

***WAS SHAKESPEARE A ‘HYDDEN MAN’?***

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*Was Shakespeare a ‘Hydden Man’?*

*An Elizabethan Jigsaw Puzzle*

*Nancy Peters Maude*

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# Preface

Imagine reconstructing a 400-year-old jigsaw puzzle with a seemingly infinite number of pieces, many of which are missing, with the cover picture lost or, more likely, deliberately obscured. This sums up the long-standing search for the definitive author of a revered body of literary masterpieces collectively known as the Shakespeare works. In the following chapters, significant and well-accepted pieces of this puzzle are reconfigured to create a portrait of the proposed author of the Shakespeare works, Ralph Sheldon of Beoley (1537-1613).

At its essence, this analysis is of a genre known as an ‘author attribution study,’ a genre which, as indicated by Harold Love in his seminal work *Attributing Authorship* (2002), has a myriad of varied forms.<sup>1</sup> For example, while this author’s own study attributing the authorship of an anonymous work, *Ulysses upon Ajax* (1596), to Thomas Lodge relied heavily upon internal stylometric evidence (comparison of linguistic parallels),<sup>2</sup> this study has little reliance on such comparative word analysis. Nevertheless, as required by Professor Love, it is strongly supported by copious amounts of both internal and external evidence.<sup>3</sup> This evidence constitutes the major pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

Thus, various kinds of evidence are presented to affirm the attribution of the entire body of work commonly accepted as the Shakespeare oeuvre to Sheldon, the ‘Hydden Man’ of the title. The Introduction lays out the genesis of the theory. Research has confirmed that numerous so-called ‘source-plays’ formed the basis for many Shakespeare plays, with the conventional consensus that the writer Shakespeare was merely the reviser (or more directly, the

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Love, *Attributing Authorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Peters Maude, “Was Thomas Lodge Also Misodiaboles?,” *The Review of English Studies*, New Series 68, no. 255 (June 2017): 488-506.

<sup>3</sup> Love, 216.

plagiarizer) of such source-plays. By contrast, this theory argues that one man – Ralph Sheldon – wrote both the source-plays and the later-published, more literary Shakespeare plays. It holds that Sheldon wrote these plays while working as the long-time house dramatist for the Earl of Leicester and his troupe, Leicester's Men, starting in the mid-1560s, and continued with the troupe in its later iterations as the Queen's Men, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the King's Men, until his death in 1613.

Parts I – III of this study compile the documentation for this theory. Part I first summarizes the basic evidence for Sheldon as a 'generic' Shakespeare, then follows with a preliminary summary of the chronology of the evidence supporting the attribution of the Shakespeare works to Sheldon, beginning in 1555 and extending through the 1623 First Folio, including a timetable related to the chronology. Parts II and III present the myriad jigsaw pieces and supporting documentation. Part II includes independent evidence corroborating the theory. Part III offers internal and external evidence in a chronology beginning with Sheldon's trip to Italy as an 18-year-old in 1555/6, ending with Sheldon's death in March 1613 and the final Shakespeare plays of 1613/4.

In Part IV, the conclusion of the attribution study is set forth, in accordance with the methods of Professor Love. This summation proposes a 'profile' of characteristics of the writer Shakespeare that can be fairly drawn from the Shakespeare texts, thereby offering a list by which all candidates (including Sheldon) can be judged. Most importantly, it reconfigures the evidence presented in the earlier chapters of the book to describe the relevant evidence in a manner intended to prove that the biography of Ralph Sheldon has a rational relationship to the entire literary output of the writer known as Shakespeare and that, therefore, Sheldon was Shakespeare. Two appendices support this conclusion: Appendix I providing a summary of Sheldon's life as Shakespeare and Appendix II lists the evidence connected with individual Shakespeare works, set forth in a chronology as revised under this theory.

# Introduction: The Challenge

Common wisdom asserts that as we know who wrote the Shakespeare works, there is little need to inquire further. But in the past century, eminent scholars such as Geoffrey Bullough, Kenneth Muir, E.M.W. Tillyard, Lily B. Campbell, J. Dover Wilson, Ernesto Grillo, Ernst Kantorowicz, Lukas Erne, and others have unearthed much new evidence regarding the writer's sources and methods. This accumulated scholarship presents serious conundrums on the perceived life of the writer, leading to the question: do we really know who wrote the Shakespeare works? To address these numerous conundrums, this book presents an alternative theory: that Ralph Sheldon of Beoley (1537-1613), known in modern times for his commission of the Sheldon tapestry maps, wrote the various works of the writer known as 'Shakespeare' over the course of his 76 years until his death in 1613, consistent with when, by consensus, the Shakespeare plays appear to end.

Many of the puzzles surrounding the writer Shakespeare have surfaced with rigorous research by the scholars noted above that has conclusively identified numerous texts as predecessors of the Shakespeare oeuvre. These original texts are frequently highly esoteric, and difficult to obtain both then and now. Such texts include, for example: law reports by jurist Edmund Plowden (c. 1518-85) published in the 1570s in the Norman French language then used in the law courts; Francois de Belleforest's French language novellas from the 1570s; a rare manuscript written in 1576 by George North; and (most controversially) a manuscript written c. 1591 by physician Thomas Moffett touting silkworm production.

Then, similarly, there is the seemingly irrefutable evidence of an Italian influence in the Shakespeare plays, identified by Stratfordian scholars not only in geographical and local references but also in the construction of certain plays in the manner of the great Italian dramatic movement beginning in the 1550s of the *commedia dell'arte*. As opposed to the literary source texts, however, knowledge of these specific references would not be available in manuscript or published sources – rather, only

through personal observation. So, the major conundrum presents itself: how did the writer obtain the observational knowledge of Italy and Italian culture evidenced in his plays?

In addition to conundrums developed from research into the texts of the Shakespeare plays, other riddles appear in the history of contemporary events. For example, around the year 1590, the poet Edmund Spenser (1552/53-99) laments that “pleasant Willy . . . is dead of late.” Shakespearean scholar Alfred Harbage (1901-76) gave a lecture in 1961 in which he tied Spenser’s lament to the writer Shakespeare, calling it an “unsolved puzzle” that is “one of the strangest in our early dramatic history.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, satirists Joseph Hall (1574-1656) and John Marston (1576-1634) make puzzling references to the writer Shakespeare, calling the writer by the Roman surname ‘Labeo,’ and Hall accusing him of living like a “craftie Cuttle” disguised under “another’s name.”

Shakespeare’s sonnets present yet another enigma to a biography of the writer. The first early sonnets undeniably advocate marriage and procreation, seemingly advice from an older, wiser man to the young noble to whom the sonnets are dedicated. Further, the later sonnets give the sense of bad fortune (see, for example, Sonnet 37, line 3: “So I, made lame by Fortune’s dearest spite”) and social disgrace. How can such personal details be reconciled to the conventional biography of the writer?

Still another mystery of contemporary history is who financed the construction of the Globe Theater. Shakespeare historian E.K. Chambers wrote flatly: “[T]here is nothing to show how the funds for building [the Globe] were found.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the ownership (and profits) of the Globe were divided into two equal shares, one held by the brothers Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, and the other by five members of the acting troupe known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. While the Burbages contributed funds (and work) toward the erection of the Globe, it seems equally clear that the others (the members of the troupe) did not. So, who paid for the other half of the Globe, and why did they not take an ownership share, instead giving their share to the members of the acting troupe?

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Harbage, “*Love’s Labor’s Lost* and the Early Shakespeare,” in *Stratford papers on Shakespeare, 1961*, ed. B.W. Jackson (Toronto: W.J. Gage Limited, 1962), 129.

<sup>5</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), II.417.

Arguably the heart of the expansion of the study of the Shakespeare works was the confirmation of numerous sources – often rare and arcane – used in the plays. Kenneth Muir (1907-96), editor of the *Shakespeare Survey* from 1965-80 who served as Chairman of the International Shakespeare Association, wrote an article in 1954 that identified multiple literary sources for the tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe* as retold in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, sources that included Thomas Moffett's aforementioned manuscript on silkworm production.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the article he observed that such variety of sources was not uncommon in Shakespeare's works:

It may be urged that we are dealing with an exceptional case . . . But although some plays were based on a single source, there is no reason to believe that the case of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is unique. *Richard II* is apparently based on Hall, Holinshed, Froissart, Daniel, a play, and two French sources. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare certainly made use of Holinshed, *The Faerie Queene*, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, the old chronicle play of *King Leir*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*, and his own *Titus Andronicus*. There is sound evidence that he consulted two editions of *The Mirror for Magistrates*. . . .

From this, Muir concluded that "[T]hese and many other examples which might be given" were "sufficient indication" that a "full-length study of Shakespeare's use of multiple sources" was necessary.<sup>7</sup>

Two years later (at the suggestion of Muir),<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Bullough (1901-82) of Kings College, London, embarked on his epic study, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ending with 8 volumes of over 1000 pages of commentary accompanied by more than 3000 page of texts, published over a 18 year period from 1957 to 1975.<sup>9</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Muir, "Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (April 1954): [www.jstor.org/stable/2866583](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2866583); for Muir's discussion of "the version from which Shakespeare appears to have borrowed most, that contained in Thomas Moffett's poem, *The Silkwormes and their Flies*," see 147-51.

<sup>7</sup> Muir, "Pyramus," 152-53.

<sup>8</sup> See Muir on Geoffrey Bullough, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/memoirs/pba-68/bullough-geoffrey-1901-1982/>; Muir wrote that he had been approached by publishers Routledge & Kegan Paul on publication of a collection of Shakespeare's sources but instead Muir suggested that the publishers contact Bullough as he had already begun such a study; see 499.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8v. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1957-75).

monumental work, together with Muir's subsequent *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (1977, dedicated to Geoffrey Bullough),<sup>10</sup> remain today the definitive survey of Shakespeare's sources.

As might be expected, revelations of new sources underlying Shakespeare's plays led to a reevaluation of the writer Shakespeare himself, but not, perhaps, in the way one might expect. Instead of admiration for the remarkable breadth of an obviously scholarly author, there was a growing consensus that the writer Shakespeare had merely rewritten someone else's scholarly work. In his 1939 edition of *Richard II*, John Dover Wilson (1881-1969), editor of the Cambridge series *The New Shakespeare* begun in 1921, suggested that an older anonymous play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, had provided Shakespeare with "not merely with material for his *Richard II* but for the whole cycle *Richard II* to *Henry V*"; he also alluded to the "strange publication" of *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* – an early play dealing with the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V. Of the author of the *Troublesome Reign*, Wilson wrote that this "unknown predecessor" was "soaked in the history of England, had read the chroniclers for [Shakespeare] and had digested what they had to say upon the downfall of Richard II into a play-book ready to [Shakespeare's] revising hand." Wilson concluded: "Once again, as in *King John*, we have had to face the question, 'Was Shakespeare a profound historical scholar or merely the reviser of such a scholar's play?' And, as before, we have been compelled to reply that the probabilities are all in favour of the second alternative."<sup>11</sup>

While Bullough rejected Wilson's conclusion on *Richard II* (Bullough, III.354-355), he himself similarly found old plays – written anonymously, apparently by some earlier scholar – as the probable major source of numbers of Shakespeare's plays: *The Taming of the Shrew* (Bullough I.57); *The Merchant of Venice* (Bullough I.445-446);

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<sup>10</sup> Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (Yale University Press, 1978; first printed in the UK by Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. John Dover Wilson, *The New Shakespeare Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 1939, reprinted 1971), lxxiv-lxxvi. Wilson refers to his conclusion in his earlier edition of *King John* that Shakespeare "first undertook the rewriting of *The Troublesome Reign* in 1590 for some company unknown"; see *King John*, ed. John Dover Wilson, *The New Shakespeare Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 1936, reprinted 1969), lv.

*King John* (Bullough, IV.4-5); *1&2 Henry IV* (Bullough IV.167-168); *Henry V* (Bullough IV.347-348); *Hamlet* (Bullough, VII.16); *King Lear* (Bullough, VII.276). Writing about *Much Ado About Nothing*, Bullough notes that Wilson had argued that this play was “set up from ‘an old play which had been worked over and recast’ but that the old play was written by Shakespeare himself. Of this, Bullough commented that it was “always daunting for a commentator to be faced by the ghost of an ‘old play,’ and it [was] heartening to think that Shakespeare may have written this one himself” (Bullough II.61).

But where was there evidence that the older, more scholarly writer had vanished? Lukas Erne’s 2003 *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* would seem to provide ample evidence that later publications of Shakespeare’s plays were more, not less, scholarly than preceding plays. Erne’s research shows that Shakespeare published much longer, more complete, and more complex published works, and that he did so explicitly for the purpose of creating a more respectable literary version of the original stage plays.<sup>12</sup>

This study proposes an alternative theory to the writer Shakespeare, one that bridges the wide gulf between the older, so-called ‘source-plays’ and Shakespeare’s later poetic and highly accomplished published plays. This work introduces a new candidate as the writer Shakespeare, Ralph Sheldon of Beoley, a wealthy landowner with extensive holdings in Worcestershire and Warwickshire – in the middle of ‘Shakespeare country.’ It is contended herein that Sheldon wrote (and revised) all the plays, beginning with *Romeo & Juliet* around 1560, and continuing through *The Two Noble Kinsmen* until his death in 1613.

Not only does Sheldon’s life offer resolution to Shakespeare conundrums, such as those cited above (for example, Sheldon’s brother-in-law was Edmund Plowden; he would have known of Moffett’s silkworm advocacy, as his family was long engaged in promoting English manufacture of high-quality tapestries, something for which silk – and silkworm production – was essential), but it also provides straightforward answers to two fundamental questions about the life of the writer. First, why did the plays end in 1613/4?

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<sup>12</sup> Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 134-35; 220.

Sheldon died in March 1613. Second, for every candidate not named ‘Shakespeare,’ why the continuing conspiracy of silence around the identity? Sheldon was an alleged Catholic ‘recusant’ – someone who failed to attend English church services – whose wife’s Throckmorton family was militantly Catholic; as such, Sheldon would have been politically highly suspect as a writer of traditional English history plays.

This theory fundamentally alters the conception of the writer, proposing that the writer was the pioneer dramatist of the age, inspiring the later younger dramatists of the Elizabethan era, not – as currently held – an imitator of the same younger playwrights. Sheldon began his career working with Robert Dudley 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Leicester (1532-88) and his prominent stage troupe in the 1560s, continuing in the 1570s, a fraught time when it would have been politically fatal for the strong Protestant and English nationalist Leicester to have publicly allied with a Catholic recusant as his lead playwright. While Sheldon wrote for Leicester, his plays were unpublished and anonymous; but even after Leicester’s death in 1588, the political danger persisted, with Sheldon eventually publishing his plays either anonymously or under the pseudonym of ‘William Shakespeare.’

Of course, this study reaches a very different conclusion from that of the scholars mentioned above: that the writer was Ralph Sheldon, who started writing his masterpiece plays around 1560 – about 30 years earlier than the traditionally accepted date; a man required to write anonymously as a ‘hydden man’ (Sheldon’s phrase) because of the political danger to his powerful patrons. Nonetheless, the theory is constructed from evidence developed over the decades by these same careful investigators. This study relies, almost entirely, upon the expert scholarship of dedicated Shakespeareans who have created a massive array of highly useful documentation on the writer Shakespeare.



# **PART I: THE THEORY**

## 1. *Ralph Sheldon as the ‘Generic’ Shakespeare*

The central theory for Ralph Sheldon as Shakespeare is straightforward: it holds that Sheldon worked as house dramatist for acting troupes connected to the Earl of Leicester and the Court from 1566 until Sheldon’s death in March 1613. Inspired by a trip in 1556 to northern Italy, Sheldon’s attention to his father’s dream of an English tapestry industry was diverted to the exciting development of English drama, and in the ensuing six decades he collaborated with men such as jurist Edmund Plowden (his brother-in-law), translator Thomas North, and fellow dramatist John Fletcher to create a magnificent repertory for the English stage. Unfortunately, his Catholic recusancy (and his marital connection with militant Catholics) was politically dangerous for the Protestant Court, requiring Sheldon to work discretely under public anonymity (and eventually under the *nom de plume* ‘William Shakespeare’), living his life as the ‘hydden man’ of the English stage. Detailed proof of this theory is laid out in the remainder of this book; Appendix I outlines the life of Sheldon under this theory.

In decorative ornaments he added to his family’s chapel and to the famed Sheldon tapestries around the 1590s, Ralph Sheldon introduced a symbol unusual for the era, the celestial globe. His younger contemporary, the antiquarian Thomas Habington (1560-1647), compiled a list of the ornamentation of the family’s chapel at Beoley, and near the top of the list, described (with a sketch similar to the globe pictured on this book) a symbol prominent in a leaded window Sheldon had created for the chapel as a “Globe Sables, [drawing inserted] the form of the Globe,” a symbol Habington reported nowhere else in Worcestershire.<sup>13</sup> Then, on the top border of his tapestry map of Worcestershire, Sheldon featured original drawings of two celestial globes (each including a version of the London night sky), one on the right and the other on the left. Commenting on the fact that such drawings were unique to the era, tapestry historian Hilary L. Turner asked,

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, 2v. (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1895), I.71. A digital version of both volumes is available at <https://www.google.com/books/>; a search of the digital volumes revealed no other use of the term “globe” in the volumes. Habington made his notes on Worcestershire from 1606 until his death in 1647; see I.17.

“Whatever gave Sheldon the idea to put Globes into tapestry?”<sup>14</sup> The theory set forth herein would answer Turner’s question: Ralph Sheldon’s globe symbols infer the same interests as those that underpin the naming of the ‘Globe’ Theatre.

Much like William Shakespeare, Ralph Sheldon, Esquire (1537-1613) was mysterious. Sheldon held various public offices in Worcestershire between the 1560s and the 1580s: Member of Parliament (1563-67); Sheriff (1576-77) and Justice of the Peace (1574-87).<sup>15</sup> In 1587 he was removed as a justice of the peace because of his wife’s failure to attend Protestant church services (so-called ‘recusancy’), and although he served on two commissions in 1591, he held no more public offices after that date.<sup>16</sup> During the late 1580s and 1590s, he created the Sheldon Tapestry maps with the weavers of the Sheldon Tapestry Works, but there is little to show that he expanded the Tapestry Works far beyond its local operations.<sup>17</sup> Habington claimed that though Sheldon confined himself to a “pryvate lyfe” he deserved a “preeminent dignity” for his “singular partes of mynd which flowed from hys tounge and penne.”<sup>18</sup> Despite Habington’s praise of the

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<sup>14</sup> Hilary L. Turner, “Fitting it in, filling it out: from Christopher Saxton’s survey to Ralph Sheldon’s tapestry maps,” lecture presented at the Bodleian Weston Library on 2 December 2019 (<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/sheldon-tapestry-maps>) minute 22.17.

<sup>15</sup> See History of Parliament Online, <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/sheldon-ralph-1537-1613>.

<sup>16</sup> See Turner, “Ralph Sheldon (1537-1613) of Beoley and Weston: cloaked in conformity?” *Br. Cathol. Hist.* 34, no. 4 (2019): 571-73; also see Ralph Sheldon, History of Parliament Online.

<sup>17</sup> The Sheldon Tapestry Works was the result of a partnership between Ralph’s father William Sheldon and Flemish weaver Richard Hyckes, beginning in the years before William Sheldon’s death in 1570. Although the Sheldon Works have long been credited with starting the quality tapestry industry in England, Turner’s deep research into the subject questions the extent of the actual enterprise, see Turner, “Finding the Sheldon Weavers: Richard Hyckes and the Barcheston Tapestry Works Reconsidered,” *Textile History*, 33, no. 2 (2002): 137-61. Mary Bryan H. Curd concludes Ralph Sheldon made few new investments after his father’s death, and that an important factor in the failure of the Sheldon Works to fully develop into a national industry was Ralph Sheldon’s “seemingly limited interest in the enterprise”; see Curd, *Flemish and Dutch Artists in Early Modern England* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016), 78, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Habington, I.70.

surpassing quality of Sheldon's "penne," no published work collected in the Early English Book Online (EEBO)<sup>19</sup> cites Ralph Sheldon as author.<sup>20</sup>

And even though the latter half of his life may be characterized as "private," in 1581 he was viewed as a "very powerful man" whose imprisonment for recusancy around September 1580<sup>21</sup> and subsequent release in early January 1581<sup>22</sup> caused "much talk and scandal" in London, gaining far more attention and special treatment than would be expected for a provincial country squire with no national office. In 1580, a group of Jesuit priests had entered England on a 'mission' on behalf of the Catholic faith, and the English Parliament enacted legislation prohibiting certain contacts with these Jesuits, with additional penalties against English subjects who refused to go to the English church. According to the Memoir of Jesuit priest Robert Persons, certain "[recusant] gentlemen in prison" had been influenced to conform to English law by a book which had declared that it was not "a sin" against the Catholic faith to attend English church services; the memoir specifically identifies Ralph Sheldon as one of two of the imprisoned gentleman who consequently "wavered" in their faith, and describes the street jeers that resulted: "in London Ralph Sheldon a very powerful and rich man, whose fall [that is, his promise to conform] caused so much talk and scandal to the rest, that it was made the subject of pasquinades, one of which was: 'Sheldon is fallen; and do you ken why? Through *oves et boves et pecora campi* [sheep and oxen and cattle of the fields]'.<sup>23</sup> That this taunt against Sheldon reverberated throughout London seems confirmed by an allusion to the same incident (and the same rhyme) by Sir John Harington, the Queen's

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<sup>19</sup> Early English Books Online (EEBO) is a digital platform that contains transcripts of over 146,000 works published in England between 1475 and 1700. To search on EEBO, go to <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/>.

<sup>20</sup> However, for a sample of Sheldon's writing see Leslie Hotson, *I, William Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 30-34.

<sup>21</sup> Sheldon appeared before the Privy Council on August 21, 1580, to answer charges of recusancy; although he was committed to Marshalsea prison "sometime later," the exact date is unclear; see Sheldon, *History of Parliament Online*.

<sup>22</sup> See Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 565-66.

<sup>23</sup> See "The Memoirs of Father Robert Persons," *The Catholic Record Society Publications*, vol. 4 (London, 1907), 3-5; the manuscript from which this was taken was transcribed by Father Christopher Grene, and was "copied from the original, dictated and in part written by Fr Persons."

godson, in a book he wrote in 1596, over 15 years later; Harington goes on to repeat comment that Sheldon “was one of the sufficientest wise men of England, fittest to be made of the [Queen’s Privy] Counsell, but for one matter [that is, his recusancy].”<sup>24</sup>

So, was Sheldon a traditional English country squire? Perhaps, but if the writer Shakespeare were considered ‘anonymous’ – that is, unknown – Sheldon could certainly be a legitimate candidate to be the author, writing under the pseudonym Shakespeare (or ‘Shake-speare’). Careful scholarship over decades points to specific areas of knowledge and expertise relied upon by the writer Shakespeare in his work; this expertise can be used to create a biographical ‘profile’ of the writer. Such a ‘generic profile’ of the writer Shakespeare would identify him as a man with (1) Warwickshire roots; (2) legal knowledge, particularly in property, litigation, and local administration; (3) continental travel, specifically to Italy; (4) extensive personal hawking experience; and (5) deep interest in father-daughter relationships, and much association with marriage ceremonies. This generic profile would prove an exact fit for Sheldon.

Although Sheldon worked as a public official for Worcestershire, his ties to Warwickshire were extensive: he grew up in Beoley, a tiny hamlet of Worcestershire, in a manor house previously owned by the Earls of Warwick,<sup>25</sup> immediately on the western border of Warwickshire and the Forest of Arden, in the heart of what is called ‘Shakespeare country.’ From his father William he inherited 14,000 acres, with large holdings in Warwickshire, where in 1588 he built a manor house (Weston House) at Long Compton.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, two of the more obvious references to Warwickshire have direct relevance to Sheldon: “Burton-heath” in *Taming of the Shrew* (1.2.18), and “Barson” in *2 Henry IV* (5.3.92). The generally accepted location of Burton-heath – the home of Christopher Sly (the tinker whose dream grounds the play) – is Barton-on-the-

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<sup>24</sup> Sir John Harington, *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 239-40.

<sup>25</sup> Habington, I.69.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, “Biography & Epitaph of Ralph Sheldon c. 1537, d. 1613,” *Tapestries Called Sheldon*.

Heath, the closest village to the west of Long Compton and Sheldon's manor.<sup>27</sup> Critics agree that Barson – Falstaff is alternatively identified as “goodman Puff of Barson” – is Barcheston;<sup>28</sup> the identification of the variation ‘Barson’ for ‘Barcheston’ comes from a funerary monument in Barcheston for William Willington, Esquire who died in May 1455<sup>29</sup> – the maternal great-great-grandfather of Ralph Sheldon.

