

How intriguing – and how modern – to think that he was eulogizing Mary Sidney, authoress of Shakespeare’s plays!

Postscript

Bill Pratt brought to my attention William Browne’s poetic epitaph of Mary Sidney, “On the Countess Dowager of Pembroke,” published in 1660:

Underneath this sable hearse
Lies the subject of all verse:
Sidney’s sister, Pembroke’s mother;
Death, ere thou hast slain another,
Fair, and learn’d, and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee.
Marble piles let no man raise
To her name for after days;
Some kind woman born as she,
Reading this, like Niobe⁵
Shall turn marble, and become
Both her mourner and her tomb.

It is gratifying to know that she was valued for herself, whether she wrote William Shakespeare’s works or not.

⁵ Niobe, whose twelve children were slain by Apollo and Artemis, was turned into a stone which continued to weep; she thus became an ideal subject for garden statuary and mortuary sculpture.

SOURCES

Robin P. Williams, *Sweet Swan of Avon: Did A Woman Write Shakespeare?* (Berkeley, CA: Wilton Circle Press, 2006).

John Gross, “*Denying Shakespeare*” (March, 2010).

Calvin Hoffman, *The Murder of the Man Who Was “Shakespeare”* (New York: Julian Messner, 1955).

H.N. Gibson, *The Shakespeare Claimants* (Routledge Library Editions, 1962).

William Browne (1591-1643), “On the Countess Dowager of Pembroke,” in Norton’s *Anthology of English Literature*.