While the degree of Shakespeare's legal training has been the source of debate for centuries,<sup>30</sup> even the most skeptical of legal scholars has been impressed by the number, and the legal accuracy of, legal allusions in Shakespeare's plays.<sup>31</sup> Legal scholar George Keeton points to “many allusions” that cannot be readily explained, and refers specifically to the writer's knowledge of legal procedure, bonds, leases, fines and recoveries, technical property terms such as determination, purchase, fee simple;<sup>32</sup> he notes, in particular, Shakespeare's special interest in the “administration of justice in town and country,” citing Shakespeare's “full-length” study of Justice of the Peace Shallow.<sup>33</sup> Sheldon's expertise in these areas of law cannot be overstated: according to his biographer Turner, his main life's occupation was “litigation” and after his father's death in 1570, “he was rarely out of the courts”;<sup>34</sup> he also worked as a Justice of the Peace for Worcestershire for 15 years, from 1574 until he was forced to resign because of recusancy issues in 1587. The UK National Archives and other UK archives hold numerous records of legal cases undertaken by Sheldon, primarily featuring litigation

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<sup>27</sup> See *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Brian Morris, *The Arden Shakespeare* (Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1997; originally printed in 1981), 163, see note 18.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, George Russell French, *Shakespeareana Genealogica* (1869), 326-27, digital version at <https://www.google.com/books/>.

<sup>29</sup> Record of the monument from Warwickshire antiquarian Sir William Dugdale (1605-1686), *The Antiquities of Warwickshire Illustrated* 2v. (London, 1730), I.603, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000156000>, (Hathitrust #657).

<sup>30</sup> For a summary of these arguments, see Mark Andre Alexander, “Shakespeare's Knowledge of Law,” *The Oxfordian* vol. IV (2001) 51-119.

<sup>31</sup> For a range of the extensive work on Shakespeare and the law, see the bibliography compiled by O. Hood Philips in *Shakespeare and the Lawyers* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1972), 193-210.

<sup>32</sup> George W. Keeton, *Shakespeare's Legal & Political Background* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd, 1967), 29-31.

<sup>33</sup> Keeton, 94, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, Ralph Sheldon Biography, *Tapestries Called Sheldon*.

over property and debt issues, such as land purchase, leases, indentures, bonds, and fines.<sup>35</sup>

Proof of first-hand knowledge of Italy by Shakespeare remains a controversial subject, largely because of the biographical limitations of the Stratford Shakspeare. However, Italian professor Ernesto Grillo's *Shakespeare and Italy* (1949) presents convincing arguments on the clear allusions in the Shakespeare plays to facts (geographical and otherwise) that could not have been known by the writer without personal experience of Italy.<sup>36</sup> Italian diplomatic records indicate that Sheldon traveled with Edward Courtenay, the Earl of Devon, to northern Italy in 1555/6<sup>37</sup> and Courtenay's itinerary closely matched the geographical locations of the Shakespeare plays.<sup>38</sup> He probably returned to England after Courtenay's tragic death in September 1556, as he was admitted to Middle Temple in November 1556.

In his article, "Shakespeare's Falconry," Maurice Pope makes the definitive case that Shakespeare must have had extensive personal experience with trained hawks and the sport of falconry (or hawking). Far more than any of his contemporary writers Shakespeare made over fifty mentions of hawking, writing without any error about the sport; of his use of technical terms, Pope concludes that "what is certain is that Shakespeare used them with familiarity."<sup>39</sup> Sheldon's serious personal interest in hawking is indicated by the fact that British state papers record that he sent a manservant

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<sup>35</sup> Archived records of legal cases involving Ralph Sheldon can be found at the UK National Archives website, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>; search for "Ralph Sheldon."

<sup>36</sup> Ernesto Grillo, *Shakespeare and Italy* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1949); see also Richard Paul Roe, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> See *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (CSPV), ed. Rawdon Brown, vol. 6, Part I (London, 1877), 253-54, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100971285> (Hathitrust #327, 328. This shows two letters found in Italian diplomatic files (No. 284, 20 Nov. 1555, and No. 285, 21 Nov. 1555) relating to English affairs relating to "young Sheldon"; this study presents the case that "young Sheldon" is 18-year-old Ralph Sheldon.

<sup>38</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 243 (No. 273, 11 Nov. 1555) (Hathitrust #317): Courtenay expected to travel "first to Mantua, then to Ferrara, and perhaps to Milan, before going to Venice."

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Pope, "Shakespeare's Falconry," *Shakespeare Survey*, 45 (Cambridge University Press, 1992): 131-32, 135.

to Ireland “under the colour of buying hawks.”<sup>40</sup> This statement was accepted in legal proceedings over Sheldon’s defense against serious allegations of traitorous activity, indicating there was no doubt but that Sheldon maintained trained hawks.

In his book on *Shakespeare’s Fathers and Daughters*, Oliver Ford Davies counts twenty-one of Shakespeare’s plays that “prominently feature fathers, surrogate fathers and daughters.” Marriage was also greatly significant in the plays: at least fourteen of the plays include the marriage of daughters. Davies writes that Shakespeare was a “great dramatist of the family” with “almost all” of his major characters “in thrall to family ties.”<sup>41</sup> Sheldon had ten children, nine of whom were daughters; all of Sheldon’s daughters were married during Sheldon’s life.

Any claimant of Shakespeare’s pen must answer two fundamental questions: (1) why the plays stopped in 1613/4; and (2) why (if the claimant’s name is not Shakespeare) the writer was so deeply hidden behind the pseudonym of “William Shakespeare.” To the first question, Sheldon died in March 1613.<sup>42</sup> To the second question, Sheldon’s recusancy barred public acknowledgement of his authorship of the plays, especially given the historic and political aspect of the Shakespeare oeuvre; to have done otherwise would not only have tainted his plays as suspiciously (and potentially treasonously) Catholic but also reflected such suspicion on his sponsor, the resolutely Protestant Earl of Leicester, and the Queen.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1547-1625* (London, 1856-72;), vol. 3 (1591-94), 546, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011543470> (Hathitrust #564): see examination of Rich. Williams, 20 August 1594.

<sup>41</sup> Oliver Ford Davies, *Shakespeare’s Fathers and Daughters* (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017), 1, 190.

<sup>42</sup> See Harold Bloom’s affecting commentary on the subject, reflecting on the uniqueness in literary history of the apparent “abandonment of his art” by the Stratford Shakespeare (who died in 1616); Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 695.

<sup>43</sup> In the modern era, this would be akin to the perceived threat of Communism, the threat of which devastated the U.S. entertainment industry in the 1950s.



## 2. *The Jigsaw Puzzle: Sheldon the ‘Hydden Man’ as Shakespeare*

Mid-twentieth century research revolutionized the study of the Shakespeare texts: scholars like Muir and Bullough identified the wide variety of arcane sources from which the plays were originally developed, thereby adding a countless number of new pieces into the jigsaw puzzle that is ‘Shakespeare.’ Recognizing the dilemma, modern scholars settled into an uneasy hypothesis; they concurred that the young man from Stratford William Shakspeare upon coming to London circa 1587 (at age 23) found scripts of old anonymous plays which he rewrote and produced over a ten-year period, and by 1598, was heralded as the “most excellent” playwright of all, Shakespeare.<sup>44</sup> This book re-thinks the jigsaw puzzle, assembling the now-known pieces into a decisively altered whole. From this rearrangement a fundamentally different image emerges, that of Ralph Sheldon, a man who it is proposed wrote all the plays – the anonymous source-plays and 38 ‘Shakespeare’ plays – over a 53-year period from around 1560 until his death in 1613.

The phrase “Hydden Man” was Sheldon’s own. In a 1585 deposition challenging his son-in-law’s claims that he, his daughter, and wife were avowed papists, Sheldon declared that he, himself, was “no hydden man,”<sup>45</sup> an oddly defensive utterance. The context of this declaration was completely unrelated to anything ‘Shakespeare’; even so, the phrase “Hydden Man” aptly describes the theory of the life of Ralph Sheldon as Shakespeare.

Sheldon was a practicing Catholic in an era when to be a practicing Catholic meant possible prosecution for heresy and, even, treason. In the years following the death of Henry VIII in January 1547, the Tudor monarchy was unstable. When Henry’s 9-year-

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<sup>44</sup> The quote is from Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia: Wit’s Treasury* (7 September 1598); Meres lists 12 plays by Shakespeare, who he declares is “among the English the most excellent” of both comedies and tragedies. See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.246.

<sup>45</sup> See TNA STAC 5/R41/32; also see Hotson, 32. In a deposition written in 1585 in response to a legal complaint by his son-in-law John Russell, Sheldon protests that he (Sheldon) was “no hydden man.” Hotson includes the incident (and the quote) as an anecdote about Russell and Sheldon, with no reference to Shakespeare. In his quote, Hotson uses the modern spelling ‘hidden’; in the actual deposition, however, the spelling is “hydden.”

old son was crowned King Edward VI in February 1547, he took over not only as king but also as the head of the Protestant Church of England. He died six years later; his Protestant cousin Lady Jane Grey was crowned queen but was deposed in nine days by Henry's Catholic daughter Mary, and subsequently executed. Mary was proclaimed queen in 1553, and one year later she married Philip, Catholic heir to the throne of Spain. Then, in 1558, Mary died and her half-sister, the Protestant Elizabeth, became queen. Buoyed up by their new Protestant Queen, English nationalists rebounded. But Elizabeth was young and unmarried, with no clear path of succession. In the event of Elizabeth's death, a major claimant was the Catholic Mary Stuart; and in 1569 a group of northern lords rebelled, backing Mary Stuart as Queen. The Northern Rebellion was quashed but, in its wake, the Catholic pope dramatically excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570. The threat of Catholic political militancy only intensified in the coming decades.

It was in this world of political and legal turmoil that Sheldon – a Catholic but a patriot and a loyal nationalist – found himself in the early 1560s. As an openly Catholic writer working for the political interests of the Protestant Queen and Leicester, his only practical recourse was a discrete presence as a 'hydden man,' a man ultimately known in public as 'William Shakespeare.' The pen name itself announced him as a 'hydden man': it references Athena, shaking her spear in battle, wearing a helmet conferring invisibility.

As time progressed, the veil over Sheldon most probably deepened, likely increased by public confusion caused by the similarity in the names of his chosen pen name and that of one of his actors, William Shakspeare. The actor, who was of a family well-known to Sheldon from the same rural countryside, joined the company of actors sometime in the late 1580s. While actual biographical information about the actor is only sketchy, anecdotal evidence makes it was likely that he was handsome, good company, and a decent actor, but no poet.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the confusion between the playwright and

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Paul Menzer, "Anecdotal Jonson," *Ben Jonson and Posterity*, ed. Martin Butler and Jane Rickard (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Part III, Chapter 7; see Simon Andrew Stirling, *Who Killed William Shakespeare?* (History Press, 2013), 26-9. Stirling, a confirmed Stratfordian, also documents the 19<sup>th</sup> century report that William Shakspeare's skull was stolen from his grave and placed in the Sheldon family crypt, circa 1795, see Stirling, 54-7. The original story can be found at [stratfordsociety.co.uk/files/Skulduggery.pdf](http://stratfordsociety.co.uk/files/Skulduggery.pdf); for confirmation that the skull was, in fact,

the actor could only have grown after ownership profits in the Globe Theatre were shifted to players of the acting company, including Shakspere. To outsiders, Shakspere's ownership share must surely have reflected his assumed contributions as the playwright Shakespeare. While this book does not directly address the claim of the actor as the playwright, a timetable follows that compares the Sheldon theory with the known (and conventionally constructed) dates underlying the Shakspere claim as writer of the plays. See Chapter 3, Timetable of Events.

Part II of this book deals with three different circumstances that provide evidence of Sheldon as Shakespeare but that are independent of Sheldon's own biographical details. First, there is bibliographical evidence that the Sheldon family received the first printed copy of the full 1623 First Folio, and that this special Folio was a gift (Chapter 4). Second, in 1596, the highly educated courtier John Harington, godson to the Queen, notated a copy of a book presented to the equally cultured Lord Lumley equating Sheldon with "Will" (Chapter 5). Finally, although there is no known published work by author 'Ralph Sheldon,' there are publications – which can be tied to Sheldon or Shakespeare or both – with writings by the author 'R.S.' (Chapter 6, 22, 32).

Part III lays out the biographical and textual evidence tying Sheldon to Shakespeare, with the issues presented in chronological order. The evidence is detailed and fully documented in footnotes accompanying the text.

Part IV, the "Conclusion – Why Sheldon Was Shakespeare" reorders the evidence to follow the chronology of the plays. In the sense of the jigsaw puzzle, the conclusion offers a new, reconfigured version of the ancient Shakespeare puzzle.

To make it easier for the reader to follow the technical presentation of the evidence in this thesis, the next paragraphs of this section summarize the theoretical story of Sheldon as Shakespeare, citing the chapter (or chapters) where full discussion of the subject can be found.

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stolen see "Shakespeare's skull probably stolen by grave robbers, study finds," *The Guardian*, 23 March 2016.

## 1550s: Sheldon's Italy Was Shakespeare's Italy

Sheldon's father William and his grandfather William Willington both were wealthy, successful wool merchants who exported wool overseas for use by Flemish weavers in creating luxury tapestries, a product then much in demand at the English Court. William Sheldon dreamed of establishing an English industry of tapestry weavers in the then-impooverished countryside of Warwickshire, and in 1555 he sent his 18-year-old son Ralph (most probably with his man Richard Hyckes) to the Low Countries to study the Flemish weaving trade. By chance – with the help of his father's close friend Ambassador Philip Hoby – Ralph found himself part of the retinue of the 28-year-old Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, marching through war-torn Germany into northern Italy. With the long European wars, significant parts of the tapestry industry had shifted to Italy, a center of the cultivation of the mulberry tree and the silkworm, vital to the finest woven tapestries. See Chapter 7.

Under the leadership of the dashing Courtenay – the Catholic heir to the throne as the last of the White Rose Plantagenet line, and suitor to both the Catholic Mary and the Protestant Elizabeth – Sheldon entered into Italy through Mantua, the home of the Gonzaga princes, in January 1556, on a trip that would change his life forever. At the time of his arrival, the 25-year-old Vespasiano Gonzaga and his beautiful wife Diana de Cordona, were building their utopian city Sabbioneta. The new city – founded on the concept of the ideal classic city such as Athens (it was later known as “Little Athens”) and the principal of religious tolerance – was surrounded by mulberry trees cultivated for silkworms; the construction in January 1556 had just begun on the western wall by what was known as “il Quercia dei Duca” (the Duke's Oak). All these elements – Athens, the Duke's Oak, the silkworms, the dreamland overseen by a noble but frequently quarrelsome couple (Vespasiano's jealousy was famed) – were later repeated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. See Chapter 8. Moreover, acting troupes in Mantua had only recently (around 1550) invented a revolutionary dramatic style – the ‘commedia dell’arte’ – a style manifest in Shakespeare plays from one of the earliest (such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) to his late play *The Tempest*. See Chapter 9.

The itinerary of Courtenay's trip, and the Sheldon family's business interests perfectly align with the Italian cities where first-hand knowledge of the local geography and culture is most prominent in the Shakespeare plays: Mantua, Milan, Venice, Padua, and Verona. Verona, on the trade routes into northern Europe, specialized in the handling and export of the specific type of silk predominantly used in the woven tapestries. Travel to the west from Verona to Milan was via rivers and canals, or via the land route, traveling around Mantua through forests. Then to the east of Verona were Padua, where Courtenay resided, and Venice, where Jewish merchants managed the import of foreign silk thread into Italy and elsewhere. See Chapter 8. Courtenay died suddenly and tragically, possibly of poison, in Padua on 18 September 1556.

### **1556-61: Sheldon at Middle Temple, *Romeo & Juliet*, and the of the Inns Court**

By November 1556, Sheldon was in central London, admitted to study law at the Middle Temple on November 12, and had chambers in the Temple at least through May 1560. In this same period, the first version of *Romeo & Juliet* was produced, to notable acclaim, and a new nativist English dramatic tradition developed, centered in the London Inns of the Court.

Although there is no extant playbook of the early *Romeo & Juliet*, the performance of such a play is attested to by Arthur Brooke in preface to his 1562 poem *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* where he writes of "the same argument [the same story as in his poem] set forth lately on stage." The conventional view is that Brooke's poem inspired a later Shakespeare play, but there is nothing in the brief record of the play that would refute the opposing view: that Shakespeare's play inspired Brooke's poem. To the contrary, Brooke's account makes it clear that the stage production ("being far better set forth than I have or can do") had inspired him to publish a poem translating the French version of the story, and he augmented his translation with some character development long considered Shakespeare's trademark (such as the bawdy nurse). See Chapter 10. That Sheldon would have been in London at the same time the original play was performed adds strong support the latter view, especially as the play seems derived directly from Sheldon's experiences in Italy, particularly in its

Verona location and the tragic death of Romeo Montague, a character highly reminiscent of Edward Courtenay.

Over thirty years later, the production of the playlet of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* harkened back to a far earlier period in English stage history – when there were no professional actors, only “rude mechanicals”; of the playlet, Bullough wrote that it may have been a “whimsical burlesque of Shakespeare’s first experiment in romantic tragedy.” That *Pyramus and Thisbe*, is, indeed, an archaic version of *Romeo & Juliet* would suggest the accuracy of Bullough’s surmise. But perhaps of greater significance, the apparent source of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet was an extremely rare and obscure manuscript advocating silkworm cultivation in England, something few people would be aware of; that is, few people other than those with an interest in English silk production and the tapestry industry – such as Ralph Sheldon. See Chapter 10.

Sheldon’s time at the Middle Temple was a period of political turmoil – summarized by the seismic shift in 1558 from the Catholic Queen Mary I to the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I – but there was also a renaissance of poetry and drama, all centered in the Inns of the Court. Drawing from then ‘modern’ (1548) history chronicle of Edward Hall (Gray’s Inn, Member of Parliament), George Ferrers (Lincoln’s Inn, Member of Parliament) organized a series of poetic vignettes illustrating bad (and tragic) behavior of past rulers; these were first published in 1559 in *Mirror for Magistrates*, an earlier version having been banned under Queen Mary. Likewise, Thomas Sackville (Inner Temple) and Thomas Norton (Inner Temple, Member of Parliament) produced the first English five-act drama, *Gorboduc*, a play dealing with the questions of succession to the English crown, in 1561/2. See Chapter 11.

Although there had long been an assumption among Shakespeare scholars that the writer drew his history solely from the later Holinshed’s Chronicles (particularly the 1587 edition), new research undertaken in the mid-twentieth century by scholars such as Bullough, Muir, Tillyard, and Lily B. Campbell, radically altered that presumption. This research unearthed a vast amount of different sources for the various plays; arguably the two most influential were from this early period: Hall’s Chronicle and the *Mirror for*

*Magistrates*. See Chapter 11. Like the men who wrote these seminal early works, Sheldon lived through the most turbulent political period of the Tudor succession and had an active political role as a member of the Inns of the Court, and a Member of Parliament (1563-67).

### **1560s: Sheldon and Leicester**

Closely allied, and forthrightly behind, the cultural renaissance led by the Inns of the Court were the two long-term compatriots, the new Queen Elizabeth and Robert Dudley, her Master of the Horse. On May 16, 1559, after her accession to the throne in November 1558, Elizabeth decreed that henceforth all English plays would be written only by men of “auctoritie, learning, and wisdom.” By the next month, Dudley was organizing performances of his ‘Lord Dudley players’ in Yorkshire. Dudley – a master impresario his entire life – was by the Christmas season of 1560/61, at age 27, the principal producer of Court entertainment, along with Sebastian Westcott of the Children of Paul’s. The following year, he was admitted into the Inner Temple, and grandly ruled over the festivities that included the ground-breaking production of *Gorboduc*. See Chapter 12.

But having set himself to be the principal producer of Court entertainment, how was Dudley – soon to be Earl of Leicester – to find plays written by men of learning and wisdom? Oddly, there is no known record of any playwright associated with Dudley’s acting troupe (after 1564, Leicester’s Men) for the entire period of their operation, from 1560 through 1583. Neither was there any playwright associated with the Children of Paul’s between the years 1567 through 1581. While anonymous plays were frequent in this early period, Leicester was a well-known patron who, over the course of his career, worked with named writers handling his other court entertainments, such as Richard Edwards, George Gascoigne, and William Gager. See Chapter 12.

By 1560, Sheldon was familiar to Dudley – Sheldon negotiated the sale of the stewardship of Warwick castle from his father-in-law Sir Robert Throckmorton to Dudley, a sale completed in February 1562. Moreover, Dudley was soon to be his neighbor at his sumptuous palace of Kenilworth in Warwickshire, and early on (around 1559) appointed Sheldon’s father William – whose second wife related to the Dudley

family – as one of his local deputies. But the Middle Temple shared premises with the Inner Temple: was Dudley also familiar with Sheldon because of his early *Romeo & Juliet*?

In April 1566, Dudley – by then both the Earl of Leicester and the Chancellor of Oxford – brought Sheldon to Oriel College of Oxford, where Sheldon helped produce the play to be performed in festivities honoring the Queen's first formal visit to Oxford in August. Leicester, though, had something far longer in mind: he demanded that Oriel lease a residence to Sheldon for a 60-year term, thereby forcing the College fellows to evict the occupant of the residence, Edward Marbeck, the brother of Oriel College Provost Roger Marbeck. Leicester's demand created an uproar at the College, and the Provost himself – a very promising young scholar – resigned his position. Sheldon's new residence was then used for dress rehearsals of *Palamon and Arcite*, a well-received play written by the talented Court dramatist Richard Edwards. The occasion ended a great success, with the former Provost given a lead role in both the ceremony for the Queen and the play performance. See Chapter 13.

Then, in October, the Court dramatist Edwards died suddenly in his early 40s. Edwards's untimely death not only meant the loss of a highly regarded playwright and poet, it also left a gaping hole in the Court's retinue. At Court, two acting troupes of young boys led the entertainment: the Children of the Chapel Royal and the Children of Paul's. Edwards had been the Master of the Chapel Royal, and Sebastian Westcott was the Master of Paul's. Westcott, a beloved figure, was principally a musician, and traditionally worked with a dramatist – at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign he had worked with the gifted playwright John Heywood, a Catholic who fled the country with the accession of Elizabeth. Edwards, though, had very capably taken over as the main Court dramatist since 1561. With Edwards's death who was to take over as the Court playwright?

With his recent success at the Oxford festivities for the Queen, Sheldon would have seemed the obvious choice, but there was serious difficulty with this: Sheldon was a practicing Catholic, as was Sebastian Westcott. Leicester had spent nearly four years negotiating to retain the staunchly Catholic Westcott as Master of Paul's, against the will



of Edmund Grindal, the Puritan Bishop of London. See Chapter 14. It would have been politically impossible for Leicester to renew similar efforts on behalf of Sheldon. In fact, when he went to great lengths to procure the long-term residency for Sheldon at Oriel College, Leicester was likely doing his best to hide Sheldon from the public glare, to avoid the inevitable questions regarding Sheldon's Catholicism.

The Queen appointed her Gardener William Hunnis, a known Protestant loyalist, to the vacant position of Master of the Chapel Royal; Hunnis, however, retained his duties as Gardener at Greenwich. According to historian Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, "not one line of any play which can be even plausibly connected with him has come down to us." The Queen seems to have opted for a Protestant figurehead in the position previously held by the talented Edwards. See Chapter 15.

By the next year's Christmas festivities in 1567/68 – notwithstanding the absence of a known Court dramatist – there was a variety of entertainment produced for the Queen at Whitehall, including the play *Wit and Will*. This play, later published as a five-act play but largely forgotten in modern times, added a wise-cracking impudent page boy Will to its plot, a remarkable advance in the otherwise staid history of morality plays. While the play was produced principally for the Queen's entertainment, around this time Sebastian Westcott opened his rehearsals to outsiders, effectively operating a small public playhouse somewhere near St. Paul's. This play – with its hilarious and iconic 'Will' – was probably one of its first productions. See Chapter 16.

When the play was later published in 1569, no author was identified; the play however, seems classic Shakespeare with its iconic Will and a ground-breaking five-act structure. In Shakespeare's plays – particularly those apparently originally written for boy actors – the writer repeatedly returned to the theme of the impudent page boy Will and his master Wit, with different variations. Most obviously, he included the characters Speed and Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the servant Moth and his master Don Armado. Servant boys (including one named 'Will') and their masters also had a prominent role in *The Taming of A Shrew*, the early version of *The Taming of The Shrew*, and likely one of the very earliest of the noted plays. See Chapter 16.

## 1570s: Sheldon, Plowden, Belleforest, & the ‘Source-Plays’

After a hiatus of nearly ten years, Leicester’s Men returned to the Court in 1571. Then, in 1574, the Queen awarded them a patent to perform throughout England, apparently the only such patent she ever awarded. But what were their plays and who was their playwright?

With the total absence of records, one can only speculate. Along with the early *Romeo & Juliet*, the troupe may have had success with *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, a play which directly followed *Gorboduc* in deriving its chronicle history from the twelfth century tales of Geoffrey of Monmouth, rather than modern Tudor histories. And certainly *Titus Andronicus*, a grisly play in the semi-classical mode of the day, was a tremendous crowd-pleaser.

But at some point, beginning in the 1570s, the plays adopted a more contemporary style, and dealt with more topical issues: *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* used for the first time a Tudor chronicle history; *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and early *Richard II* both deal with Tudor succession issues; *Hamlet* was a masterpiece of a new dramatic scale; *Merchant of Venice* considered the significant question of the role of equity in the legal system. All five of the plays have been identified either as a so-called ‘source-play’ (*Famous Victories*, *Troublesome Reign*) or as having an early source-play, two without any doubt (*Hamlet*, *Merchant of Venice*), and one with less consensus (*Richard II*).

All but one play (*Famous Victories*) have one further thing in common: the unquestioned influence of the erudite legal work of Edmund Plowden, an eminent jurist, and brother-in-law to Ralph Sheldon. Sheldon and his brother-in-law Plowden, both practicing Catholics, had been close since their times together in the Middle Temple, but they became even closer after the death of William Sheldon in 1570, when both acted as executors for William’s estate and Plowden had resigned as Treasurer of the Middle Temple to concentrate on publishing his innovative court reports. See Chapter 17.

Sometime in the early 1570s, Sheldon seems to have obtained a rare volume (published in 1550) of the Chronicle of Edward Hall and preceeded to write notes in the

margins of the volume. The notes can be identified as Sheldon's by a comparison of the marginal script and Sheldon's signature: most distinctive is the upper case 'R' found in both the signature and the notes, a form of the letter which seems unique among the recorded script of the era. There is no way of determining exactly how this volume came into his possession; however, because the last known owner was a prominent Shropshire man who died in 1571, with his estate in the family of a jurist well-known to fellow Shropshire native Edmund Plowden, it appears that Sheldon may have been presented the book by his brother-in-law Plowden. See Chapter 18.

Sheldon's marginal notes outlined the rousing story of Henry V, the victor of Agincourt. But the play itself contains much comic relief, interspersing the chronicle history with the fictional story of the young Prince Hal and Oldcastle (later Falstaff). This latter story Sheldon seems to have developed from a rumor making the rounds at the time: in May 1573, Lord Burghley had reported that three of the Earl of Oxford's men had ambushed two men crossing Gad's Hill on the way to London. Having included a variation on this scandal, though, Sheldon was careful to add the fictional detail that the Earl's ancestor had been the wise counselor who gave the King the critical advice that had assured the Agincourt victory. Thus was born the tremendously popular (and patriotic) *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. The first performance of the play can be deduced as sometime after the 1573 incident and sometime before the first edition of Holinshed's (1578) as the sole source of the original play seems to have been the earlier Hall's Chronicle. See Chapter 18.

With the success of the *Famous Victories*, the collaboration of Sheldon and Plowden seems to have begun in earnest. At the time, there was serious unrest in England over the political power of the Catholic Church: northern Catholic lords had rebelled in 1569, and in 1570, the Pope excommunicated the Queen. Over a decade earlier, the Protestant Bishop John Bale had written a manuscript play *Kyng Johan*, casting the history of the medieval monarchy of King John as a triumph over the evil forces of France and Catholic pope. Although neither Sheldon nor Plowden (for obvious reasons) were likely fond of the play, Sheldon used the rare manuscript (which was only found at Ipswich with the Queen) to write a slightly less polemic play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. Plowden was a legal expert on succession – he had been the leading voice in

the public debate on the subject, defending the right of the Catholic Mary Stuart as heir to Elizabeth. Using his legal theory, the play shifted to a far more subtle parallel of Tudor times, slightly altering the facts of the succession issues surrounding John and his brother Arthur to better compare with those surrounding Elizabeth and Mary Stuart. See Chapter 19.

Although the *Troublesome Reign* may have been something of a trial to the Catholic Sheldon, he once again hit his true stride with his next play – another blockbuster, *Richard II*. Beginning his play at the exact point where Edward Hall began his Chronicle, Sheldon returned to his more routine sources – Hall’s Chronicle and the 1559 *Mirror for Magistrates*. But to these, he added far more scholarly sources (including medieval French manuscripts), as well as Plowden’s fairly arcane legal theory on the concept of the “King’s Two Bodies.” This latter theory – a legal fiction that the monarch’s mortal body (and character) are separate from those of the monarch’s ‘body corporate’ – underpins the entire play, resulting in an extended meditation on the theory of kingship. Even if the king’s ‘body mortal’ is flawed, the king still cannot be removed because of the right of the ‘body corporate’; therefore, no matter what one thought of the human qualities of Richard II, no one (including other injured lords like Bolingbroke) had the right to usurp Richard’s throne. Of rebellions such as those undertaken by the northern Lords, Sheldon seemed to be saying – to the public on behalf of the Queen: such rebellions against a rightful monarch (even with legitimate grievance) can never be right, and will only likely lead to civil war and destruction. See Chapter 20.

Dating of almost any Shakespeare play is highly problematic, but perhaps none have aroused so much controversy as the dating of *King John* (and its source-play *Troublesome Reign*) and *Richard II*. While this theory concludes that the source-plays for both *King John* and *Richard II* were originally written in the mid to late 1570s, conventional theory would date the first performances of the plays sometime after the late 1580s. Although the theory of this book relies principally on the clear evidence of Edmund Plowden’s significant influence on both plays, the key difference to the dating of the plays rests with the historic events which underlie both plays: did the plays refer to the 1569 Northern Rebellion of Catholic lords, and the push for Mary Stuart as Queen, followed by the excommunication of Elizabeth by the Catholic pope in 1570, or did the

plays reference the later events of the execution of Mary Stuart in 1587, and the Spanish Armada in 1588? Chapters 19 and 20 discuss the arguments of Shakespearean scholars; the discussion concludes that none of the evidence eliminates the possibility that the plays dealt with the early events of the Northern Rebellion and its aftermath.

Moreover, though, the theory of this book stands on the clear and uncontroverted influence of Plowden's succession writings, particularly in *Richard II*: Plowden died in 1585, and his theories dealt with the earliest of the Elizabethan succession issues, of which the Northern Rebellion was the aftermath. While, clearly a writer could have applied these writings to the later history, Plowden's writings were highly esoteric and difficult even for the expert. That his influence on the plays covered not just one, but four plays, strongly suggests a personal voice in the plays. And, as at least one of the plays – *Merchant of Venice* – can be firmly dated to the late 1570s, this personal voice would seem to have been in the 1570s, obviously preceding his death in 1585.

The principal source of the story of *Hamlet* seems to have been a French novella by Francois de Belleforest from a 1576 edition of the fifth volume of his *Histoires Tragiques*, but once again there is clear evidence of collaboration with Plowden. One of Plowden's reported court cases in 1561 concerned a man named John Hales who drowned in a river, and the court determined that because the man had thrown himself into the river his death was a suicide, not an accident. In the play, the gravediggers for Ophelia's burial discuss whether her death was a suicide or an accident, unquestionably applying the holding of Hales to the situation. Then, the complicated climax of the play – and the order of the multiple deaths – followed another of Plowden's reported cases. This case, which Plowden recorded in 1572 in nearby Warwick, involved – like the play – a series of murders by poison, and determined who was, or who was not, to blame for murder. See Chapter 21.

*Hamlet*, however, was not the only Shakespeare play based on a Belleforest novella: *Much Ado About Nothing* also used another of his novellas – a translation of Matteo Bandello's story of Timbreo and Fenicia. This novella was from an even earlier volume of Belleforest's; while *Hamlet* used a 1576 edition of the fifth volume, *Much Ado*

*About Nothing* appears to have been drawn from either the 1569 or 1574 edition of Belleforest's third volume. The first stage performance of this play has been suggested as early as January 1574/5, allowing for the use of either edition as its source. Thus, it would seem likely that the playwright had translated two different Belleforest novellas in the 1570s. See Chapter 22.

In 1577, someone identified as 'R.S.' published English translations of four early Belleforest tales (all four originally French translations of Matteo Bandello). These stories were taken from Belleforest's first and second volumes. Until 1608, there were no other published English translations of Belleforest novellas. Obviously, this theory proposes that Ralph Sheldon – that is, someone with the initials R.S. – has translated Belleforest novellas as sources for his plays in the early to mid-1570s. The possibility that someone else – someone with the same initials but not Ralph Sheldon – has simultaneously also translated Belleforest novellas seems an unlikely coincidence, especially since these translations (those of the playwright and those of R.S.) appear to have been the only public translations of Belleforest in the Elizabethan era. See Chapter 22.

The book of translations by R.S. includes two prefaces, both with authors only identified as 'T.N.' In the book, the second T.N. wrote that the "orphan" texts (the Belleforest translations) would have been better "poolyshed" had God "lent to the Autour longer lyfe." While this suggests that R.S. has died and, in fact, the death of R.S. has been routinely assumed as true, the phrasing also seems deliberately ambiguous: it would also be technically true had the translator been quite simply, a very busy man.

This second T.N. has been tied to Thomas North, noted translator of *Plutarch's Lives*, a well-known source of Shakespeare's Roman plays. At the same time that the R.S.'s Belleforest translations would have been published, North happened to be residing at the manor of Roger North, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron North, along with English diplomat and scholar George North. In 1576, George North had completed his manuscript entitled *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels*, dedicated to Lord North. In what seems yet another odd coincidence, this manuscript – exceedingly rare and never published – has been convincingly connected to eleven of the Shakespeare plays. See Chapter 22.

The year 1577 began as a triumph for the Children of Paul's: it was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Children of Paul's performances at Court. On January 3, 1527, the Court had seen a performance of the Latin play, *Menaechmi* by Plautus; in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul's at Court, Paul's performed the English vernacular version of the same play, calling it *Historie of Error*, the earliest version of *The Comedy of Errors*. The play was performed on January 1, 1577, at Hampton Court, almost 50 years to the day of the performance of the original Plautus play. Like the play *Romeo & Juliet*, no one other than Shakespeare has ever been associated with the *Comedy of Errors*; and as with the earlier *Romeo & Juliet*, Ralph Sheldon – now under a long-term arrangement with Leicester – appears to have been available as the playwright. See Chapter 23.

In the latter half of the 1570s, the sheer popularity of the Court plays started taking its toll. Sebastian Westcott's playhouse was drawing crowds and showing a profit, but it was also the subject of protest: the City Alderman received complaints in 1575 that Westcott's playhouse was corrupting the young people with "papistrie." By the end of 1576, Richard Farrant (a musician who had taken over duties of Children of the Chapel Royal) was looking for a lease at the old Blackfriars Monastery as a new stage for the boy actors. Likewise, the adult acting troupes were playing to large audiences at the inns in east London. In the middle of 1576, Richard Burbage of Leicester's Men had started arrangements to construct a stand-alone public playhouse on the outskirts of London, in nearby Middlesex County. See Chapter 24.

The year 1577, however, ended on an ominous note. Although the year saw the opening of the first public purpose-built playhouse in England (aptly called the Theatre), by November 1577, Puritan ministers had started what became a protracted assault on the English playhouses, one calling them "scholes of vice, dennes of Theeves, & Theatres of all lewdnesse." Causing far greater immediate distress, however, Sebastian Westcott was convicted of heresy, and imprisoned at the end of December, remaining in confinement until March 1578. See Chapter 24.

Sometime in 1578 an early version of the *Merchant of Venice* was produced, a play reported by Stephen Gosson (in his *Schoole of Abuse* published the same year), and simply called the *Jew*. Yet another effort inspired by the work of Plowden, the play dealt

with the issue of equity as a moral correction to the legal enforcement of an unjust penal bond. Plowden was a strong proponent for a wider use of the equity – in the sense of natural “moral virtue” – to mitigate the letter of the law, particularly in the case of penal statutes. In fact, after this play, in the 1580s, equitable relief in the case of penal bonds – the principal issue in this play – was far more widely available. This play, however, may have been the last collaboration between Sheldon and Plowden. Sheldon was prosecuted in 1580 for his failure to attend Protestant church services; Plowden died in 1585. See Chapter 25.

### **1580s: Retrenchment of the English Stage**

In the spring of 1580, the Jesuits, led by Fathers Campion and Persons, undertook what they characterized as a religious ‘mission’ to save the Catholics in England, a ‘mission’ that was widely viewed by English authorities as part of the continuing political threat of the Catholic Pope and his allies. Sheldon was arrested in the subsequent crack-down by the authorities on those who were seen as sympathizers with the Jesuit invasion. Indicted in the summer for his failure to attend the reformed Protestant services, Sheldon was imprisoned briefly at Marshalsea in the fall of the year. He was however, treated very kindly by the authorities and, in a widely reported incident, he was out of confinement by early January 1581, having agreed to conform after being provided evidence (by the Treasurer to the Queen Lord Burghley himself) that attendance of Protestant services was not a sin against his faith. Sheldon subsequently stood accused by rumors and rhymes on the streets of London of having foregone his principles to save his wealth and power. See Chapter 26.

Unfortunately, nearly simultaneously with the ‘papist’ scandals engulfing both Sheldon and Sebastian Westcott (who died in 1582), the Children of Paul’s seem to have been exiled from the Court for 5 years between 1582 until February 1587. During this period, the group completely disappeared from the Court stage. John Lyly, under the patronage of the Earl of Oxford, took over the Blackfriars playhouse in 1584; actors from Paul’s may have joined the ‘Oxford boys’ but there is no clear evidence of this. See Chapter 27.



By the end of 1583, Leicester's Men had also been dissolved, with its last play at the Court in February 1583, and its players subsumed by the new – and perhaps, more carefully controlled – Queen's Men. With a tighter rein on the actors, the Court – now under the lead of Francis Walsingham – still defended the acting companies against the Puritan complaints and City authorities but agreed to compromise such as banning Sunday theater performances. See Chapter 27.

Leicester's nephew, the poet Philip Sidney, wrote around 1583 the most noted defense of poetry against the attacks of the Puritan ministers. But even he agreed with certain criticisms of the stage productions, reviling the "Comick" as "odious" and labeling it the product of "naughtie Playmakers." Sidney's criticism, and his own writings, inspired a new generation of poets and playwrights to a higher standard of English vernacular poetry. (See Chapter 28.)

Leicester could hardly escape blame for the apparent chaos, and the change in control of the acting companies signaled the rapid diminishment of the power of Leicester. His star declined even further with the anonymous publication of *Leicester's Commonwealth*, in the following year. While Leicester's reputation had long been marred by the suspicious death of his first wife in 1560, this new book accused him of a lifetime of vile and nefarious deeds including murders, falsehoods, and treason, largely without any serious proof. But while the Queen and the Privy Council publicly denounced the book and its allegations, there was no printed refutation of its claims. Only 'R.S', introducing his *Phoenix Nest* in 1593, publicly defended Leicester in written denunciation of what he called the slanders of the "libellors." See Chapter 29.

Leicester attempted to revive his fortunes with an ill-advised expedition to the Low Countries to defend against the Catholic invaders in December 1585. Many West Midlands gentry – including three of Sheldon's sons-in-law – joined Leicester on the expedition. It all ended badly with the loss of the siege of Zutphen and the tragic death of Leicester's nephew Sidney, with Leicester returning home in November 1586. While Leicester took a lead in defeating the Spanish Armada in August 1588, he died age 56 in the month after the English victory. Except reportedly by the Queen, he was little mourned. See Chapter 29.

Meanwhile, Sheldon had a difficult time at home. In 1583, his son-in-law John Russell publicly accused his wife Elizabeth, and Sheldon's wife Anne Throckmorton of holding Catholic mass in the family home. Sheldon was outraged at his son-in-law's behavior and responded in a lawsuit in 1585 to protest on behalf of his daughter and wife. In 1587, he was once again prosecuted for his failure to attend church services, and as a result, removed from his position as a Worcestershire Justice of the Peace, a position he had held since 1574. Nonetheless, he was otherwise treated very leniently, with no detention and few fines. Moreover, his household accounts during the mid-1580s show him routinely traveling to London throughout the year. See Chapter 26.

Plays by Shakespeare appear to have been performed in London during the decade, although the evidence is scarce. Sometime around the end of the decade, the *Henry VI* trilogy was performed on stage. It also seems most likely that throughout the decade Shakespeare's plays of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* continued to evolve, going from one play into three, and accentuating the ever-growing comic portrayal of Oldcastle (later Falstaff) and his crew. See Chapter 30.

So, while Shakespeare's plays continued to command the English stage, other, younger voices joined in, with highly educated scholars – as had been demanded by the Queen – taking a prominent role. Oxfordian John Lyly (and the Earl of Oxford) attempted to bring back the boy actors, in the vacuum created by the great loss of the Children of Paul's. Cambridge graduates Greene, Thomas Nashe, Christopher Marlowe, as well as Oxford graduate Thomas Lodge, all contributed to the theater scene beginning in the 1580s, with more playwrights such as Ben Jonson and Thomas Heywood to come in the 1590s. See Chapter 30.

Near the end of the decade, Edmund Spenser's poem *The Teares of the Muses* (registered in 1590) included a lament by the Muse Thalia noting the recent loss of "pleasant Willy": [O]ur pleasant Willy, an is dead of late." Shakespearean editor Alfred Harbage concluded that the poem referred to Shakespeare, a puzzle he termed "one of the strangest in our dramatic history." Although the gist of the lament is unclear – Shakespeare plays were, as noted, on stage at the same time – but perhaps it referred to the absence of plays like the early comedies – plays like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

or *The Taming of a Shrew* – plays previously performed by the recently absent Children of Paul’s? See Chapter 31.

### **1590s: Post-Leicester and Poetry Rises from the Phoenix Nest**

In the early 1590s, both R.S. and the playwright took leading roles in the rise of the ‘new poetry.’ Apparently deeply affected by both Philip Sidney’s tragic death and his call for higher standards of English poetry and drama, R.S. published in 1593 an elegant and non-commercial anthology heralding the ‘new poetry,’ entitled *The Phoenix Nest*. The same year, the playwright followed a similar new course: publishing for the first time his own new poetry, *Venus and Adonis*, under (for the first time) the name of ‘William Shakespeare.’ Much of the new poetry in *The Phoenix Nest* focused on poems (23 of 97 poems) that used a six-line iambic pentameter stanza, rhyming *ababcc*, which, as it happens, is the same stanza Shakespeare used in *Venus & Adonis*, a form that has since become known as the *Venus & Adonis* stanza. Moreover, both the anthology and *Venus & Adonis* share fundamental influences by the Oxford-educated poet Thomas Lodge (c. 1558-1625): Lodge was the major contributor to the poetry collection, and his works served as the model not only for Shakespeare’s *Venus & Adonis* but also for *As You Like It*. Combined with the curiously simultaneous translations of Belleforest by both R.S. and the playwright in the mid-1570s, the closely parallel actions of R.S. and Shakespeare at this later date seem to make the strong case that they are one and the same man, Ralph Sheldon.

As a tribute to Sidney, and to Sidney’s uncle the Earl of Leicester, R.S. compiled his anthology with the major contributions of Walter Raleigh and Nicholas Breton. Both men were – like Ralph Sheldon – connected with Oriel College, and both would have been studying at Oriel near the time when Sheldon began his 60-year term at Oriel; additionally, Raleigh was also of Middle Temple, and related to Sheldon’s wife through his 1591 marriage to her first cousin. As with the early publication of the Belleforest translation, R.S. seems to deliberately obscure his identity. *The Phoenix Nest* specifies that it was “set forth by R.S. of the Inner Temple.” Despite repeated investigations into R.S. as a member of the Inner Temple, no likely candidate has ever been identified; the anthology’s modern editor Hyder Edward Rollins considered the

identity of the *Nest*'s editor to be the chief mystery of the book. In thus disguising his identity, R.S. seems to have relied on what may have been an old joke where Leicester would have recognized all lawyers only as members of the Inner Temple (where Leicester was associated). See Chapter 32.

In compiling the anthology R.S. gathered up unpublished poems from the elite poets of Oxford; the poet with the largest number of poems in the collection seems to have been Thomas Lodge. Lodge's 1589 narrative epic poem *Scylla's Metamorphosis* is credited as the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Venus & Adonis*. The play *As You Like It* was probably first performed sometime in the 1590s. The play was based on Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590). Very like Ralph Sheldon at Oriel, the play's Duke Senior had been banished to the Forest of Arden, only to be surrounded by a merry band of poets collecting their poems in his exile. The play was not published until the 1623 Folio, with its original publication "staied" in 1600. See Chapter 32.

In the early 1590s the writer Shakespeare had announced his own "pupil pen" in poetry as he began his now-famous correspondence of sonnets to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, offering the young Earl advice on marriage and children (even praising the possibility of ten children, such as in Sheldon's own family: see Sonnet 6, lines 7-10). While his first sonnets were distinctly paternal, his later poems were far more in the vein of Falstaff to Prince Hal. His legal metaphors in the pursuit of love seem very close to those in a published note by R.S. to his "Mistresse A.T."; Sheldon's wife was Anne Throckmorton. He also wrote of his personal misfortune, "So I, made lame by Fortune's deepest spite" (Sonnet 37, line 3), a sentiment readily explained by Sheldon's status as a prosecuted Catholic recusant. See Chapter 33.

Shakespeare's new poetry – particularly that of *Venus & Adonis*, which outsold any of his other work – caused considerable comment, and some criticism. One prominent young Puritan poet, Joseph Hall, publicly rebuked him for transforming his work from that of "heroicke poesie" to the style of *Venus & Adonis*. He admonished him: "For shame write cleanly *Labeo* [his nickname for Shakespeare], or write none." Antistius Labeo was a prominent Roman lawyer from a wealthy family who as a Republican sympathizer fell afoul of the regime of Augustus, declining other office to

devote his time to writing. Also described by Hall as a “craftie Cuttle” who disguises himself in a “blacke Cloude,” this “Labeo” seems a perfect match for Sheldon. See Chapter 34.

Such criticism, however, may have stung the writer. Some Shakespeare plays were published in the first half of the 1590s, and some may have been copied from less than perfect scripts. In the future, the writer seemed determined to re-write the old plays, to meet the new standards of high English literature. And, seemingly to counteract the suggestions of Joseph Hall, the edited playbooks were published by a new publisher: Andrew Wise who operated at the Sign of the Angel, whose only other significant client was named Playfere. Beginning in 1597, Wise published five of the plays (*Richard II&III*, Parts 1&2 *Henry IV*, *Much Ado About Nothing*) – all of which were published (as had been *Venus & Adonis*) under the pen name ‘William Shakespeare’ (or Shake-speare). See Chapter 35.

### **1598-1613: Sheldon, the Globe, Lord Chamberlain’s Men, & the Final Plays**

Meanwhile, though, Richard Burbage’s acting company (then known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men) was struggling. Throughout the 1590s, serious issues such as plague, political strife, and economic stress had closed down many of the playhouses. But in 1598 there was a breakthrough: the Privy Council awarded two companies, one of whom was the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, monopolies on the trade. The company then launched a plan to construct a new playhouse, to be called the Globe.

Who funded the Globe Theatre construction? Although there is no record that answers this question, it seems uncontroverted that except for Richard Burbage, no member of the acting troupe contributed funds to its construction. Nonetheless, five members of the troupe – including William Shakspere – obtained, as a group, a one-half share in the ownership of the Globe and in its subsequent profits. However, for this to happen someone – the person who, in fact, did fund the Globe construction – had to affirmatively give up his rights to the Globe ownership. Who would forsake such lucrative rights?

Again, like so many of the puzzling aspects of the Shakespeare tradition, Sheldon's life can provide an answer: the very generous treatment of the players in the acting troupe closely mirrored the Sheldon family's benevolent arrangements with its tapestry weavers; by William Sheldon's 1570 will, the profits of a long-term lease were made available for the use of tapestry weavers in Worcestershire and Warwickshire. Moreover, there is strong evidence that Sheldon incurred massive (and unexplained) debt in the decade of the 1590s, eventually ending up nearly bankrupt when his lender (a former close friend) suddenly called in his loans. These circumstances are very similar to those in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, a play whose original source was specifically altered to match those same facts. See Chapter 36.

Then there is the curious circumstance of Nicholas Breton's *A poste with a packet of madde letters* (1606). In this letter, R.S. writes to 'Lord W.H.' inviting him to the wedding of his daughter for a feast of venison and asking him to favor R.S.'s "sute for a Bucke." In July 1603, Sheldon's daughter Philippa married; this was a time when William Herbert ('Lord W.H.'), the Earl of Pembroke, appears to have been the chief patron of the newly named King's Servants (also then 'King's Men,' previously the Lord Chamberlain's Men), and – most significantly – when George Buck (in June 1603) had just been appointed the acting Master of the Revels, thereby responsible for Court entertainments. Thus, Sheldon (R.S.) seems to have been referring to the Earl's help with a request of the Master of the Revels George Buck. See Chapter 37.

Shakespeare's two final plays were produced in 1613/4, coinciding with Sheldon's death in March 1613. *Henry VIII* was performed in June 1613, and it was during a performance of that play on 29 June 1613 when a fire destroyed the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare's final play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, was probably the first play performed in London after the Globe fire at Blackfriars in November 1613. Both plays are collaborations with John Fletcher, the playwright who succeeded Shakespeare as the house writer for the King's Men. But while *Henry VIII* was included in the First Folio in 1623, *Two Noble Kinsmen* was not; rather it was printed in 1634 listing Fletcher as the first author and Shakespeare as the second author.

This leaves the question: why was Shakespeare's final play not attributed to him as senior author? Certain circumstances suggest that he died before he could fully collaborate on the play: his portion of the play is largely limited to the first and last acts, that is, to a skeletal play; when the play was produced, the Prologue refers only to a single writer and eulogizes the "noble breeder" of the play; and the last line of the Prologue indicates that the company is mourning what may be multiple misfortunes, referring to "our losses." However, as with the entire history of the writer Shakespeare, the identity of the "noble breeder" seems obfuscated by artifice. In the midst of the eulogy two lines are inserted on Chaucer as the source of the play; such a direct acknowledgement to the play's source without any part in the play's plot is unprecedented in the Shakespeare plays. The reference, however, serves to point to Chaucer as the "noble breeder," thereby conveniently covering the more obvious possibility that the eulogy is, in fact, memorializing the recent death of the company's illustrious playwright Shakespeare. As always, Sheldon remains a "Hydden Man." See Chapter 38.

### 3. *Timetable of Events*

Below is Table 1: Timetable of Events, comparing the relevant events in Sheldon's life and the theory of him as a 'Hydden Man' with important events in the contemporary times, as well as events as assumed under the conventional theory of the actor William Shakspere as the writer Shakespeare.

Table 1: Timetable of Events (Note: dates based on assumptions by this author or others are listed in bold.)

SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
1537: R. Sheldon born.		
	1547: Henry VIII dies; Edward VI crowned.	
	1553: Edward VI dies; Mary I crowned.	
1555/6: Sheldon in Italy 1556: Sheldon in Middle Temple until 1560.		
	1558: Mary I dies, Elizabeth crowned.	
	1559: <i>Mirror for Magistrates</i> , published;	



SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
	Robert Dudley starts his acting company.	
	Circa 1560: first stage performance of <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> ; 1560/1: Dudley's actors first perform at Court. 1561: Dudley admitted to Inner Temple.	
	1561/2: <i>Gorboduc</i> performed at Inner Temple.	
	1564: Dudley created Earl of Leicester, appointed Chancellor of Oxford.	1564: William Shakspeare born.
1566: Leicester procures 60-year lease for Sheldon from Apr. 1566 at Oriel College, Oxford.	1566: Queen's formal visit to Oxford, Aug/Sept; Richard Edwards, Court Dramatist, dies Oct.	
	1567/8: <i>Wit and Will</i> performed at Court. <b>Circa 1567/8:</b> Court children's rehearsals are opened to the public.	
	1569: Northern Lords rebellion; Protestant protest over children's rehearsals.	
1570: William Sheldon dies, 1570; R. Sheldon and Edmund Plowden co-executors of William Sheldon's will.	1570: Pope excommunicates Elizabeth.	
<b>Circa 1572/3:</b> Sheldon obtains Hall's Chronicle, annotates volume with notes for play <i>Famous Victories</i> .		
<b>1574-78:</b>	1574: Elizabeth grants Leicester's Men patent for	

SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
<b><i>Famous Victories</i> produced c. 1574.</b>	performance throughout England.	
<b>Sheldon &amp; Plowden collaborate: <i>Troublesome Reign</i>, c. 1575</b>	1575: Puritan protests over Westcott and the children's rehearsals.	
<b><i>Richard II</i>, c. 1576; <i>Hamlet</i>, c. 1576/7; <i>Merchant of Venice</i>, 1578.</b>	1576: Lease obtained for children's stage at Blackfriars.	
<b>Sheldon translates Belleforest for <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (c. 1574), <i>Hamlet</i> (c. 1576).</b>	1577: Children of Paul's celebrate 50 years of Court performance with <i>Historie of Error</i> ; Burbage opens first stand-alone public theater, Puritan ministers start public sermons against stage 'lewdness'; Westcott imprisoned for heresy.	
1577: R.S. publishes four more Belleforest translations.	1578: <i>Merchant of Venice</i> on stage.	
1580: Sheldon prosecuted and briefly imprisoned.	1580: Jesuit mission into England.	
	1581: Children of Paul's last performance at Court on Dec. 26 until Feb. 1587.	
	1583: Acting companies consolidated as Queen's Men under Francis Walsingham; Leicester's Men have last Court performance, Feb. Philip Sidney writes defense of poetry, c. 1583.	
	1584: <i>Leicester's Commonwealth</i> published; John Lyly and Earl of Oxford take over Blackfriars lease.	
1585: Plowden dies.	1585: Leicester brings expedition to Low Countries in Dec.	

SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
	1586: Philip Sidney dies on Leicester's expedition; Leicester returns to England in Nov.	
Sheldon prosecuted for failure to attend Protestant services and forced to resign as Justice of the Peace.	1587: Mary Stuart executed for treason.	1587: William Shakspeare comes to London from Stratford.
	1588: England defeats the Spanish Armada in Aug.; Leicester dies Sept; <i>Henry VI</i> trilogy begins c. 1588/9.	
	Circa 1589: Edmund Spenser writes lament for the loss of "Pleasant Willy."	Circa 1589: Shakspeare joins acting company.
		<b>Circa 1590: Shakspeare writes <i>King John</i>, from <i>Troublesome Reign</i>; Shakspeare writes the <i>Henry VI</i> trilogy.</b>
	1591: <i>Troublesome Reign</i> published anonymously.	<b>Between 1591 and 1598: Shakspeare writes and produces <i>Two Gentleman of Verona</i>, <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>, <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>, <i>Merchant of Venice</i>, <i>Richard II</i>, <i>Richard III</i>, <i>Henry IV</i> plays, <i>Titus Andronicus</i>, <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>, <i>Comedy of Errors</i> [these assumed because of the stage plays listed by Frances Meres in Sept. 1598].</b>  <b>He also writes <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i> and sonnets to Southampton.</b>
	Plague closed the theaters, June 1592	
1593: R.S. publishes anthology of poetry by Oxford poets, <i>The Phoenix Nest</i> , with major poetic form the <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i> stanza; Thomas Lodge – whose work <i>Rosalynde</i> would form the basis for <i>As You Like It</i> – was the largest contributor.	1593: 'William Shakespeare' publishes first volume of poetry, <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i> ; 'Shakespeare' begins sonnets to the Earl of Southampton, advising on marriage and procreation, continuing for next decade.	
	1594: <i>Taming of A Shrew</i> , <i>Richard III</i> , <i>Contention Between York and Lancaster</i> published anonymously.	
	1595: <i>Comedy of Errors</i> performed at Gray's Inn.	

SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
1596: Harington writes note "Sheldon : Will."		
	1597: <i>Richard II</i> , <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> published anonymously.	
	1598: Privy Council grants monopoly on theater production to two companies, including Lord Chamberlain's Men.  Frances Meres notes Shakespeare as "most excellent:" playwright listing 12 plays, none of which were published with Shakespeare's name before 1598.  First plays published with authorship ('William Shake-speare'): <i>Richard II</i> , <i>Richard III</i> ; also <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> ('W. Shakspeare'); <i>1 Henry IV</i> published anonymously.	
	1599: The Globe Theatre is opened.	
	1600: <i>Merchant of Venice</i> , <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> , <i>2 Henry IV</i> , <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i> published with Shakespeare's authorship; <i>Henry V</i> published anonymously.	
	1602: <i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i> published.	
1603: Sheldon's loan called due, causing near bankruptcy.	1603: Elizabeth dies; James I crowned; <i>Hamlet</i> published.	
	1605: <i>King Leir</i> published anonymously.	

SHELDON DATES	HISTORIC DATES	SHAKSPERE DATES
	1608: <i>King Lear</i> published.	
	1609: <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> , <i>Pericles</i> published.	
1613: Sheldon dies.	1613: performance of last play, <i>Henry VIII</i> .	
		1616: Shakspeare dies, with no more plays after 1613.
Sheldon family receives first completed copy of the First Folio.	1623: First Folio published.	

The 1623 Folio included 18 Shakespeare plays that had not been published: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *I Henry VI*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John*, *MacBeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Timon of Athens*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Winter's Tale*.



## **PART II: INDEPENDENT EVIDENCE OF SHELDON AS SHAKESPEARE**

#### 4. *Was the Sheldon Folio the First of the First-Run?*

A pristine provenance and a very definitive bibliographic history establish the 1623 Folio long held by the Sheldon family (known as ‘Burdett-Coutts’ or Folger #10) as unique among the extant 1623 Folios. The Folio was owned by the Sheldon family from 1623 to 1781; after its sale it ended with the family of Baroness Burdett-Coutts, from whom it was purchased by Folger in 1922.<sup>47</sup> Folio expert Sidney Lee said that this Folio was the only copy about which he could “tell the full story of its ownership from start to finish.”<sup>48</sup> As discussed below, five extant copies (including the Sheldon Folio) are undisputedly part of the first-run of ‘complete’ Folios; the Sheldon copy, however, is the only Folio of the five Folios that without question has been corrected for missing pages by the original publisher. Furthermore, a torn right-hand corner of the title page – next to a rare notation “pretium” (or price) – appears to signify that the Folio had not been sold, but rather, was a gift to the Sheldon family.<sup>49</sup>

According to scholar Peter Blayney, there were three distinct ‘issues’ of the First Folio, identified by specific bibliographic evidence.<sup>50</sup> The first – shown in three extant copies – is an issue of the Folio that is missing the play *Troilus and Cressida*. The second issue came when the printers corrected the omission of *Troilus*. To do this, they inserted the play (derived from the 1609 Quarto) beginning on the ‘verso’ side of a leaf which included on its ‘recto’ side the last page of *Romeo & Juliet*. This last page of *Romeo*, however, was an artifact of the earlier printing, and was redundant (*Romeo* was fully printed elsewhere in the Folio), so in the second issue, the *Romeo* page was simply crossed-out or torn to show its redundancy; in bibliographic terms, this artifact is called a

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<sup>47</sup> See Anthony James West, *The Shakespeare First Folio: The History of the Book* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 157.

<sup>48</sup> West, 157.

<sup>49</sup> According to Love, the provenance of the surviving copies of the first printing may lead to evidence of authorship, see Love, 63.

<sup>50</sup> The full story of the three issues of the First Folio (without the play *Troilus and Cressida*; with the play added in without the Prologue; with the play and its Prologue) is described by Peter W.M. Blayney, *The First Folio of Shakespeare* (Washington, DC: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1991), 21-4.



‘cancellandum’ (something to be removed). With the addition of *Troilus*, then, the Folio was considered ‘complete’ – that is, until it was discovered that another version of *Troilus* included a one-page Prologue. In the third issue, therefore, the additional Prologue page replaced the redundant *Romeo* page on the recto side of the leaf that included the first page of *Troilus* on its verso side. In bibliographic terms, this replacement sheet is known as the ‘cancel’ or ‘cancellans.’<sup>51</sup>

Bibliographic evidence conclusively identifies five extant copies of the First Folio as part of the first-run of ‘complete’ Folios – that is, Folios from the **second** issue with all the then-known Shakespeare plays included.<sup>52</sup> Each of these five Folios (four Folios held by the Folger, included Burdett-Coutts Folger #10; plus the Toovey Folio held by the Pierpont Morgan Museum) contains an artifact of an earlier, incomplete publishing run of the Folio (the ‘cancellandum’).

However, of these five extant Folios only two – the Burdett-Coutts Folger #10 and the Toovey – have been corrected to include the added Prologue: that is, only two have had the correcting ‘cancellans’ (or ‘cancel’) leaf added to the volume. But, of these two, only the Burdett-Coutts Folger #10 Folio has been demonstrably untouched since its original publication. In his discussion of these extant copies, Blayney describes a Folio “with the original leaf [but] now also contains a cancel that is obviously a late insertion taken from a smaller copy”;<sup>53</sup> this appears to be the Toovey Folio, which is a large page Folio to which has been added a smaller page ‘cancel.’ While this could have been added by the publisher before its purchase, there is evidence that this Folio was unbound after its purchase, leaving the possibility that subsequent owners added the Prologue scavenged from another copy.<sup>54</sup> According to Anthony James West, the copy held by the

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<sup>51</sup> Photographs of both the ‘cancellandum’ and the ‘cancel’ leaves are included in Blayney’s description, see Blayney, 23.

<sup>52</sup> For identification of the five extant copies of first “complete” Folios, see W.W. Greg, “The Prints of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* in the First Folio,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 45, no. 4 (1951): 273, footnote 2. [www.jstor.org/stable/24298593](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24298593).

<sup>53</sup> Blayney, 24.

<sup>54</sup> For the history of the Toovey Folio, see Germaine Warkentin and Peter Hoare, “Sophisticated Shakespeare: James Toovey and the Morgan Library’s ‘Sidney’ First Folio,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 100, no. 3 (2006): 313-56,

Sheldons for nearly 150 years (Burdett-Coutts Folger #10), also has both the ‘cancellandum’ and the ‘cancellans’ (or ‘cancel’) leaves.<sup>55</sup> But, unlike the Toovey Folio, it has no indication of any alteration by the Sheldons or its subsequent owners.<sup>56</sup> This would lead to the assumption that the publisher added the missing Prologue to the unbound copy – thereby fully finishing the ‘complete’ Folio – **before** the copy was taken by its new owner, William Sheldon, Ralph’s grandson. This would appear to be unique among the extant copies of the Folio.

Another definitive aspect is the manuscript notation of “pretium” in the top right corner on the title page of this copy, with the corner (where the amount of the “pretium” – the price – would have been noted) torn off.<sup>57</sup> The notation of “pretium” was rare not only because of its extant presence (only one other extant Folio includes such a notation) but also because of its placement on the title page (in 16<sup>th</sup> century books, if price was marked at all, it would be on a flysheet attached to the book).<sup>58</sup> In part because of its obvious and highly unusual placement on the title page – with the right hand corner next to the notation ostentatiously torn off – the notation suggests an intentional gesture by the publisher to indicate the Folio as a gift, not a purchase.

The history of the Folio obtained by the Sheldon family suggests very special handling by its publisher. Although it cannot be demonstrated that it was the actual first copy of the first-run of “complete” Folios (four other possible claimants exist), its careful treatment by its publisher suggests that this particular Folio was – unlike at least three of the other four first-run Folios – held back for additional correction. While it cannot be definitively proved that it was given the particular handling because of special status as

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[www.jstor.org/stable/24293806](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24293806). The Toovey Folio is a large page Folio; the added Prologue page is of a smaller size.

<sup>55</sup> West, 156, notes on Folger 10; Blayney appears to reference this same Folio when he describes “one copy that *has* the Prologue leaf, the torn inner column of the original leaf still survives,” Blayney, 24.

<sup>56</sup> See West, 157.

<sup>57</sup> West, 9.

<sup>58</sup> The only other Folio with a listed “pretium” is Folger 71, notated on a blank sheet in the book, not on the title page. See West, 8.

the first of the first-run Folios, equally it cannot be ruled out that this was, in fact, was the first copy from the first-run of the first completed Folio.

## 5. *Harington's annotation on 'Will: Shel- / don'*

Sir John Harington (c. 1560-1612), well-known courtier and godson to the Queen, annotated a copy of his 1596 publication *Metamorphosis of Ajax* with the marginal note “Will: Shel- / don” (the hyphen added because the notation was broken into two lines). Harington, the translator of Ludovico Ariosto’s Italian epic *Orlando Furioso*, also wrote on contemporary poetry and drama,<sup>59</sup> and had one of the largest collections of Elizabethan playbooks: according to Lukas Erne, Harington’s library included eighteen copies of Shakespeare’s plays.<sup>60</sup> The notation was included in a book presented to John Lumley 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Lumley (c. 1533-1609), an intellectual with one of the largest private libraries of the era,<sup>61</sup> and noted as the “first of English connoisseurs.”<sup>62</sup> It is argued that Harington included this marginal note for a specific intellectual purpose: that Harington was clarifying to Lord Lumley that his textual references to a spunky young boy referred to in the text as “pretty Wil” and “your sonne William” were meant to invoke ‘Will’ as the creation of Ralph Sheldon (Will: Shel- / don).

The so-called “Lumley-Folger” copy was annotated by Harington in script in its margins; among other things, the annotations identify the unnamed people to whom Harington alludes in his text.<sup>63</sup> On leaf K-3, Harington’s text refers to “your sonne William” and “his grammar rule”, as well as to “pretty Wil” with whom Harington would join forces with to “challenge all the gramarians”; on the left margin, Harington “Will: Shel- / don.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.237-38, 245.

<sup>60</sup> Erne, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Lord Lumley was a “dedicated collector” of books, with a catalogue from 1605 showing 2800 books in his library; see David McPherson, “Ben Jonson’s Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue,” *Studies in Philology*, 71, no. 5 (1974): 10, [www.jstor.org/stable/4173858](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173858).

<sup>62</sup> A.L. Rowse, *Sir Walter Raleigh: His Family and Private Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 97.

<sup>63</sup> Donno, 24. In her edition of Harington’s works, Donno includes the annotations of the Lumley-Folger copy as part of her commentary on Harington’s text.

<sup>64</sup> Donno, 179.

In commentary on her modern edition, Elizabeth Story Donno explains this annotation as meaning simply “William Sheldon,” referring to the 7-year-old son of Harington’s cousin Edward Sheldon.<sup>65</sup> Donno’s explanation, however, does not deal with the distinctive presence of the colon punctuation mark dividing “Will” and “Shel- / don.” The presence of the colon dividing “Will” and “Sheldon” would appear to bear significantly on the meaning of Harington’s notation, particularly to the scholar Lumley. For reasons discussed more fully below, it is contended that the division of the two names by a colon does not indicate simply “Will” as an abbreviated given name and “Sheldon” as a surname, rather it indicates that “Will” (the name suggested by the text) is in apposition to “Sheldon,” that is, that “Sheldon” is an appositive (or added explanation) of “Will.” Edward Sheldon is nowhere mentioned in Harington’s text or his annotations;<sup>66</sup> the only “Sheldon” actually mentioned in Harington’s text is Ralph Sheldon.<sup>67</sup> Thus, it would seem that from this annotation Lord Lumley would be expected to understand that “Will” as an appositive for Ralph Sheldon.

Although unstated in her note on the annotation, Donno’s basis for concluding that the use of a colon between “Will” and “Sheldon” indicates an abbreviated given name and a surname would appear to be the then common practice of distinguished clerics and scholars to use a colon to indicate their abbreviated given name when they presented their signature in Latin.<sup>68</sup> So, to use a well-known example (discussed more fully below), the playwright Ben Jonson routinely signed his books as “Su[m] Ben: Jonsonij Liber.”<sup>69</sup> Under the circumstances of this annotation, however, it would seem highly unlikely that Harington (himself an accomplished scholar) would use a colon as a reference to the Latin signature of a 7-year-old boy. The example presented is that of Ben

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<sup>65</sup> Donno, 179, note 99.

<sup>66</sup> Edward Sheldon was the son of Ralph Sheldon; although he is not mentioned in the text, Donno makes the case that he is the “Philostilpnos” of the prefatory letter, who signs the letter as “[Y]our loving cousin.” See Donno, 58, note 22.

<sup>67</sup> In his book, *An Apologie*, following his *Metamorphosis*, Harington refers explicitly to Ralph Sheldon (Donno, 238-240) and also to “M.R.S.” which Donno explains as “Master Ralph Sheldon” (Donno, 260, note 309).

<sup>68</sup> See Sara van den Berg, “Marking his Place: Ben Jonson’s Punctuation,” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 1, no. 3 (1995): 1, <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/01-3/bergjons.html>.

<sup>69</sup> McPherson, 19.

Jonson's relatively unique practice of signing his name "Ben: Jonson" using a colon between his given name and his surname. A catalogue of Jonson's library documented Jonson's autograph as found in 207 of his known library books. In well over half the books Jonson had personally signed the book: most were signed as "Su[m] Ben: Jonsonij Liber" (characterized as Jonson's "normal signature"); a small number – eight of the books – were signed without accompanying Latin text, as "Ben: Jonson" (some with a squiggle on the final consonant, some without).<sup>70</sup> Given the large predominance of signatures presented in Latin text, the derivation of Jonson's use of the colon between his given name and his surname seems clear, even where his signature is not included in Latin text. In her discussion on Jonson's unique use of the colon in his signature, Sara van den Berg speculates that Jonson may have intended to present himself as a learned man.<sup>71</sup>

In Harington's annotations, however, there is no indication that anywhere in his handwritten notes is he "Latinizing" the names or identities of the characters he has included in his text. Moreover, from his other notations in the same book, if Harington were, in fact, referring to a 7-year-old boy it seems he would have simply stated his name as "Will [or William] Sheldon" without the use of a colon. When he identifies other people to whom he alludes (without complete names) in his text, his annotations are simple and direct. So, for example, on leaf I-8<sup>v</sup> of *Metamorphosis*, he writes of a "learned preacher of Bath M.R.M."; his annotations in the left-hand margin identify him simply as "M<sup>r</sup> Mere- / dith."<sup>72</sup> On one page of his appended work, *Apologie*, he refers to an unnamed "most honorable Poet" with a left-hand marginal note of "The Erl of Shrowsbery" and to an unnamed "noble Philosopher" with a marginal note of "The Earl of Lincoln."<sup>73</sup>

So, why did Harington use the colon to separate 'Will' and 'Sheldon'? In the absence of any sense that he was intending to "Latinize" the identity of "Will" (or any

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<sup>70</sup> McPherson, 19. See catalog notations for those books with "normal signature"; this author noted about 121 books with Jonson's "normal signature," that is, presented in a Latin text.

<sup>71</sup> Van den Berg, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Donno, 148, note 229.

<sup>73</sup> Donno, 241, note 204; 242, note 211.

other personage in his books), it would seem that he was using the colon to suggest the other common reason for the usage of a colon between two nouns (or phrases): to define the two nouns as in apposition to each other, that is, to explain, rename, or further identify the first noun in terms of the second noun. In her discussion of Ben Jonson's usage of the colon, van den Berg points out that Jonson himself wrote that the colon marks "[A] Distinction of a Sentence, though perfect in it selfe, yet joined to another."<sup>74</sup> Using the Jonson definition, 'Will' is one idea that is joined with another idea, 'Sheldon,' to further illuminate the meaning of 'Will.' Thus, when considered as appositives, 'Will' is another name for 'Sheldon' (or vice versa). As noted above, however, from the vantage of Lumley (to whom the note was addressed), the only person in the text identified as 'Sheldon' is Ralph Sheldon. Without any contrary indication in the annotation, it would seem fair, therefore, to assume that Harington intended to indicate to Lumley that 'Will' is another name for Ralph Sheldon, specifically.

But even if this is so, and Harington is indicating that his textual reference is related to Ralph Sheldon, does that mean that 'Will' also (as it is argued) would refer to the writer Shakespeare? While the actual meaning the Harington text is obscure and not fully understood in modern criticism, the context of "prety Wil" seems an allegorical reference to a young student of grammar, one who follows the poetic rules of Philip Sidney,<sup>75</sup> and who is a "sweet companion."<sup>76</sup>

The writer "William Shakespeare" had published in 1593 his *Venus & Adonis*, dedicating "the first heir of my invention" to the Earl of Southampton (who is also identified in Harington's Lumley annotations).<sup>77</sup> One possible explanation for Harington's text would be that it is a wry take on the writer's "first heir" and the writer's first published use of the 'William Shakespeare' pseudonym: "your sonne William" who is a "sweet companion" may be seen to characterize the poet Shakespeare's *Venus & Adonis*.

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<sup>74</sup> Van den Berg, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Donno, 179.

<sup>76</sup> Donno, 180.

<sup>77</sup> Donno, 174, footnote 68.

Another possibility, however, is that Harington is referring to the invention of the comic character ‘Will,’ an impudent young boy who, beginning around 1567 was inserted into the staid morality plays of the era. The annotation itself is appended directly opposite of text dealing with a young boy “prety Wil” who argues impertinently with the narrator [Harington] on the rules of grammar. Harington remarks on him as Sheldon’s “sonne” and ultimately “[Harington] wil joyne issue” with Will and go to Oxford.<sup>78</sup> Harington’s text seems to bring back the “pretye boye” Will from *The Marriage of Wit and Science* (II.2.431, c. 1569)<sup>79</sup> – probable published version of early play *Wit and Will* – who routinely gives impertinent advice to his elders. See Chapter 16.

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<sup>78</sup> Donno, 179-80.

<sup>79</sup> See Trevor Lennam, *Sebastian Westcott, the Children of Paul’s, and ‘The Marriage of Wit and Science’* (University of Toronto Press, 1975); Lennam’s edition of the play includes the quote at 135.



## 6. *Ralph Sheldon as the Writer R.S.*

If Ralph Sheldon was the writer Shakespeare, his “penne” would, of course, be of “preeminent dignity” as attributed to him by Thomas Habington; but if so, where are the writings under the name of ‘Ralph Sheldon’? While the digital database of Early English Books Online (EEBO) includes no literary work attributed to ‘Ralph Sheldon,’ there are numerous references to ‘R.S.’ in the texts.<sup>80</sup> Of these, this study focuses on the following five references, discussed here in an overview but more fully in other chapters, listed in order of publication date:

(1) R.S., *Straunge, lamentable, and tragicall hystories translated out of French into Englishe by R.S.* (London: Hugh Jackson, 1577; <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A03434>). For full discussion, see Chapter 22.

(2) Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: William Ponsonbie, 1590; <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12778>).

(3) *The Phoenix Nest, Built up with the most rare and refined workes of noble men, woorthy knights, gallant gentlemen, masters of arts, and brave schollers.* “Set forth by R.S. of the Inner Temple Gentleman” (London: John Jackson, 1593; <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A11254>). For full discussion, see also Chapter 32.

(4) Nicholas Breton, *The wil of wit, wits will, or wils wit* (London: Thomas Creede, 1597; <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A16804>). See also Chapter 32.

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<sup>80</sup> The author undertook an EEBO search for ‘R.S.’ in the EEBO full texts; for this there were 68 records, many of which were simply notations where ‘R’ preceded ‘S’ in the alphabet. There were around twenty-five related to an ‘R.S.’ literary connection; of these, one was eliminated as being too early, and others for being clearly identifiable to an ‘R.S.’ who was not Ralph Sheldon. In the end, the five works considered in this study were selected for special review because of their obvious literary impact.

(5) Nicholas Breton, *A poste with a packet of madde letters. The second part* (London: John Browne and John Smethicke, 1606; <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A16786>). See also Chapter 37.

Whoever R.S. was, he was clearly associated with the highest ranks of Elizabethan poet-writers. Not only did he contribute a commendatory poem to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, but also, as the credited editor of *The Phoenix Nest*, he put together one of the finest poetry anthologies of the era (see Chapter 32), with contributions from poets of the highest regard such as Walter Raleigh, Thomas Lodge, Nicholas Breton, as well as one from 'W.S.,' all in commemoration of the late illustrious poet Philip Sidney.

The last four works are strongly interconnected, suggesting that R.S. in these works is one and the same man. These works are published between 1590 and 1606, and are all connected with writer-poets closely associated with Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), niece to Leicester, sister to Philip Sidney, and mother to William Herbert (Earl of Pembroke). The second book was written by Edmund Spenser, with a group of commendatory poems led by Walter Raleigh, including one by R.S. The third book, *The Phoenix Nest*, was edited by R.S., with major contributions by Raleigh and Nicholas Breton. The last two books are both written by Breton, with prose contributions by R.S. Both Spenser and Breton are recognized as significant members of the Countess's social circle, with Raleigh also considered a member.<sup>81</sup> R.S. also appears clearly allied with the Earl of Leicester: in *The Phoenix Nest*, the introductory material included a full-throated defense against the late Leicester's "Libellors" (see Chapter 29, 32).

The five works (numbers 3 & 4) also contain two poems written by 'W.S.,' both unexplained and rare references. Alone among the five works, the first listed record is not connected with the Countess's circle, but is probably connected with Thomas North, the

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<sup>81</sup> Mary Ellen Lamb, "The Countess of Pembroke's Patronage," *English Literary Renaissance* 12, no. 2 (1982): 167. [www.jstor.org/stable/43447074](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43447074).

noted translator of *Plutarch's Lives* (1579);<sup>82</sup> nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter 22, it is argued that the French translator (author of the first listed work) is the same R.S. who wrote the other works.

Despite dogged attempts to identify 'R.S.,' no one has conclusively determined the identity of the unknown writer: see, for example, the efforts outlined below by Hyder Edward Rollins, the editor of the 1931 edition of *The Phoenix Nest*, and John Payne Collier in his *Works of Edmund Spenser* (1862). Likewise, there have been attempts to identify 'W.S.'—the poet who contributed a poem to the *Nest*, "A notable description of the world," but without clear success.

For Rollins, the "chief problem connected with the *Nest* is the identity of its compiler, R.S."<sup>83</sup> Rollins reviewed a list of the various proposed candidates: Richard Stanyhurst (a Jesuit with "lumbering" poetry); Robert Southwell (another Jesuit who was in prison in the tower at the time); R. Smythe (who he believes has been announced as dead; but compare Chapter 22); R. Smith (a poet with "wretched verse"), Richard Stapleton, Ralph Sidley, Robert Sackville.<sup>84</sup> Of these, only two were members of the Inner Temple: Richard Stapleton and Robert Sackville.<sup>85</sup> None of the candidates, though, convinced Rollins. While he recognized that Richard Stapleton as the "most generally accepted suggestion" he believed that the suggestion relies upon "pure conjecture," and is "impossible" to prove.<sup>86</sup> He notes that a "Richard, son and heir of Sir Brian Stapleton was admitted to the Inner Temple in February, 1534"; using this date as a rough estimate of his age, Stapleton would have been likely over 75 years of age when the *Phoenix Nest* was published in 1593. George Chapman's first edition of *Ovid's Banquet of Sence* (1595) includes a commendatory sonnet from "Richard Stapleton to the Author."<sup>87</sup> This is the only poem Rollins could identify as composed by then elderly Stapleton (Rollins also

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<sup>82</sup> Dennis McCarthy, "Thomas North was the 'T.N.' Who Prefaced Belleforest's *Tragicall Hystories*," *Notes & Queries* 54, no. 3 (September 2007): 244-48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjm131>.

<sup>83</sup> *The Phoenix Nest*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Harvard University Press, 1931), xxi.

<sup>84</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxi-xxv.

<sup>85</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxv, for Stapleton, see footnote 1.

<sup>86</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxiv.

<sup>87</sup> George Chapman, *Ovids banquet of sence* (London: Richard Smith, 1595), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebbo/A18417>.

remarks on an undated Chapman reference to his “most ancient” friend “Master Richard Stapilton”).<sup>88</sup> Rollins points out that with this commendatory sonnet, Richard Stapleton did not sign himself in the manner of R.S. as a member of the Inner Temple.<sup>89</sup> Rollins also examined the list of *Students Admitted to the Inner Temple 1547-1660* (1877), and finds no evidence that any other Inner Temple lawyer was the editor of the *Nest*; he dismisses the only possible candidate, Robert Sackville, as not having any known connections to the literary group.<sup>90</sup>

In his 1862 edition of the works of Edmund Spenser, Collier listed various possible identifications of R.S.<sup>91</sup> The unknown poet wrote the fourth commendatory poem for Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, which appears after two poems by ‘W.R.’ (Walter Raleigh) and one by ‘Hobynoll’ (maybe Gabriel Harvey). Collier did not consider Robert Sackville, but otherwise he simply listed (with little comment) the same names examined by Rollins: Richard Stanyhurst, Robert Southwell, Ralph Sidley, Richard Smith, and Richard Stapleton.

As compared to R.S. there are far fewer unknown references to ‘W.S.’ in the EEBO digital database; however, of the twelve instances found by this author,<sup>92</sup> two are also associated with R.S.: Nicholas Breton’s book, *The Will of Wit* and R.S.’s *The Phoenix Nest*. In *The Will of Wit*, written around 1580 but not published until 1599, a commendatory poem by ‘W.S.’ introduces Breton’s work; the poem is four stanzas, each

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<sup>88</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxvi-xxviii.

<sup>89</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxviii.

<sup>90</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxv.

<sup>91</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. John Payne Collier, 5v. (London: Bell and Daldy, 1862), I.155-56, footnote e, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006672651> (Hathitrust #349-50).

<sup>92</sup> Of the other 10 references to ‘W.S.’, three are attributed to plays possibly written by Shakespeare (*Cromwell* [1602], *Locrine* [1595], and *The puritane* [1607]); three are attributed to known authors (two to William Seres, and, in the compilation, *England’s Helicon* [1600], the poem *Chloris*, to William Smith); one, in *Willobie his Avis* (1594), has a long history of commentary on possible relationship to Shakespeare; three seem completely unrelated because of context (*Golden Aphroditus* [1577] includes a 18-line poem; *A short discourse of the life of servingmen* [1578] includes a letter from ‘W.S.’; *A Spirituall propine of a pastour* [1589], published in Edinburgh with a introductory sonnet from ‘W.S.’).

with six lines, written in iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme *ababcc* (the same stanza and rhyme scheme as in *Venus & Adonis*).<sup>93</sup> Two editors of the same work took opposite positions on the possibility that the author of this poem was Shakespeare: whereas James Halliwell wrote in 1860 that the four stanzas had been “absurdly ascribed to Shakespeare” and were “were more likely by William Smyth, the author of *Chloris*,”<sup>94</sup> Alexander Grosart wrote in his 1879 edition that the language in the poem “at once remind of Shakespeare.”<sup>95</sup>

One poet, William Smith (or Smyth), has been generally suggested as the poet ‘W.S.’ in both works. Smith was the author of a volume of forty-nine sonnets, *Chloris, or The Complaint of the passionate despised Shepheard* (1596)<sup>96</sup> and a book of verse presented in manuscript to the Countess of Pembroke, *A newyeares’ Guifte*.<sup>97</sup> However, Lawrence Sasek, the editor of the modern edition of *Chloris*, doubted that it was likely that Smith was the author of the poem in *The Phoenix Nest*, writing:<sup>98</sup>

Conceivably, William Smith may be the author of a poem attributed to W.S. in *The Phoenix Nest* (1593), though it is unlike his other work. This poem, “A notable description of the World,” tells the story of the creation in two stanzas, the first of which is rhyme royal and the second, nine pentameter lines rhyming *a b a b c d c d d*. In its theme, in its hybrid form, and in its harshness of meter, it contrasts with the smooth regularity of the poems known to be Smith’s. Also, the date conflicts with Smith’s references to *Chloris* as his first work.

So, was Ralph Sheldon also R.S.? The immediate case for Ralph Sheldon as R.S. lies with three main points: R.S. seems to have been closely allied with Nicholas Breton and Walter Raleigh, all associated with Oriel College; R.S. seems to have been comfortable with legal terminology but was most likely not associated with the Inner

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<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Breton, *The works in verse and prose of Nicholas Breton*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 2v. (Edinburgh: 1879), II. *The Will of Wit*, 6, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008661623>, (Hathitrust #50).

<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Breton, *The will of wit*, ed. James O. Halliwell (London: T. Richards, 1860), vii, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001420618>, (Hathitrust #13).

<sup>95</sup> Grosart, I.iv, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008661623>, (Hathitrust #60).

<sup>96</sup> William Smith, *Chloris, or The Complaint of the passionate despised Shepheard* (London: Bollifant, 1596), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12550>.

<sup>97</sup> See William Smith, *The Poems of William Smith*, ed. Lawrence A. Sasek (Louisiana University Press, 1970), 3.

<sup>98</sup> Sasek, 4.

Temple despite the inference to the contrary; and R.S. appears connected with the writer Shakespeare.

One of the most striking similarities of the literary works grouped as related to R.S. is the overlap between R.S., Ralph Sheldon, Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), and Nicholas Breton (1545-1626). Raleigh and Breton were two of the principal contributors to R.S.'s *The Phoenix Nest* (1593). Both Breton and Raleigh were connected with Oriel College, where Sheldon had one of the college residences, beginning in 1566 (see Chapter 13). Raleigh included a poem by R.S. in his extended commendation of Edmund Spenser's 1590 *Faerie Queene*, and in a 1595 book dedicated to Raleigh,<sup>99</sup> Spenser appended three poems from R.S.'s *The Phoenix Nest*. Raleigh matriculated at Oriel College around 1572,<sup>100</sup> and like Sheldon, he was a member of Middle Temple.<sup>101</sup> Further, Raleigh was married to Elizabeth "Bess" Throckmorton, the daughter of Nicholas Throckmorton,<sup>102</sup> the first cousin of Sheldon's wife Anne Throckmorton.

Although little is known about Breton, what is known connects him with Ralph Sheldon and Leicester. From an early age, he was tied closely to the center of the Elizabethan theatrical community. His stepfather (from 1568) was George Gascoigne, a Gray's Inn lawyer-dramatist who organized Leicester's magnificent 1575 entertainment for Elizabeth at Kenilworth.<sup>103</sup> Although the dates are unknown, Breton was associated with Oriel College. In a book published in 1577, Breton indicated that as a "yong gentleman" he had spent "some years at Oxford."<sup>104</sup> Oriel College records say nothing of Breton; however a diarist writing under the date, "14 March 1582[-3]," noted that "ther was Mr. Brytten, once of Oriel Colledge which made Wyts Will; he speaketh Italian

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<sup>99</sup> Edmund Spenser, *Colin Clouts come home againe* (William Ponsonbie, 1595), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12773>.

<sup>100</sup> Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, *Sir Walter Raleigh: In Life and Legend* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 9.

<sup>101</sup> Rowse, Raleigh, 133.

<sup>102</sup> Nicholls and Williams, 74-6.

<sup>103</sup> C.T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1981), 32, 177-80.

<sup>104</sup> Nicholas Breton, *A flourish upon fancie* (London: Richard Jones, 1577), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A16746>).

well.”<sup>105</sup> Given the title of his work (*Wytts Will* as described by the diarist), Breton may have been at Oriel in the period when the anonymous play *Wit and Will* (1567)<sup>106</sup> was developed, after Leicester first obtained the lease for Sheldon at Oriel in April 1566 (see Chapter 13). In Breton’s later years as an accomplished poet, his major patron (and possible lover) was the Countess of Pembroke.<sup>107</sup>

The connections between Raleigh, Breton, and Oriel College, and then the mutual connection with R.S., lead to the question whether there was any other Oriel College personage of the general period from the late 1560s to the early 1590s (when *The Phoenix Nest* was published) with the initials R.S. other than Ralph Sheldon; examination of the 1926 publication of the Oriel College Dean’s Register for 1446-1661 suggests not. The index to the volume indicates 11 men with initials R.S. during the years of the entire volume;<sup>108</sup> of these only two, Robert Smythe [Smith] and Ralph Stamforde [Stanforde] were at Oriel during the period in question: Smythe was accepted in 1582, then resigned in 1588 and Stamforde became a fellow in 1577, but by 1584 had left for Rheims.<sup>109</sup> This would leave only Ralph Sheldon as R.S. of the period under consideration.

Two items bear on R.S. as legally trained: the legal metaphors used in an undated letter published among Breton’s *Madde Letters*, and R.S.’s description of himself as an “Inner Temple Gentleman” introducing *The Phoenix Nest*. In the letter, from R.S. to “Mistresse A.T.,” R.S. writes:

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<sup>105</sup> See Halliwell, v-vii, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001420618> (Hathitrust #11-13). Halliwell discusses the diary record and the history of publication of *Will of Wit*, and concludes that, as the work was entered on the Stationers’ Register 7 September 1580, the first edition was likely in 1580.

<sup>106</sup> *Wit and Will* was performed for Elizabeth at Westminster at Christmas 1567, Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.84.

<sup>107</sup> See *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900/Breton, Nicholas, <https://en.wikisource.org>.

<sup>108</sup> *The Dean’s Register of Oriel 1446-1661*, ed. G.C. Richards and H.E. Salter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926): the index at 406 shows Richard Saunders (1636); Richard Sawtre (1510); Robert Say (1635); Richard Sewall (1549); Ralph Sheldon (1566); Robert Smythe (1582); Richard Spencer (1644); Ralph Stamforde (1577); Roger Stephens (1446); Richard Sutton (1510); Roger Sutton (1480).

<sup>109</sup> *Oriel Register*: Smythe, 193; Stamforde, 178, note 1.

Ladie, I have been so ill a scholar to love, that I never yet learned the courting of beautie . . . I will use no Attuneie in this case: which being to judged in your kindnes, I will onely crave audience, and stand to your arbitrement: my case being my own lawyer, this I plead: your eies have stolne my hearte: now I must either be accessarie to mine own hurte, or accuse you of the felonie, but rather willing to loose my heart in your eies, then keepe them to looke on other light, I wil onelie appeale to your selfe, what to doe in this passion . . . (Breton, *Madde Letters*)

Ralph Sheldon married Anne Throckmorton ('Mistresse A.T.'?) in May 1557, in the year after he first was admitted to the Middle Temple.<sup>110</sup> Could this be the language of a young legal scholar to his beloved?

Although R.S. may have been a legal scholar, he does not seem to have been from the Inner Temple, notwithstanding the description in *The Phoenix Nest* of 'R.S.' as an Inner Temple Gentleman. Of the various candidates considered over the years as possibly 'R.S.,' only two, Richard Stapleton and Robert Sackville, have been identified as admitted to the Inner Temple. As noted above, the modern editor of the *Nest* Rollins was unconvinced that either Stapleton or Sackville was 'R.S.,' and he could not identify any other probable candidate from the Inner Temple admission list.<sup>111</sup> Because R.S. – as editor – would surely have had a hand in the description of himself, this suggests deliberate obfuscation of his own identity by R.S. But the *Nest* contain poetry from the finest poets of the era, and was partially dedicated to the Earl of Leicester, a very strong advocate of the Inner Temple and its lawyers. If its editor had deliberated misstated his connection with the prestigious Inner Temple, where was the objection from members of the Inner Temple?

Sheldon was legally trained but associated with Middle Temple; Middle Temple shared the same premises with the Inner Temple (Middle Temple on the west, Inner Temple on the east). Leicester had private quarters in the Inner (not Middle) Temple, and

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<sup>110</sup> See E.A.B. Barnard, *The Sheldons* (Cambridge University Press, 1936), 28.

<sup>111</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxv, xxvii. A search of the Inner Temple Admissions Database corroborates the finding: 17 members admitted between 1547 and 1593 had initials 'R.S.'; of these, none are known writers. Among the entrants is Robert Southwell (1563), but he is not the noted Jesuit priest Robert Southwell (c. 1561-96); see Inner Temple Admissions Database, [www.innertemplearchives.org.uk](http://www.innertemplearchives.org.uk).



used Inner Temple lawyers almost exclusively in his legal affairs.<sup>112</sup> Could the apparent deception concerning R.S.'s membership in the Inner Temple be a known jest on confusion between the two sets of lawyers on the part of Leicester: perhaps Leicester routinely viewed any lawyer who assisted him (including Middle Temple lawyer Ralph Sheldon) as an 'Inner Temple Gentleman'?

The case argued herein for Sheldon as the writer Shakespeare provides even greater reason to equate R.S. and Sheldon. The writer's long-term relationship with Leicester as patron would certainly underlie the full-throated and passionate defense of Leicester in the introduction to the *Nest* (see Chapter 29). The long-term anonymity of the Catholic Sheldon as playwright for Leicester would explain the continuing obfuscation of Sheldon's identity in the *Nest* (see Chapter 32). Two unusual sources used by the writer Shakespeare in his plays are also connected strongly to R.S.: R.S. published in 1577 a rare translation of four stories by the French writer Francois de Belleforest, the same author whose stories Shakespeare followed in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet* (see Chapter 22). As the basis for his tale of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare used an obscure poem on silkworm cultivation, available only as a manuscript, written by Thomas Moffett, physician to the Herbert family and another well-known member of the Countess of Pembroke's social circle (see Chapter 10).

However, it is in the last listed work, Breton's *Madde Letters* (1606) which provides perhaps the most direct evidence of the convergence between R.S., Ralph Sheldon, and the writer Shakespeare. In the second post referencing R.S., R.S. writes to "Lord W. H." In the undated note, R.S. invites Lord W.H. to the wedding of his daughter where venison will be served, asking that Lord W.H. look with favor on this, his "sute for a Bucke." As discussed more fully in Chapter 37, the personal circumstances of both Ralph Sheldon and Lord William Herbert (the son of the Countess of Pembroke) suggest that the date of the note was around May/June 1603, just at the time when George Buck was commissioned as acting Master of the Revels for the Court of the newly arrived King

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<sup>112</sup> See Derek Wilson, *Sweet Robin* (London: Allison & Busby Ltd, 1981), 134, 172-73, 219.

James VI of Scotland; as such, Buck would be the official censor of the Court plays of the writer Shakespeare. From what is known now, it appears that Lord William Herbert was the principal patron of the Shakespeare acting company; this “madde letter” would seem to confirm that surmise.

For a summary of proposed ‘hydden’ life of Sheldon as R.S. see Appendix I; for a list of the evidence connecting Sheldon and R.S. with the Shakespeare works, see Appendix II.

## **PART III: CHRONOLOGY OF SHELDON AS SHAKESPEARE**

### **A. 1556: SHELDON & ITALY**

## 7. *Sheldon Goes to Italy (1555/6)*

Following two eminent Shakespearean scholars Ernesto Grillo and Mario Praz (both Stratfordians), the consensus would be that Shakespeare needed some source of personal knowledge of Italian geography and culture. Correspondence preserved in Venetian diplomatic files between English Ambassador Sir Philip Hoby (1504/5-58) and Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon (c. 1527-56) indicates that 18-year-old Ralph Sheldon accompanied Courtenay beginning in November 1555 from Louvain across war-torn northern Europe to Italy, where he likely stayed until the Earl's untimely death in Padua in September 1556, returning to England in time to be admitted to Middle Temple in November 1556. The correspondence suggests that Hoby was acting on behalf of Ralph's father William, who wished to establish a luxury (arras) tapestry industry in England; at the time, Italy – in the region to be visited by Courtenay – was the major producer and exporter of the silk thread critical to production of arras tapestries. The itinerary of the Earl's trip roughly matches the research of Grillo and Praz on the geographical markers in the Shakespeare play, but perhaps more significantly, the geography and cultural points included in the early Shakespeare Italian plays mirror the region of most commercial use to the Sheldon tapestry business: Mantua, Milan, Venice, Verona, and Padua.

Two letters exchanged between Hoby and Courtenay provide the main evidence for Sheldon's trip and his itinerary. On November 20, 1555, Hoby wrote from Antwerp to Courtenay in Louvain, asking that Courtenay meet with "a scholar and countryman of mine named young Sheldon, encourage him in his studies, and show him some kind of courtesy, for that his father, being a very dear friend of mine, may hear from his son's report that my recommendation of him to your Lordship may stand his in some stead."<sup>113</sup> The next day, Courtenay replies, and "promises to look after young Sheldon, whom he

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<sup>113</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian* (CSPV), vol. 6, Part I (1555-56), ed. Rawdon Brown (London, 1877), 253 (No. 284, 20 Nov 1555), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100971285> (Hathitrust #327).

has not yet seen.”<sup>114</sup> Courtenay received funds for his travel on 22 November 1555,<sup>115</sup> and presumably embarked on his much-delayed trip where he expected to travel “first to Mantua, then to Ferrara, and perhaps to Milan, before going to Venice.”<sup>116</sup>

Both the identity of “young Sheldon” and what Courtenay’s promise to “look after young Sheldon” entailed are vague in this correspondence. However, as discussed further below, Ralph Sheldon’s age and circumstances, his epitaph and family lore, as well as the fact that Hoby and Ralph’s father William were close personal friends – the elder Sheldon witnessed Hoby’s will in 1558 – all strongly support that “young Sheldon” was Ralph Sheldon, the 18-year-old son and heir to William Sheldon. Moreover, the timing of the Ambassador’s request – while Courtenay was in the midst of preparations to depart immediately for Italy – and the precise match of William Sheldon’s business interests to Courtenay’s Italian itinerary would lead to the conclusion that Courtenay agreed to “look after the young Sheldon” while the young Sheldon accompanied him on his trip to Italy.

Ralph Sheldon’s social circumstances in November 1555 (18 years of age, unmarried, one year from entering Middle Temple) make him an ideal candidate for “young Sheldon”: an unencumbered young gentleman scholar whose father sends him to the continent to expand the family’s economic and business interests with the assistance of the father’s long-term friend diplomat and trade negotiator Philip Hoby. Sheldon’s epitaph (presumably written around his death in 1613), offers support for a European trip at that time: “After he had spent his youth studying at Oxford, he had visited France and other countries and lived at Court. He then had married. . . [emphasis added]”<sup>117</sup> According to E.A.B. Barnard (reporting on family lore), Sheldon married Anne Throckmorton in May 1557 “shortly after his return from those ‘tapestry’ travels abroad, with Richard Hyckes as his mentor. . .”<sup>118</sup> While the exact relationship between Sheldon

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<sup>114</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 254 (No. 285, 21 Nov 1555), (Hathitrust #328).

<sup>115</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 255-56 (No. 286, 22 Nov 1555), (Hathitrust #329-30).

<sup>116</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 243 (No. 273, 11 Nov 1555), (Hathitrust #317).

<sup>117</sup> Barnard, 41. The text is Barnard’s translation of the original Latin inscription.

<sup>118</sup> Barnard, 28.

and Hyckes is disputed by scholars,<sup>119</sup> it seems that Sheldon's family believed that he traveled to Europe on a trip related to the proposed Sheldon tapestry business before his marriage in May 1557. As Sheldon was in London to enter Middle Temple in November 1556,<sup>120</sup> such a trip would have most likely been the preceding year, thereby coinciding with Courtenay's trip to Italy.

William Sheldon (c. 1500-70) and Ambassador Hoby (c. 1504-58) were contemporaries, shared business interests, and owned neighboring properties in Worcestershire; and as Sheldon witnessed Hoby's will a week before his death on 9 May 1558,<sup>121</sup> most certainly (as Hoby's letter to Courtenay suggests) long-time friends. Hoby, a diplomat who had worked closely with Antwerp merchants on trade negotiations,<sup>122</sup> would have known of the wool trade operations of Sheldon's father-in-law William Willington in Calais, and undoubtedly would have approved Sheldon's desire to establish an English arras tapestry industry. Around 1545, Hoby had acquired property from the dissolution of the Evesham monastery,<sup>123</sup> a monastery very nearly adjacent to the Pershore monastery (Pershore to Evesham is 6 miles), of which lands the Sheldon family had leased or owned since around 1505.<sup>124</sup> William Sheldon, sheriff and M.P. from Worcestershire in 1547, was also actively involved in regulation of the monastery dissolution from 1547.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> See Turner, "Richard Hyckes (?)1524-1621 – a biography," *Tapestries Called Sheldon*.

<sup>120</sup> *Middle Temple Records*, ed. Charles Henry Hopwood (London: Butterworth & Co., 1904), 108.

<sup>121</sup> *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1509 – 1558*, ed. S.T. Bindoff (1982), "Hoby, Sir Philip (1504/5-58)," [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/hoby-sir-philip-15045-58](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/hoby-sir-philip-15045-58).

<sup>122</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900*, "Sir Philip Hoby."

<sup>123</sup> Habington, 38-9; 53-4.

<sup>124</sup> T. Brendan Minney, "The Sheldons of Beoley," 2; Turner, "More on William Sheldon," *Tapestries Called Sheldon*. Beoley, where William Sheldon's family resided, had originally been part of the Pershore monastery lands and was about 20 miles from Philip Hoby's properties at Evesham.

<sup>125</sup> Bindoff, *History of Parliament*, "William Sheldon (1511-70)," [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/sheldon-william-1511-70](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/sheldon-william-1511-70).

Edward Courtenay, the Earl of Devon, was one of the most tragically romantic figures of the era – strikingly handsome, graceful, both scholarly and roguish, the last heir of the English Catholic White Rose (York) nobility, suitor to both Queen Mary and Princess Elizabeth;<sup>126</sup> a man who might have been King but who died suddenly in Padua in September 1556, age 29, after a hawking expedition.<sup>127</sup> In 1555, after allegations of conspiracy between Edward and Princess Elizabeth on behalf of an English rebellion against Queen Mary, Edward was exiled to Brussels, leaving England on April 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup>, “with all his retinue.”<sup>128</sup> Upon arrival in Calais on his way to Brussels, Courtenay announced his intention to travel to Italy.<sup>129</sup> Despite repeated requests,<sup>130</sup> he did not receive permission to travel from King Philip until five months later, on 15 October 1555; with this permission he expected to leave for Italy around the first of November.<sup>131</sup>

At the time Hoby contacted him on behalf of “young Sheldon” (on 20 November 1555), Courtenay had been once again delayed, desperately trying to raise funds for his travel;<sup>132</sup> however, by 22 November he had procured a line of credit.<sup>133</sup> Clearly, Courtenay, on the day (21 November) when he agreed to “look after young Sheldon,” would have intended to leave for Italy as soon as he could, without incurring further delay. Given this timing (especially as by 21 November he had yet to meet Sheldon), the sole way that Courtenay could have “looked after” young Sheldon would have been to include him with his entourage on his Italian trip.

Moreover, given the economic and trade situation of the era, the greatest (and probably only) help that Courtenay could have afforded to the Sheldon family and their incipient tapestry venture would have been to take Ralph to Italy. There were large

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<sup>126</sup> Louis Wiesener, *The Youth of Queen Elizabeth, 1533-1558*, ed. from French, Charlotte M. Younge (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1879; <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008957546>), 174-176; for another point of view, see CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, xxiv-xxv, footnote 2 (Hathitrust #32-3).

<sup>127</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, xxii (Hathitrust #30).

<sup>128</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 58 (No. 67, 29 April 1555), (Hathitrust #130).

<sup>129</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 67 (No. 77, 10 May 1555), (Hathitrust #139).

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 99 (No. 123, 6 June 1555), (Hathitrust #173).

<sup>131</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 215 (No. 248, 16 October 1555), (Hathitrust #289).

<sup>132</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 243 (No. 273, 11 November 1555), (Hathitrust #317).

<sup>133</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 255-56 (No. 286, 22 November 1555), (Hathitrust #329-30).

collections of tapestries in Italy,<sup>134</sup> and rulers such as the Gonzaga in Mantua had brought in Flemish weavers from the Low Countries starting in the fifteenth century.<sup>135</sup> In the 1550s, much of the fighting of the ongoing European wars was centered on northern France and the Flemish territories of the Netherlands, forcing expert Flemish weavers to seek refuge in other lands; this circumstance accelerated the immigration of tapestry artisans to Italy, where the Renaissance art and culture added significant commercial value to high quality tapestry work.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Christina Antenhofer, "Displaying Textiles at the Gonzaga Court," in *Europe's Rich Fabric*, ed. Bart Lambert and Katherine Anne Wilson, (New York: Routledge, 2019; originally published Ashgate, 2016), 39-40.

<sup>135</sup> Katherine Anne Wilson, "The Possession and Uses of Luxury Textiles," in *Europe's Rich Fabric*, 12-13.

<sup>136</sup> See "Tapestry," *Brittanica Online Encyclopedia*, [www.brittanica.com/print/article/583114](http://www.brittanica.com/print/article/583114).



## 8. *Sheldon's Tapestry Business & Shakespeare's Plays*

In their studies, Grillo and Praz examined the early Shakespeare plays and commented on the remarkable amount of local knowledge alluded to regarding five specific northern Italian cities: Verona, Mantua, Padua, Venice, and Milan. Of these allusions – some of which will be discussed below – Ernesto Grillo said that he found “such vivid colour and such a wealth of precise and vigorous details that we are forced to conclude that Shakespeare must have visited Milan, Verona, Venice, Padua, and Mantua . . .”<sup>137</sup> Likewise, Mario Praz found it exceedingly “puzzling” that Shakespeare was so accurate in certain local allusions, allusions that were “confined to a definite part of Italy: Venice, and the neighboring towns of Verona, Padua, Mantua; and Milan. . .”<sup>138</sup>

If, however, one compares the northern Italian cities then prominent for sericulture and tapestry manufacture, one finds the same cities named by Grillo and Praz as used by Shakespeare in his early plays: Verona, Mantua, Padua, Venice, and Milan. The paragraphs below provide evidence that this clear overlap between the cities most connected to the Sheldon business interests and the central area of the early Shakespeare plays is no coincidence.

First, the origin of some of the most controversial allusions noted by Grillo, Praz, and others can be directly explained by Sheldon's commercial interests. Then, two of the most puzzling aspects of the Shakespeare oeuvre: the silkworm/sericulture source of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the obvious indebtedness of his work to the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, can both be traced to the entry of the noble Courtenay (along with “young Sheldon”) into the cultural realm of the Gonzaga princes in Mantua around January 1556. Courtenay himself appears to have found a place in the Shakespeare works, as a possible prototype for the characters of Romeo Montague and Henry V with

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<sup>137</sup> Grillo, 132-33.

<sup>138</sup> Mario Praz, “Shakespeare and Italy,” *Sydney Studies* (University of Sydney, 1966): 11-12.

his “band of brothers.” Finally, Ralph Sheldon’s likely relationship with Richard Hyckes seems mirrored by that of Lucentio and Tranio in the *Taming of the Shrew*.

If the Sheldon tapestry works were to compete with Flemish imports of arras tapestries such as those collected by Henry VIII and Thomas Wolsey, it needed a ready supply of high-quality silk and metallic thread. According to tapestry historian Thomas Campbell, four factors determined the quality of Tudor tapestries: the quality of the cartoon from which it was woven; the skill of the weavers interpreting the cartoon; the fineness of the weave; and the materials used to make the tapestry. Of these, the materials – particularly the silk and metallic thread – were “by far” the most significant factor in the cost and quality of tapestry.<sup>139</sup> As England had no native silkworm cultivation (sericulture), the Sheldon tapestry works would need to import these costly threads.

At the time, the supply of silk thread was dominated by the Italian silk industry, which both produced the silk locally and also imported vast amounts from overseas.<sup>140</sup> Northern Italy had extensive sericulture in various city states, including along the Po River valley, mostly around Mantua, Ferrara, Milan,<sup>141</sup> and Venetian cities such as Padua and Verona.<sup>142</sup> Venice also imported vast quantities of raw silk from abroad, largely from Romania and Greece; this trade was pursued generally by Levantine Jews living in Venice ghettos.<sup>143</sup> Verona, in particular, was key to the tapestry trade: because of its position on the central trade route to Germany and Flanders, it concentrated on export of heavier, coarser silk thread used in tapestries, and traded heavily with northern European markets.<sup>144</sup> As can be seen, Courtenay’s Italian itinerary – Mantua, Ferrara, Milan,

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<sup>139</sup> Thomas Campbell, “Tapestry Quality in Tudor England: Problems of Terminology,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, 3, no. 1 (1995-96): 29. [www.jstor.org/stable/40662554](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40662554).

<sup>140</sup> Luca Mola, “A Luxury Industry: The Production of Italian Silks 1400-1600,” in *Europe’s Rich Fabric*, 206.

<sup>141</sup> Mola, *Rich Fabric*, 211.

<sup>142</sup> Luca Mola, *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 256.

<sup>143</sup> Mola, *Silk Industry*, 67-69.

<sup>144</sup> Mola, *Silk Industry*, 244; *Rich Fabric*, 214. Verona’s concentration on the coarser silk used in tapestries contrasted with other regions of Italy; in Vicenza and Tuscany, for example, the sericulture industry concentrated on producing very fine thread, to be used in the production of velvets and satin; see Mola, *Rich Fabric*, 214.

Venice, ultimately ending in Padua, with the addition of nearby Verona – completely matched the potential commercial interests of the Sheldon tapestry works.

Certain allusions in the early Shakespeare plays – for example, to the sailmaker in Bergamo (*Taming of the Shrew*, 5.1.70-71); to the waterway between Verona and Milan (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.3.41-43); to an “argosy” (a ship used by Venetian merchant Antonio) sailing to Mexico (*Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.18-20) have been seized upon by critics as errors demonstrating Shakespeare’s lack of local knowledge. Subsequent investigation by various scholars, however, have found these references to be accurate,<sup>145</sup> and have indicated the writer’s singular acumen; for example, Mario Praz, referring to the first two allusions, stated that “these seeming inaccuracies, far from revealing Shakespeare’s ignorance of Italian geography, show an intimate acquaintance with it. . .”<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Grillo remarks on Shakespeare’s “intimate acquaintance” with Italy, citing, among other things, the detailed description of Gremio’s household furnishings: “Tyrian tapestry . . . arras counterpoints . . .” in *Taming of the Shrew* (2.1.345, 347), luxury items to be found, according to Grillo, only in the palaces of the aristocracy of Italy.<sup>147</sup> Grillo also points out that Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock – as an “indisputable type” of Venice – would have been “impossible” in England because there were no Jews allowed in England.<sup>148</sup>

Yet, if reference is made to the Sheldon tapestry business and its commercial interests, all the above allusions (and the knowledge thereof) can be readily explained. At its broadest, Ralph Sheldon’s interest would be learning as much as possible about the textile trade in Italy. Whereas this would most certainly include specialized knowledge about Tyrian tapestries and “arras counterpoints” (a luxury tapestry constructed of contrasting panels), it would extend easily to knowledge of the existence of sail manufacture in Bergamo, a northern Italian city between Verona and Milan. Furthermore, information on the general trade routes between Italian states – especially the more

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<sup>145</sup> Regarding the sailmaker in Bergamo, see Grillo, 141; the waterways between Verona and Milan, see Grillo, 142-146; Praz, 8; Roe, 35-61; the argosy in Mexico, see Roe, 116-117.

<sup>146</sup> Praz, 8.

<sup>147</sup> Grillo, 137.

<sup>148</sup> Grillo, 139.

protected river canal system – would be of basic concern to anyone pursuing commercial opportunity throughout northern Italy.

However, the clear convergence between the writer Shakespeare's knowledge of Italian commercial trade and the Sheldon business interests are most acutely observed in the *Merchant of Venice*. As noted above, Venice was the center of the importation of raw silk into Italy, and the trade was managed by Levantine Jews. Although there is a Jewish money-lender and merchant ships in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's story "Il Pecorone" – the probable source of much of Shakespeare's narrative – Shakespeare's play includes far more local color than presented in Fiorentino's tale.<sup>149</sup> Concerning Jews and their culture, the writer alludes, among other things, to the varied origins of Jews (reference to a "wealthy Hebrew of my tribe," 1.3.55); to Jewish clothing (reference to "my Jewish gabardine" 1.3.111).<sup>150</sup> Concerning the merchant ships, Shakespeare refers not to generic ships (as does Fiorentino in his tale) but rather specifies definite types of ships: "argosies" (1.1.9) and "my wealthy Andrew" (1.1.27).<sup>151</sup> Such detail on both Jews and actual types of merchant ships would have been quite naturally accumulated by a young Englishman investigating possible raw silk trade deals in Venice.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to have been inspired by two of the oddest sources in the history of the Shakespeare canon. The first is an obscure poem, *The Silkwormes, and their Flies*,<sup>152</sup> likely written around 1591 by naturalist Thomas Moffett (also Mouffet) to advocate sericulture in England and circulated in manuscript before it was published in 1599, years after the likely first performance of the play.<sup>153</sup> Muir makes a detailed case for Moffett's poem as a source for the play's tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe* as presented by the group of roaming actors. Muir traces verbal parallels between Moffett's poem and Shakespeare's play, and also compares the sense of Moffett's purpose with Shakespeare's language: for example, "bottom" is a technical

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<sup>149</sup> See Bullough, vol. I.449-50; Bullough's translation of "Il Pecorone," I.463-76.

<sup>150</sup> Roe, 128-29.

<sup>151</sup> Roe, 116-18.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas Moffett [Mouffet], *The Silkwormes, and their Flies* (London: Ling, 1599), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A07602>).

<sup>153</sup> See Kenneth Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 73-6.

term for the cocoon spun by the silkworm; Bottom, in the play as an actor, is a weaver by trade. (See Chapter 10 for further discussion of this poem as a source for Shakespeare.)

The second odd source is Sabbioneta, a tiny Italian town (originally within the duchy of Mantua) that was constructed into an ideal Renaissance urban center starting in 1556 by its Duke, the Gonzaga prince Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna (1531-91) and his beautiful wife Diana de Cardona. The place is locally known as “La Piccola Atene” (little Athens), with a temple, and most importantly, with a western gate known as “il Quercia dei Duca” (the Duke’s Oak).<sup>154</sup>

Richard Roe in *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (2011) connected these landmarks of the tiny planned urban community with references in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.<sup>155</sup> *AMND* refers to “the Duke’s oak” – as a meeting spot at 1.2.103; Roe connected this reference with the aforementioned western gate to the city.<sup>156</sup> Roe then tied two other well-known aspects of Sabbioneta – its traditional name of “Little Athens” and its temple – to similar references in *AMND*:<sup>157</sup> according to a search of EEBO, the play contains 28 references to ‘Athens’ or ‘Athenians’; and 4 references to ‘temple.’ While references to ‘Athens’ and ‘temple’ are replete in western literature, the reference to the ‘Duke’s oak’ is quite unique; search of EEBO would suggest, in fact, that the Shakespeare play is the only source of the phrase. But, as further noted by Roe,<sup>158</sup> while there are no ‘dukes’ native to Greece (or Athens), there are countless Italian dukes.<sup>159</sup> Thus, the fact that not only is the phrase “Duke’s oak” very rare, but also that the same

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<sup>154</sup> Roe, 183.

<sup>155</sup> Roe, 178-87.

<sup>156</sup> Roe, 182-83.

<sup>157</sup> Roe, 183-85.

<sup>158</sup> Roe, 184.

<sup>159</sup> While the rulers of classical Greece were not known as ‘dukes,’ the literary source of portions of *AMND*, Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, refers specifically to Theseus, ‘duc’ of Athens; see, Bullough, I.377. However, there is no mention of a “Duke’s oak” in the Chaucer narrative, and borrowings from *The Knight’s Tale* are considered incidental to the plot of *AMND* [see Bullough, I.367-68; also see, for example, the discussion in Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010), 277, comparing the usage of Chaucer’s story in *AMND* with its use in the later play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*].

commonly ‘Italian’ reference (Duke) is combined with the same commonly ‘Greek’ references (Athens and temple) in both Sabbioneta and *AMND* seems highly significant.

These two apparently disparate source works – the sericulture trade poem and the history of the ideal city Sabbioneta – have one thing in common: they are each a tale of a dream (in Moffett’s poem, that of *Pyramus and Thisbe*; in Sabbioneta, that of the ideal Renaissance city) set against the background of silkworms spinning their cocoons in mulberry trees. As it happens, Sabbioneta was built by Vespasiano Gonzaga in the midst of a major center of mulberry tree cultivation for silkworms. In the latter half of the fifteenth century, continuing into the sixteenth century, much of Italy became involved in what some historians have referred to as “mulberry-mania” wherein vast tracts of mulberry trees were introduced for silkworm cultivation.<sup>160</sup> The Gonzaga family was one of the first Italian aristocratic families to embark, between 1465 and 1478, on extensive plantings of mulberry trees on their lands in Mantua.<sup>161</sup> The Gonzagas (as well as the Duke of Milan), created nurseries to supply trees to anyone interested in them.<sup>162</sup> While it is unknown exactly where the plantings of mulberry trees extended within the duchy of Mantua, Sabbioneta was, at the time of its reconstruction as a urban utopia, a Gonzaga estate in the countryside just over 20 miles from the main city of Mantua. In one history of Sabbioneta written in 1849, the countryside surrounding Sabbioneta was described as “cultivated with different seeds, and mostly rich in mulberry trees and beautiful vines, which are organized in lines that go from south to north” (emphasis added).<sup>163</sup>

Most importantly, though, the two sources are connected by Ralph Sheldon, and the Sheldon family interests in arras tapestry and sericulture. From diplomatic accounts, it appears that Ralph Sheldon (as part of the Earl of Devon’s company) would have entered into Mantua in January 1556, although the exact date of Courtenay’s company entry into

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<sup>160</sup> Mola, *Rich Fabric*, 212.

<sup>161</sup> Mola, *Silk Industry*, 217.

<sup>162</sup> Mola, *Rich Fabric*, 212.

<sup>163</sup> Antonio Racheli, *Delle memorie storiche di Sabbioneta* (1849), 23-4; <https://archive.org/details/dellememoriestor00rachuoft>): The full quote is: “Il territorio del commune, di cui ella tiene presso che il mezzo, culto a campagne di seminati e per io piu inarborato di gelsi e di bellissime vigne, che ordinate per filari vanno da mezzodi a tramontane, gira a un di presso venti miglia.” Translation by Stefania Saccani.

Italy is unknown. However, Courtenay had left Italy near the end of November and he was in Venice by early February 1556, as the Venetian Council apologized to Courtenay for their failure to make a proper “demonstration of our goodwill and esteem for him” by motion dated 8 February.<sup>164</sup> This would suggest that he would have entered into Italy sometime in January 1556.

That Courtenay and his retinue would have first stopped in Mantua upon entering Italy in January on his way to Venice is strongly indicated by three items. First, the diplomatic note on Courtenay’s itinerary had explicitly noted that he intended to visit Mantua immediately upon entering Italy, and from thence going to Ferrara and possibly Milan before Venice.<sup>165</sup> Second, the same diplomatic note on Courtenay’s itinerary made it clear he was traveling via Cologne, by the trade route entering into Italy through what is now known as the Brenner Pass, and Mantua is immediately south of the pass.<sup>166</sup> Finally, as a matter of diplomacy, Courtenay would have visited Mantua first: King Philip II of Spain (also consort of the English Queen Mary) had given him permission to travel to Italy, and at the time some of Philip’s closest allies in Italy were the Gonzaga princes, especially Vespasiano (who served as a page in Philip’s court).

In what seems more than a remarkable coincidence, however, January 1556 would have been the same time that Vespasiano Gonzaga started work on the western fortifications of Sabbioneta (that is, in the area of western gate or the “Duke’s Oak”). According to Ireneo Affo, the first historian of Sabbioneta, Vespasiano was actually in Sabbioneta in January 1556, urging the fabrication of his city.<sup>167</sup> Later historians have concluded that Vespasiano began his project to create the ideal city in 1556 with the construction of fortifications on the western section of the city.<sup>168</sup> Although the city was

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<sup>164</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 342 (No. 383, 8 February 1556), (Hathitrust #418).

<sup>165</sup> See CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, 243 (No. 273, 11 November 1555), (Hathitrust #317).

<sup>166</sup> See *The Times Atlas of World History* (London: Times Books Limited, 1984), 144.

<sup>167</sup> Ireneo Affo, *Vita di Vespasiano Gonzaga duca di Sabbioneta* (Parma: Presso Filippo Carmignanini, 1780), 23: “Vespasiano data che ebbe una scorsa a Sabbioneta nel Gennaio del 1556 per sollicitar colla presenza le sue fabbriche. . .”; see Google books.

<sup>168</sup> Umberto Maffezzoli, *Sabbioneta: Visitor’s City Guide* (Pro Loco Sabbioneta, 2008), 9-10; the guide was written specifically to update the research on the town and its founder Vespasiano Gonzaga.

not fully constructed until decades later, the elements critical to the Shakespeare play were all notable at the time of Sheldon's visit: the construction of fortifications at the western gate (the Duke's Oak); the dedication of a new city to the concept of the ideal classical city (such as Athens);<sup>169</sup> the existence of a Temple (a school of Hebrew studies) in the city since around 1552.<sup>170</sup>

Additionally, the presence of Vespasiano and his then wife Diana provides a strong background story for the quarrelling fairy king and his wife Titania. In his study of the sources for *AMND*, Bullough determined that Shakespeare's name 'Titania' was directly drawn from Ovid's name for the goddess Diana; but he could find no similar story in literature for the quarrelling fairy king and queen.<sup>171</sup> Unfortunately, the jealousy of the real-life Vespasiano towards his tempestuous wife Diana was well-known: shortly after they first married and arrived in Sabbioneta in 1550, Diana had a miscarriage and rumors spread that she had lost the child because it was not that of her husband.<sup>172</sup> Diana died in 1559, officially by a stroke, but according to Italian tradition, Vespasiano forced Diana to take poison after he accused her of infidelity.<sup>173</sup>

The life of Edward Courtenay at the time of his Italian travels has an almost inescapable echo of two major Shakespeare figures, Romeo Montague and Henry V. The Catholic Courtenay was closely allied with the English Catholic family Montagu;<sup>174</sup> his ill-starred suit for the Protestant Princess Elizabeth, ended (much like Romeo's suit with

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<sup>169</sup> Modern historians have debated whether Vespasiano had in mind Athens or Rome, pointing out that "little Athens" was first coined by Affo in 1780, while another man, a contemporary scholar Mario Nizzoli, referred to Sabbioneta as a "new Rome" in a speech in 1562. See Maffezzoli, 9. Vespasiano's own preference in 1556 – as between Athens or Rome – would seem to be unknown.

<sup>170</sup> See James Cowan, "Hamlet's Ghost: Vespasiano Gonzaga and his Ideal City," PhD Diss., University of Queensland (2016), 37-8.

<sup>171</sup> Bullough, I.37-71.

<sup>172</sup> Cowan, 37, paraphrasing from Gian Francesca Marini, *Sabbioneta, Piccola Atene* (Casalmaggiore: G. Toscani, 1914).

<sup>173</sup> Maffezzoli, 105.

<sup>174</sup> Edward's father Henry Courtenay and Henry Pole, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Montagu, were together accused of treasonous conspiracy against Henry VIII; both Courtenay and Pole were executed around the beginning of 1539. After the death of his father, the 12-year-old Edward Courtenay was imprisoned another fourteen years until he was released in August 1553 by Queen Mary; see CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, xxiii (Hathitrust #31).



Juliet) with Courtenay's banishment and his tragic death at age 29 in Padua, possibly by poison, very near Verona.<sup>175</sup> His exile in Europe put him in the midst of the decades long "Italian Wars." The ongoing battles at the time – between Henry II of France and the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, with his son Philip II of Spain – were staged largely in northern France, along the northeast border of France, and into Italy.<sup>176</sup> Thus, in the fashion of Henry V and his "band of brothers," Courtenay marched with his retinue in the close vicinity of war-torn lands, making their way south to Italy.

Finally, as family legend had it, Richard Hyckes, an expert on arras tapestry, accompanied Ralph Sheldon on his trip abroad. In light of this possibility, the opening scene of *The Taming of the Shrew* after the two induction scenes seems very personal to Sheldon's travels. In that scene, Lucentio sits with his man Tranio, and comments on his arrival to "fair Padua": "I am arrived for fruitful Lumbardy,/The pleasant garden of great Italy,/And by my father's love and leave am armed/With his good will and thy good company,/My trusty servant well approved in all . . . (1.1.3-7). His father he describes as "a merchant of great traffic through the world" (1.1.12), and he indicates that it is his duty to follow his father's wishes: "It shall become to serve all hopes conceived,/To deck his fortune with his virtuous deeds. . ." (1.1.15-16). Tranio, however, suggests a different outlook:

Glad that you continue your resolve  
 To suck the sweets of sweet philosophy.  
 Only, good master, while we do admire  
 This virtue and this moral discipline,  
 Let's be no stoics nor no stocks, I pray; (1.1.27-31)  
 . . .  
 No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en;  
 In brief, sir, study what you most affect. (1.1.39-40)

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<sup>175</sup> CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, xxii-xxiii (Hathitrust #30-31).

<sup>176</sup> See [http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars\\_italian\\_wars.html#9](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_italian_wars.html#9).

## 9. Italy's 'Commedia Dell'Arte' (1550s)

Another difficult conundrum for those who have studied Shakespeare is the unmistakable influence of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. According to Kenneth McKee, in his foreword to *Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte*, this dramatic genre was a “unique development in the history of theater in western Europe” and he defined it as follows:<sup>177</sup>

*Commedia dell'arte* means literally “comedy of the [actors'] guild” and was essentially improvised comedy, which followed a plot outline, called a scenario rather than written dialogue. The players consisted of a dozen or so stock characters, several of whom wore masks, and two or more *zannis* whose *lazzis* ranged from comic intonations through acrobatics to obscene gestures. This assortment of roles remained almost constant throughout the life of the genre and the types were invariably the same, although the names often changed from troupe to troupe.

Critics have long recognized the possible influence of *commedia dell'arte* in many Shakespeare plays, including *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.<sup>178</sup> Kathleen Lea, in her comprehensive history of the genre within English drama, identified two plays for which there was “no other satisfactory explanation of the Italianate elements”: *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest*.<sup>179</sup> The influence is explicit in the first Quarto version of *Love's Labour's Lost*; at the start of the play the characters are not given proper names but rather are labeled with the generic characters from the *commedia dell'arte*: the braggart or soldier, the clown, the boy, the curate, the pedant, and the wench (proper names are eventually introduced).<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> *Scenarios of the 'Commedia dell'Arte,'* trans. Henry F. Salerno (Third Limelight Edition, 1996; originally printed New York University Press, 1967), xiii.

<sup>178</sup> The first six plays are listed by Kathleen Lea, see Lea, *Italian popular comedy; a study in the Commedia dell'arte, 1560-1620* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962). The last two by Praz, 7.

<sup>179</sup> Lea, 431.

<sup>180</sup> Rima Greenhill, *Shakespeare, Elizabeth and Ivan* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2023), 83.

So, how can one account for the inclusion of a genre – which at its essence, is almost completely oral tradition – in the format of Shakespeare’s plays, particularly in many of the early Italian plays? Again, as with the other references without contemporary written sources discussed above, Sheldon’s trip to northern Italy seems especially fortuitous. The genre started as street entertainment (as opposed to the stage entertainment known as *commedia erudite*);<sup>181</sup> the players organized into troupes beginning in around 1550.<sup>182</sup> One of the best known early troupes was called “I Gelosi” (The Zealous Ones) and performed in Mantua, independent of the Duke of Mantua.<sup>183</sup> Soon thereafter, however, the Duke recruited his own players in Mantua into other well-known troupes called “Uniti” and “Confidenti.”<sup>184</sup>

As discussed above Edward Courtenay and his retinue would have entered Italy first through Mantua in January, 1556. While such *commedia dell’arte* troupes eventually played throughout northern Italy, it is striking that Sheldon would have visited Mantua – arguably the “cradle” of the genre – very near the traditional holiday period. This festival period would have been when such entertainment would have been at its height, and the acting troupes would have been undoubtedly ready to perform for the noble English visitor Lord Devon and his retinue, including young Sheldon.

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<sup>181</sup> Kevin Gilvary, “Shakespeare and Italian Comedy,” *Great Oxford*, ed. Richard Malim (2004).

<sup>182</sup> *Scenarios*, xiv.

<sup>183</sup> See Gilvary.

<sup>184</sup> *Scenarios*, xiv.



**B. 1556–61: SHELDON AT  
MIDDLE TEMPLE: *ROMEO &  
JULIET* AND PIONEER ENGLISH  
HISTORIC DRAMA**

## 10. Who Wrote the First Stage Play of ‘Romeo & Juliet,’ c. 1560?

Without any doubt, the first performance of any play associated with the writer Shakespeare was that of *Romeo & Juliet*, c. 1560. Even though the play script of that performance has been lost, the fact of the theatrical performance is indisputable. Arthur Brooke, whose 1562 poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*,<sup>185</sup> is generally considered the source of the Shakespeare play,<sup>186</sup> wrote a preface to his work that mentioned a stage play that he viewed before publishing his own translation of the famed story:

Though I saw the same argument lately set forth on stage with more commendation than I can look for – being there much better set forth than I have or can do – yet the same matter penned as it may serve to like good effect, if the readers do bring with them like good minds to consider it, which hath the more encouraged me to publish it, such as it is.<sup>187</sup>

After returning from Italy, the 19-year-old Sheldon went to London to study law, admitted to Middle Temple on 12 November 1556.<sup>188</sup> At the same time Sheldon was admitted to the Middle Temple, his brother-in-law Edmund Plowden was first appointed to office in the Middle Temple as the Steward for Christmas, and then in 1557 as Reader, both of which positions gave Plowden the authority for the Temple feasts and entertainments.<sup>189</sup> Also, beginning in April 1558, Ralph shared a chamber under John Mawdeley with the Catholic Matthew Smith, who the previous Christmas had served as the Master of the Revels.<sup>190</sup> Could it have been possible that the young Sheldon wrote his

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<sup>185</sup> Arthur Brooke, *The tragicall historye of Romeus and Juliet* (London: Richard Tottel, 1562), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A03435>). Also see Munro, J.J. ed., *Brooke's 'Romeus and Juliet'* (London: Chatto and Windus Duffield, 1908).

<sup>186</sup> See Bullough, I.274; Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 39; Munro, lvii.

<sup>187</sup> Munro, lxvi.

<sup>188</sup> *Middle Temple Records*, ed. Charles Henry Hopwood (London: Butterworth & Co., 1904), 108; Sheldon was admitted as the “son and heir” of William Sheldon of Byle [sic], Worcestershire “specially” paying 5l.

<sup>189</sup> Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, *Edmund Plowden: An Elizabethan Recusant Lawyer* (UK: Hobbs for The Catholic Record Society, 1987), 5, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Parmiter, 108; Smith later succeeded Plowden as Middle Temple Treasurer.

first play for performance at the Middle Temple, drawing from his recent Italian experience in Verona, a play in memory of the tragic death of Edward Courtenay?

That there was an early version of *Romeo & Juliet* performed on stage around 1560 is recognized by both Muir and Bullough.<sup>191</sup> The gap left by the lost play (acknowledged particularly by Muir)<sup>192</sup> leaves open the obvious question: to what extent was Brooke's translation influenced by the earlier stage play? But further, as no other English playwright has ever laid claim to the iconic play *Romeo & Juliet*, the most obvious author of this original English stage play would be the writer Shakespeare himself, and if so, then it was likely Brooke who was inspired by 'hints' from the lost play written by Shakespeare, rather than (as is currently assumed) Shakespeare inspired by 'hints' from Brooke.

Brooke does not provide the location of the stage production; but lacking any dedicated public playhouses, a major venue for such a production at this early time would have been the Inns of the Court.<sup>193</sup> the Christmas festivities of 1561/2 included the famed first production of *Gorboduc* at the Inner Temple, under the auspices of Robert Dudley.<sup>194</sup> The Middle Temple shared its premises with the Inner Temple – with the Middle Temple on the west, and the Inner Temple on the east.<sup>195</sup> Would it have been not likely that Robert Dudley – who took such an enthusiastic part in the Inner Temple revels – would also have partaken in the neighboring Middle Temple's entertainments, perhaps even sitting through a production of a highly innovative new play, *Romeo & Juliet*?

The suggestion that there was a lost play of *Romeo & Juliet* by the writer Shakespeare himself – in the early days of the pioneer English theater – seems confirmed

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<sup>191</sup> See Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 38; Bullough, I.275.

<sup>192</sup> See Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 38; Muir notes that the lost play may mean that "some of the indebtedness to Italian sources [by Brooke and subsequently, Shakespeare] may be illusory."

<sup>193</sup> Brooke himself died tragically in the year following publication of his poem, in 1563 (see Munro, 165) and there is no record of him being a member of the Inns of the Court; however, Munro refers to the publisher of his poem, Richard Tottel, as the "great law-printer," see Munro, lxi.

<sup>194</sup> Derek Wilson, *Sweet Robin* (London: Allison & Busby Ltd, 1997), 134-35.

<sup>195</sup> Godwin, 1.

not only by the documented development of Brooke's own poem but also by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written over thirty years after this original English *Romeo & Juliet*.<sup>196</sup> *AMND* featured a troop of bumbling "rude mechanicals" – amateur players before there were professional actors – enacting an archaic version of *Romeo & Juliet* on a makeshift stage in the woods, seemingly a fond nostalgic remembrance of the first years of the English stage. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 8, there is strong evidence that the writer of the *AMND* used as one of his main sources an obscure trade publication advocating silk sericulture in England. This last would seem important proof to connect Ralph Sheldon – who began his professional life as heir to a tapestry business – with this early playwright, beginning in the early Elizabethan era.

Over the centuries, the tale of *Romeo & Juliet* has been told and retold, in prose, verse, and drama, but over the years there has been only one known English dramatist of *Romeo & Juliet*, the writer Shakespeare. Similar tragedies, with similar elements are found in the medieval tales of *Pyramus & Thisbe*, *Hero & Leander*, *Tristan & Isolde*. The

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<sup>196</sup> The play was first printed in 1600, but as it was mentioned by Francis Meres, it was first performed before 1598. Bullough noted that its emphasis on weddings suggests that it was originally performed for the marriage of "some noble" and that "several names" have been proposed, but all inconclusively. Bullough also remarks that while it seems to have been written for a midsummer wedding, the play's action takes place on the night before May-day, with Theseus indicating that the lovers are observing the "rite of May." (See Bullough, I.367.) One possibility not discussed by Bullough or others identifying the likely noble couple (see, for example, E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, I.358-63, discussing six such couples), is the marriage of the Earl of Oxford and his second wife Elizabeth Trentham. Although the date of their wedding is unknown, a document dated 4 July 1591, transfers profits from a highly valuable property in central London to Elizabeth Trentham upon the death of the Earl. (See The National Archives, C54/1393, mm.22-3; transcript by Nina Green, [www.oxford-shakespeare.com](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com).) The date of the Oxford wedding would have likely preceded this transaction, possibly sometime around Midsummer Night, 1591. Sometime later, Ralph Sheldon's seventh daughter Katherine married Francis Trentham, the brother of Elizabeth and financial advisor to the Earl. The actual date of the wedding of Katherine and Francis is unknown, but a marriage settlement for the couple was filed on 26 April 1592. (See The National Archives, C142/706/5; [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/trentham-francis-1564-1526](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/trentham-francis-1564-1526).) While it is not definite that the marriage 'settlement' would precede the marriage, under normal circumstances, having resolved the settlement, the marriage would have been held shortly thereafter – in the case of Katherine and Francis, in May 1592.



more direct line to *Romeo & Juliet*, however, begins with the Italian tales of Luigi da Porto (c. 1530) and Matteo Bandello (1554), the French translation of Bandello by Pierre Boaistuau (1559), followed by the English translations of Boaistuau by Arthur Brooke in verse (1562) and William Painter (1567).<sup>197</sup> In addition to the English dramatization by Shakespeare (c. 1594-95), there is also an Italian play *La Hadriana* by Luigi Groto (1578) and the Dutch play *Romeo en Juliette* by Jacob Struijs (1634).<sup>198</sup> Between the early Italian and French versions of the tale, and the English translation of Brooke, however, there was also the lost play on the London stage c. 1560.

While scholars believe Brooke's poem to be the major source for the Shakespeare play, they also generally acknowledge that the poem is far inferior to the Shakespeare play. Bullough calls the poem a "leaden work" which Shakespeare "transmuted to gold."<sup>199</sup> While J.J. Munro finds Brooke's poem "a very able translation of Boaistuau"<sup>200</sup> he remarks that the "faults which disfigure Brooke's work are absent" from Shakespeare's play.<sup>201</sup> Although Muir compares Brooke and Shakespeare, and identifies examples of "verbal indebtedness,"<sup>202</sup> he also points out where Shakespeare deviated from Brooke: Shakespeare follows Boaistuau rather than Brooke (or Bandello or Painter) in making Romeo go to the Capulet ball in the hope of meeting his cruel mistress.<sup>203</sup>

Critical to Shakespeare's plot – and what particularly distinguishes his play from the earlier Italian tales – is the development of the characters of Mercutio, Tybalt, and his trademark bawdy Nurse.<sup>204</sup> Thus, none of these characters are found in the Da Porto tale.<sup>205</sup> Bandello adds Mercutio, but he has no significant part in the play, and Tybalt is not included; Bandello also adds the Nurse and she is persuaded to help.<sup>206</sup> Boaistuau

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<sup>197</sup> See Bullough, I.271-74; Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 38-39; Munro, xxviii-xxxvi.

<sup>198</sup> See Munro, xxxvi-xxxvii, xlii.

<sup>199</sup> Bullough, I.277-278.

<sup>200</sup> Munro, I.

<sup>201</sup> Munro, lv.

<sup>202</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 42-4.

<sup>203</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 39.

<sup>204</sup> Bullough, 279-80; Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 41-2; Munro, lviii.

<sup>205</sup> Bullough, I.270-71.

<sup>206</sup> Bullough, I.272.

builds up the Nurse's part in the plot.<sup>207</sup> But it is not until Brooke that (in a single reference) Mercutio goes to the dance, that Tybalt is introduced (again, in only one reference),<sup>208</sup> and that the Nurse becomes a comic character.<sup>209</sup>

Traditionally, therefore, scholars have attributed the fundamental shifts in the Shakespeare plot – that is, the pivotal roles of Mercutio, Tybalt, and the Nurse – to ‘hints’ from Brooke.<sup>210</sup> But – given the lost play c. 1560 of the first English *Romeo & Juliet* – it would seem just as likely that Brooke got the ‘hints’ for the shift in the plot from the stage production which he viewed prior to writing his poem. While this cannot be definitively proved, the possibility that the author of this early stage version was, in fact, Shakespeare himself, makes this possibility far more probable.

That there was, in fact, a very early theatrical version of *Romeo & Juliet* is strongly suggested in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the play-within-a-play *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and its setting. On this subject, Bullough comments that the “Pyramus and Thisbe playlet may be a whimsical burlesque of Shakespeare’s first experiment in romantic tragedy.”<sup>211</sup> Did Shakespeare begin his “first experiment in romantic tragedy” thirty-plus years prior – at the dawn of Elizabethan drama – with the first embryonic production of *Romeo & Juliet* c. 1560?

By Muir’s account, *Pyramus and Thisbe* was the “ultimate” forerunner of Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*. He writes:

It has been conjectured that the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, taken by Shakespeare from Brooke’s poem and Painter’s tale, was derived ultimately from the story of Pyramus and Thisbe; for in both tales the lovers, because of their parents’ opposition, meet in secret, in both the hero commits suicide in the mistaken belief that the heroine is dead, and in both the man’s suicide is followed by that of the woman.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Bullough, I.273.

<sup>208</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 41, 42.

<sup>209</sup> Munro, lvii.

<sup>210</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 41-2.

<sup>211</sup> Bullough, I.269.

<sup>212</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 68.

Certainly, however Shakespeare originally constructed his play, *Pyramus and Thisbe* can be seen as an archaic version of the story of *Romeo & Juliet*.

Thus, in *AMND*, Shakespeare presents a stage dramatization of an archaic version of *Romeo & Juliet* and places the production in an equally archaic setting. The play is produced by a group of “rude mechanicals” – actors in a period before professional players – and rehearsed in the woods, that is, before the time of the Elizabethan playhouse. As Bullough writes, these “rude mechanicals” are “drawn from life”<sup>213</sup>; there was a time in a very early English period when archaic versions of plays were performed by amateur actors on makeshift stages. Shakespeare’s presentation of *Pyramus and Thisbe* seems designed to transport its audience back to that earliest period of English theater – sometime long before the purpose-built playhouses of the late 1570s.

Obviously, this scenario fits the theory that Ralph Sheldon, writing in the early Elizabethan years having recently returned from Italy and Verona, began his career as a playwright with a rustic original dramatization of *Romeo & Juliet*, a play which would inspire the young Arthur Brooke to versify his translation of Boastuau, adding new plot twists derived from the original Sheldon [Shakespeare] production. The connection, though, with Sheldon goes beyond the period of the play: as mentioned in Chapter 8, a principal source of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet in *AMND* appears to be a poem included as part of trade publication advocating silkworm sericulture in England. Obscure as such a publication would be generally – particularly in that it would, at the time of *AMND* in the early 1590s, have been available only in manuscript form – it would not have been obscure for Sheldon; he was, at the same time, using his family tapestry works to create fine tapestries partly of silk thread.

From the 1930s, scholars have commented on the apparent influence of a poem, *The Silkwormes, and their Flies* on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare’s *AMND*; the poem, written by Dr. Thomas Moffett (also Mouffet), was published in 1599 but written earlier. Margaret L. Farrand, writing in 1930 determined that “[R]ead in its entirety, the Pyramus and Thisbe story in *The Silkwormes* has similarities to

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<sup>213</sup> Bullough, I.372.

Shakespeare's version far more numerous and more striking than those in any of the other poems which have been examined as possible sources for the play."<sup>214</sup> Farrand compares portions of the poem with Shakespeare's play, finding significant linguistic parallels. Then, in 1954, Muir published "Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method," illustrating that Shakespeare had, indeed, consulted several different versions of the story to construct his play.<sup>215</sup> But like Farrand, he concluded that Moffett's poem was the "version from which Shakespeare appears to have borrowed most."<sup>216</sup>

Over twenty years later, in his 1978 *Sources of Shakespeare*, Muir maintained the same conclusion: that Shakespeare took most from Moffett's poem when he wrote the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet.<sup>217</sup> He noted that 'bottom' is the technical term for the silkworm's cocoon, and that Shakespeare named the leading actor – who was a weaver by trade – Bottom; further, that the fairy names Moth and Cobweb were similarly linked to Moffett's topic.<sup>218</sup> Muir, like Farrand before him, pointed out numerous echoes of Moffett's poem in Shakespeare's playlet.

In his 1961 volume, Bullough had flatly rejected Muir's conclusion: "I am not convinced by Muir's argument that Moffett's poem preceded *AMND* and that Shakespeare parodied it"; he dismissed Muir's suggestion that the names Bottom, Moth, and Cobweb were linked to Moffett's topic.<sup>219</sup> Muir, in his 1978 book, responded to Bullough:

The poem on silkworms was not published until 1599, four years after *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* was first staged, but it is likely to have been written some years earlier, perhaps as early as 1589. Shakespeare, we must suppose, read it in manuscript. [Muir annotated this passage: Bullough "is unconvinced."]  
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<sup>214</sup> Margaret L. Farrand, "An Additional Source for a *Midsummer-Night's Dream*," *Studies in Philology*, 27, no. 2 (April, 1930): 233, [www.jstor.org/stable/4172062](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4172062).

<sup>215</sup> Muir, "Pyramus," 142.

<sup>216</sup> Muir, "Pyramus," 147.

<sup>217</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 73.

<sup>218</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 73.

<sup>219</sup> Bullough, I.375.

<sup>220</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 73, 296.

Writing in 1981, Katherine Duncan-Jones follows Bullough in questioning Muir's theory, but discounted the significance of the late publication date. Rather, she focused on the close personal association of Moffett with the Countess of Pembroke: he was the long-time family physician to the Herbert family, and according to Duncan-Jones, lived as the Countess's pensioner in a manor home near the Countess's residence in Wilton. Although Duncan-Jones recognizes that the manuscript was a "serious attempt to promote silkworm breeding," she noted that it was also "directed personally" to the Countess and her family. Ultimately, Duncan-Jones questioned whether Shakespeare (as she understood him to be the actor Shakspeare) could have had access to such a manuscript: "Certainly it cannot be readily assumed that [Shakespeare] had access to manuscripts of coterie works relating closely to the Countess and her family, even supposing that the poem was written earlier than I have suggested" (emphasis added).<sup>221</sup> Thus, even if the manuscript was written substantially earlier than publication, its circulation would have been restricted to a circle close to the Countess.

Of course, serious doubts about the writer's access to this manuscript would evaporate if the writer were known to be Ralph Sheldon (or the editor R.S.). Moffett was recognized as a "distinguished naturalist" (albeit with "little talent as a poet"),<sup>222</sup> and he visited Italy in 1579 where he – like Sheldon in 1556 – studied the Italian silkworm industry.<sup>223</sup> According to Muir, Moffett most probably first wrote the poem between 1591 and 1595,<sup>224</sup> a period of time during which Sheldon was actively engaged in creating the magnificent tapestry maps now known generally as the Sheldon Tapestries.<sup>225</sup> Surely for Sheldon, Moffett's line "What workers made their slime a robe for kings"<sup>226</sup> would be a comic summation of not only Sheldon's tapestry maps, but also of his early theatrical years.

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<sup>221</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Pyramus and Thisbe: Shakespeare's Debt to Moffett Cancelled," *Review of English Studies*, vol. xxxii, issue 121 (August 1981) 297-98.

<sup>222</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 73.

<sup>223</sup> Muir, "Pyramus," 147.

<sup>224</sup> Muir, "Pyramus," 147.

<sup>225</sup> See Turner, *No Mean Prospect: Ralph Sheldon's Tapestry Maps* (Plotwood Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>226</sup> Thomas Moffett [Mouffet] (T.M.), *The Silkwormes, and their Flies* (1599), 1, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A07602>.

## ***11. Roots of Shakespeare's History Plays in Early Elizabethan Literature & Politics***

In the early Elizabethan period, the literary giants were men who had studied law at the Inns of the Court and who took an active role in government as Members of Parliament – men such as Edward Hall (*The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* 1548; ‘Hall’s Chronicle’); George Ferrers (*A Mirror for Magistrates* 1559), Thomas Sackville (*Gorboduc* 1561; *A Mirror for Magistrates* 1563), and Thomas Norton (*Gorboduc* 1561). Like these men – in the same era as these men – Ralph Sheldon was a member of the Inns of the Court, at the Middle Temple from at least 1556-60,<sup>227</sup> and a Member of Parliament for Worcestershire (1563-67).<sup>228</sup>

With the death of Henry VIII in 1547, the Tudor dynasty had plunged into severe disarray. Nine-year-old Edward took his father’s throne in 1547 but died age 15 in July 1553. Upon Edward’s death, Lady Jane Grey, great-granddaughter of Henry VII, held the crown for 9 days, but was deposed in favor of Henry VIII’s daughter Mary, and subsequently executed. Mary was proclaimed Queen in 1553, married the Catholic King of Spain in 1554, and died in November 1558. Competing among multiple claimants for the throne (including two other great-granddaughters of Henry VII, Mary Stuart and Lady Catherine Grey), Mary’s half-sister, the 25-year-old unmarried Elizabeth, became Queen Elizabeth I in November 1558.<sup>229</sup> Foreign wars had devastated the continent, and

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<sup>227</sup> *Middle Temple Records*, ed. Hopwood, 122, 128: two notations in the *Middle Temple Records* show Sheldon in a Middle Temple chamber into 1560: “Mr. Shelden [sic] to Mr. Mawdeley’s chamber, with Mr. Smythe; paying 4l (1559); then, in May 1560, there is a record regarding a payment involving “George Page into Mr. Smith’s chamber” wherein a fine is avoided, apparently signed by Sheldon (with a cryptic untranslated note “et iste considerabit leigne”).

<sup>228</sup> William Retlaw Williams, *The Parliamentary History of the County of Worcestershire* (1897), 33-4.

<sup>229</sup> See Mortimer Levine, *The Early Elizabethan Succession Question* (Stanford University Press, 1966), 5-12. Levine outlines the various claims to the English throne at the time of Elizabeth’s accession.

rebellions in England further destabilized the English monarchy. Alfred Hart summed up England of the time as seemingly on the “verge of destruction.”<sup>230</sup>

At the time of Sheldon’s admission to Middle Temple, men of the law courts had begun a public outcry for greater government stability, inventing novel ways to make their case for secure monarchical succession. First, a group of lawyers, poets, and members of parliament, led by George Ferrers (c. 1500-79) of Lincoln’s Inn and scholar William Baldwin (d. 1563),<sup>231</sup> collaborated in 1554 on a series of verse vignettes interspersed with prose commentary on the rise and fall of historic rulers, entitled *A Memorial of Suche Princes*. Suppressed by Mary I’s Lord Chancellor, a shorter, revised version was published in 1559, the first edition of the long-running series *A Mirror for Magistrates*.<sup>232</sup>

Then, in 1561, taking the cue from the versified history chronicles of the *Mirror*, two young Inner Temple lawyers – contemporaries of Sheldon, Thomas Sackville (1536-1608) and Thomas Norton (1532-84) – wrote *Gorboduc*, the first 5-act English historical drama, using a story from ancient English history derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth to show the tragic fate of a divided monarchy.<sup>233</sup> In 1563, at the initial session of Elizabeth’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, the House of Commons introduced a petition specifying the rules of

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<sup>230</sup> Alfred Hart, *Homilies*, 10.

<sup>231</sup> Ferrers, the “master of the king’s pastimes” under Edward VI, had previously collaborated with Baldwin on Court entertainments; Baldwin was the editor of the first two editions of the *Mirror*, and in his preface to the first edition he credits Ferrers with the idea of a project to follow John Lydgate’s 15<sup>th</sup> century *Fall of Princes*. See *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900*, “Ferrers, George.” Aside from Ferrers, the contributors to the series are unnamed but various of the writers have been identified; see *A Mirror for Magistrates in Context*, ed. Harriet Archer and Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>232</sup> *Mirror*, 3.

<sup>233</sup> *Gorboduc* was novel for three major reasons: it was the first English historical play; it followed the classical tradition of Seneca in its 5-act form and its moral substance; it was written in blank verse. See *Ferrex and Porrex; A Tragedy by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (Heilbronn, 1883), xi; [archive.org/details/cu31924013133834](https://archive.org/details/cu31924013133834).

succession to the crown, and Thomas Norton rose to repeat the political arguments of his ground-breaking play, *Gorboduc*.<sup>234</sup>

Until the study of Shakespeare's sources intensified in the 1930s, the general assumption was that Shakespeare obtained his history primarily from the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587). But with the additional scrutiny, the conclusion became inescapable that whoever wrote the plays was a scholar, and a scholar who relied heavily on literature from the early Elizabethan era, rather than that of the later Elizabethan years as previously believed.

Introducing volume III of his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1960), Bullough lists the "Historical Authorities available to Shakespeare," conceding that "until recently editors underestimated [Shakespeare's] attention to authorities and assumed that he depended almost entirely on Holinshed. Those days are past . . ." Instead, it appeared that "the great playwright was himself a scholar with a liking for the rare, unprinted authority."<sup>235</sup> Although Bullough goes on to point out the numerous sources referred to by the scholar Shakespeare in his early history plays, arguably the two most influential in these plays were Edward Hall's *Chronicle, The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548) and *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), both works firmly rooted in the politics of the early Elizabethan era.

Of all the varied English historical sources available to Shakespeare, Bullough found that. "in general," the writer "followed the attitude" of the *Chronicle* of Edward Hall (Gray's Inn, Member of Parliament),<sup>236</sup> and that Shakespeare "took over not only the attitude but the pattern of Hall's history."<sup>237</sup> This conclusion, however, summed up a radical reevaluation of the sources of the writer Shakespeare. The scholar E.M.W. Tillyard noted the "traditional reluctance to perceive how much was owed to Hall by Shakespeare,"<sup>238</sup> and, in fact, it was not until 1936 that W. Gordon Zeeveld first fully

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<sup>234</sup> *A Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A.W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge University Press, 1933), 76.

<sup>235</sup> Bullough, III.1.

<sup>236</sup> Bullough, III.9-10.

<sup>237</sup> Bullough, III.15.

<sup>238</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1944), 42.



evaluated Hall – rather than Holinshed – as a source for Shakespeare, presenting evidence that “Shakespeare turned repeatedly to Hall rather than Holinshed in writing the historical plays.”<sup>239</sup>

Unlike the later Holinshed’s Chronicles (1577, 1587) which cover a wide expanse of history,<sup>240</sup> Hall focused on a specific narrow period of English history from the fall of Richard II to Hall’s own day, thereby ultimately creating the so-called ‘Tudor Myth.’ According to C.L. Kingsford in 1925, Edward Hall was a supporter of the political and religious policy of Henry VIII, and his Chronicle was “intended deliberately to be a glorification of the House of Tudor.”<sup>241</sup> A.P. Rossiter, writing in 1941, credited the period covered by Hall as giving his history “a certain form”:

This gives it [Hall’s history] a certain form, and one approaching to what seems to be the obvious design of Shakespeare’s Histories: – the anarchy that resulted (in the long run) from the deposition of Richard II; the fortunes and fall of the usurping House of Lancaster; the rise of the House of York, till Richard III reigns, arch-gangster in a gangster’s paradise; and finally, the restoration of peace, order, nobility, rightful sovereignty, and all things desirable under the Tudors. Shakespeare’s Histories, through commonly taken to be drawn almost exclusively from Holinshed, certainly keep Hall’s limits and have his theme for a framework.<sup>242</sup>

Rossiter concludes that Hall’s “compass and plan are Shakespeare’s,” and “however they [Hall and Shakespeare] may have intended them, their works act like ‘Tudor propaganda.’”<sup>243</sup>

The other literary work newly noted for its great significance to the early history plays was *A Mirror for Magistrates*, particularly from materials originally published in the 1559 edition. According to its modern editor, Lily B. Campbell, *Mirror* was “the first important work which released English history from the chronicles and employed it

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<sup>239</sup> W. Gordon Zeeveld, “The Influence of Hall on Shakespeare’s English Historical Plays,” *ELH*, 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1936): 319, [www.jstor.org/stable/2871549](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871549).

<sup>240</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 50-1.

<sup>241</sup> C.L. Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise in XVth England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 2, [www.archive.org/details/prejudicepromise0000clki](http://www.archive.org/details/prejudicepromise0000clki).

<sup>242</sup> A.P. Rossiter, “Prognosis on a Shakespeare Problem,” *Durham University Journal*, 33, pt.2 (1941):127.

<sup>243</sup> Rossiter, p. 128.

directly for the purposes regularly accepted as the ends to be achieved by history, using the freedom of poetry to adapt its means more directly to the ends to be served.”<sup>244</sup> Not allowed to be published until Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1559, the *Mirror* was a series of poetic vignettes of imagined ghosts of generally noble heritage narrating the tragic consequences of their worldly fortunes, linked by prose commentary.<sup>245</sup> Like Hall’s Chronicle, however, the significance of the influence of the *Mirror* on the Shakespeare plays was largely unknown until the 1930s, when Campbell published her modern edition of the book in 1938.<sup>246</sup> But, by 1966, Bullough had connected 9 of the 19 vignettes<sup>247</sup> in the 1559 edition of the *Mirror* to 6 of Shakespeare’s history plays.<sup>248</sup>

Geoffrey Bullough declared definitively: “that Shakespeare knew the *Mirror* well is certain.”<sup>249</sup> Even so, Bullough was far less sure how much Shakespeare’s plots owed to specific stories in the *Mirror*,<sup>250</sup> although he found that certain key points in Shakespeare’s plays originated in stories from the 1559 *Mirror*: for example, in *3 Henry VI*: “the [1559] *Mirror* anticipated Shakespeare in making Richard of Gloucester the murderer of the King,”<sup>251</sup> and in *Richard III*: “[T]he [1559] *Mirror* was the first work to make Richard personally responsible for Clarence’s death.”<sup>252</sup> Most fundamentally, however, Bullough argued that Shakespeare’s history plays and the *Mirror* shared the same moral structure. Bullough characterized Shakespeare’s histories as “not so much tragedies as ‘chronicles of wasted time,’ pageants of the glorious and terrible past of England, its great men good and bad, suffering and triumphant.” As such, Bullough summarized that, with his early history plays, Shakespeare was “making [his own]

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<sup>244</sup> Lily B. Campbell, “Tudor Conceptions of History and Tragedy in ‘A Mirror for Magistrates,’” Faculty Research Lecture (University of California Press, 1936), 9.

<sup>245</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Tudor Conceptions*, p. 10-11

<sup>246</sup> L.B. Campbell, *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), 1.

<sup>247</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Mirror*, 10.

<sup>248</sup> See Bullough, III, IV: Duke of Suffolk (analogue), *2 Henry VI*; Richard, Duke of York and King Henry the Sixth (possible source), *3 Henry VI*; George, Duke of Clarence (probable source), *Richard III*; Lord Mowbray and King Richard II (possible source), *Richard II*; see IV.x-xi: Owen Glendower and Henry Percy Earl of Northumberland (possible source), *1 Henry IV*; Richard Earl of Cambridge (analogue), *Henry V*.

<sup>249</sup> Bullough III.367 (1960).

<sup>250</sup> See, for example, Bullough’s commentary on *Richard II*, at III.367.

<sup>251</sup> Bullough, III.159.

<sup>252</sup> Bullough, III.233.

*Mirror for Magistrates*,” recreating the same type of stories with an added quality of an epic.<sup>253</sup>

In its version of history, the *Mirror* explicitly follows Hall. According to Tillyard, “the period of history into which the fallen statesmen are set in the *Mirror* is precisely that covered by Hall’s Chronicle,” even though the *Mirror* ultimately omits the drama of the Tudor Myth.<sup>254</sup> While there is uncertainty about the order of composition of the Shakespeare history plays,<sup>255</sup> Campbell points out that Shakespeare opened his *Richard II* at the exact point at which Hall began his Chronicle, thereby concluding that Shakespeare set his early history plays in the same period as the events portrayed in both Hall’s Chronicle and the *Mirror*.<sup>256</sup>

To the history of Hall, however, the *Mirror* added its own unique element: it expounded on the orthodox political doctrines of the early Elizabethan era – the divine right of kings, the obligation for passive obedience without willful rebellion and civil war. This, as described by Tillyard, was the “chief importance” of the *Mirror*: “it assembled so many current political ideas and gave them a new animation by putting them in a poetical form” and by doing so, “shifted the centre of sixteenth century poetry” resulting in a “new strenuous alliance of politics morality and religion.”<sup>257</sup>

The significance of these same political doctrines to the Shakespeare early history plays cannot be overstated. Alfred Hart in his seminal piece on Shakespeare’s

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<sup>253</sup> Bullough, III.171.

<sup>254</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 80-2.

<sup>255</sup> Over the years there has been much commentary on the fact that the final plays in the history series, those on Henry VI, were published before the earlier plays in the series, such as those involving Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V. From this, the conclusion has been drawn that Shakespeare initially composed the plays in the same order as the publication. See, for example, Tillyard, *History Plays*, 149, questioning why Shakespeare “wrote the second half first” and offering an alternative explanation, suggesting Shakespeare may have written early versions of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, plays which are “now lost but recast” in the plays which were eventually published.

<sup>256</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Histories* (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1968), 70.

<sup>257</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 90.

attention to the orthodox political doctrines of the era, *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (1934), wrote:

Shakespeare outdoes every other important dramatist of his time in the number and variety of the allusions made to the divine right of the reigning monarch, the duty of passive obedience, enjoined on subjects by God, and the misery and chaos resulting from civil war and rebellion. References to such topics are scattered through at least twenty plays; the first appears in *Henry VI*, the last in *Henry VIII*, his latest play now extant.<sup>258</sup>

It can be seen, therefore, that by deliberately overlaying the history of Hall's Chronicle with the political orthodoxy of the *Mirror*, Shakespeare created a new cultural literature – combining the rousing nationalist Tudor Myth of Hall's Chronicle with the political moralizing of the *Mirror*.

But to the central point of the chapter: what evidence is there that the Shakespeare history plays were initially composed in a period of time reasonably contemporaneous with these sources (c. 1570-80), and not in the later Elizabethan period (from the late 1580s)? The theory of this work is that early versions of the Shakespeare histories were first written for stage performance by Leicester's Men in the 1570s. Certainly, the research of scholars such as Zeeveld, Tillyard, Campbell, Bullough, and others conclusively determining the principal importance of these early works of literature to the history plays underscores the possibility of such early versions of the plays. Further, though, it is argued that such early versions of the plays can be inferred by the rarity and specific vintage of the source books themselves. To bolster this contention, it is pointed out that another proven Shakespeare source, George North's *A Brief*

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<sup>258</sup> Alfred Hart, "Shakespeare and the Homilies – A New Shakespearean Source-Book," *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970, reprinted from 1934) 9-76; 27. Hart attributed Shakespeare's knowledge of the political doctrines to the Protestant Homilies, first printed in 1547 with the last addition in 1573, and then reprinted repeatedly through 1640 (Hart, 21-22). However, Hart wrote before L.B. Campbell's and Tillyard's work on the *Mirror*, asserting the "practically nothing was written in England on politics during the sixteenth century" (Hart, 71). Even so, Hart recognized that Shakespeare's approach was not that of a theologian; and that, unlike the Homilies, Shakespeare "does not quote the words of King David or the sayings of the apostles, and does not support the prevalent political philosophy with a battalion of texts from the Scriptures. . ." (Hart, 28-9).

*Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels* – an unpublished manuscript with aspects of the *Mirror* – was written in the early Elizabethan era, in 1576.

Of the three source books considered here, two – the *Mirror* and its progeny *Rebellion and Rebels* – can be fixed to a date, both in the 1570s. Although the *Mirror* segments referenced in the early histories were originally published in 1559, they were reprinted in 6 editions before 1590: 1563, 1571, 1574, 1575, 1578, 1587.<sup>259</sup> However, Kenneth Muir, in his *Sources of the Shakespeare Plays*, found evidence that Shakespeare had used the 1574 edition specifically (as well as the 1587 edition),<sup>260</sup> suggesting that Shakespeare had originally dealt with the *Mirror* near to 1574. That Shakespeare was actually pursuing sources for plays in the mid-1570s seems indicated by references in various different Shakespeare plays (including *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*)<sup>261</sup> to a manuscript written in 1576, but never published: George North's *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels*. In the style of the *Mirror*, the manuscript contains ghostly laments by Jack Cade and Owen Glendower;<sup>262</sup> there is only one known copy of the manuscript, dedicated to Lord North, brother of Thomas North, translator of another Shakespeare source, *Plutarch's Lives* (1579-80).<sup>263</sup>

Dating of the usage of Hall's Chronicle is more problematic. A rare book even in its time – it was not reprinted after 1550,<sup>264</sup> and the copies from those printed during the reign of Henry VIII numbered about 350<sup>265</sup> – according to Zeeveld, “it quickly fell into disrepute as “indenture English” and was subsumed by succeeding chronicles, losing its identity in the larger Tudor histories that followed.”<sup>266</sup> The nearest later chronicles were by Richard Grafton in 1568, and the first edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* in 1577, with Holinshed's the far more innovative.<sup>267</sup> In Chapter 18, evidence is presented for

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<sup>259</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Mirror*, 12, 16-20.

<sup>260</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 198.

<sup>261</sup> George North, *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels*, ed. Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2018), 1.

<sup>262</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter, 50.

<sup>263</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter, 8.

<sup>264</sup> Zeeveld, 353.

<sup>265</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 40.

<sup>266</sup> Zeeveld, 318.

<sup>267</sup> Zeeveld, 318-19.

Ralph Sheldon's annotation of a volume of Hall's Chronicle, one that would have been available after the death of its likely owner in 1570.<sup>268</sup>

Obviously, the predominant use of Hall by the writer could signal that the work had been originally drafted in the period before Holinshed became the more modern version of history, that is, before 1577. Presumably, a writer of the period would reflect the most 'modern' version of history. The possible effect of such 'changing fashion' can be seen by comparison of various chronicles used by Shakespeare as opposed to those used by Samuel Daniel in his *Civil Wars* (1595, 1601, 1609). Shakespeare's history plays and Daniel's *Civil Wars* cover roughly the same period.<sup>269</sup> However, while Shakespeare relied predominantly on Hall (1550) rather than Holinshed, Daniel relied predominantly on Holinshed (1587) and Stow (1592), with an uneven smattering of Hall.<sup>270</sup> Traditionally, it has been thought that Shakespeare's histories post-date Daniel's *Civil Wars*. But, if so, why would what are presumed to be later plays (that is, those authored the conventionally younger playwright Shakspeare) return so much more frequently to the far more old-fashioned, 'outdated' (with "indenture English") Hall's Chronicle?

In writing the early Shakespeare history plays, the writer Shakespeare was following directly in the steps of these first Elizabethan poets and dramatists, men who – like Sheldon – were members of the Inns of the Court and the Parliament. Alfred Hart, at the end of his exhaustive discussion of Shakespeare's rigorous insistence on the early Elizabethan political doctrine, speculated that perhaps "Shakespeare was trying to do the State some service."<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Alan Keen and Roger Lubbock, *The Annotator* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1954), 31.

<sup>269</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 112.

<sup>270</sup> Gillian Wright, "Samuel Daniel's Use of Sources in *The Civil Wars*," *Studies in Philology*, 101, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 65, 87. [www.jstor.org/stable/4174779](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174779).

<sup>271</sup> Hart, *Homilies*, 76.

**C. 1560s: SHELDON WORKS FOR  
LEICESTER AT OXFORD,  
ANONYMOUSLY**

## 12. *The Missing Playwright for Leicester and His Men & the Court*

In a Court where theatrical entertainments were prominent, Robert Dudley (from 1564 Earl of Leicester) was the leading patron of the stage during the first two decades of Elizabeth's reign. Yet, oddly, there was never a playwright associated with any of the plays produced by his preeminent troupe Leicester's Men in these years. Likewise, the Children of Paul's, under the gifted musician Sebastian Westcott, led the Court entertainments for most of the first twenty years under Elizabeth but had no known dramatist between the years 1566-81. Although anonymity of dramatists was not uncommon in this era, it was not the standard practice of Leicester: for his other known entertainments, he engaged well-respected dramatists, including Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton (*Gorboduc*, 1561); Richard Edwards (*Palamon and Arcite*, 1566); George Gascoigne (Kenilworth entertainment, 1575); William Gager (Oxford, 1585).

After her accession to the throne in November 1558, Queen Elizabeth wasted no time establishing her vision of English drama, proclaiming on 16 May 1559 that henceforth all matters included in plays (or "common Interludes") could only be "written or treated upon" by men of "auctoritie, learning, and wisdom."<sup>272</sup> Further, whereas earlier reigns had "practically excluded" outside companies from Court performance,<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *The Cambridge History of Literature*, ed. A.W. Ward, A.R. Waller, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan Company; London: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 76; the full text of the decree can be found in J. Payne Collier, *The History of English dramatic poetry to the time of Shakespeare*, 3v. (London: John Murray, 1831), I.168-69; <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001374288> (Hathitrust #222-23). Elizabeth's decree included a general admonition that such plays should refrain from dealing with "either matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale." Such regulation of the plays was not new: earlier decrees by Henry VIII in 1544/5 (prohibiting plays that would be "contrary" to the "advancement of true religion"; see Collier, 128-29 (Hathitrust #176-77) and Mary in 1553 (plays could not advocate the principles and doctrines of reformation; see Collier, 156-57 (Hathitrust #204-05) had included similar pronouncements. However, the requirement that plays should, from that date forward, be written only by men of learning was not included in the earlier decrees.

<sup>273</sup> Charles William Wallace, *The evolution of the English drama up to Shakespeare* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1912), 123, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001398411>, (Hathitrust #153).



two outside companies – Robert Dudley’s players (later Leicester’s Men) and the Children of Paul’s – were the premier entertainment at the Court for the next two decades.

Upon the Queen’s decree, Leicester immediately wrote, in June 1559, to the Earl of Shrewsbury for a license to perform in Yorkshire;<sup>274</sup> by the Christmas season of 1560/1, “Lorde Robte Dudleyes players” were performing at Court.<sup>275</sup> Dudley’s players entertained the Court, alongside Sebastian Westcott’s Children of Paul’s for three seasons (1560-62),<sup>276</sup> but then were absent from the Court for a decade.<sup>277</sup> In 1571, Leicester’s Men returned to London, performed at Court in 1572, and every year thereafter until the formation of the Queen’s company in 1583.<sup>278</sup> Elizabeth awarded Leicester’s Men a patent to perform in London and throughout “oure Realme of England” in 1574, apparently the only such patent Elizabeth ever awarded.<sup>279</sup> By 1576, the troupe had organized its own public theater venue, building the first English permanent playhouse just north of London city limits.<sup>280</sup>

Prior to Elizabeth’s reign, the Children of the Chapel Royal were the prominent boys’ group performing at Court; with the accession of Elizabeth, however, Westcott’s Children of Paul’s became the standard Court entertainment.<sup>281</sup> Beginning with a performance on 7 August 1559, the Children of Paul’s entertained at Court nearly every year through 1581.<sup>282</sup>

Remarkably – particularly given Elizabeth’s edict for only learned men as playwrights – there is no known record of any playwright associated with either Leicester’s Men for the entire period of 1560 through 1581, nor any for the Children of Paul’s after 1566 through 1581. About the plays produced and performed by Leicester’s

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<sup>274</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.85.

<sup>275</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.142-43.

<sup>276</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.142-43.

<sup>277</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.85.

<sup>278</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.88.

<sup>279</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.87; I.282.

<sup>280</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.88.

<sup>281</sup> Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, *The Child Actors* (University of Illinois, 1926), 74.

<sup>282</sup> Trevor Lennam, 71-2.

Men during this period, little is known. Court records offer scant information about titles of plays performed, and from the names of plays given, none have been identified as published, or with a playwright.<sup>283</sup> Regarding the public plays, no records exist. Thus, there is no record of any named playwright for any play performed by Leicester's Men in London.

Between 1559 and 1581, Westcott and Paul's produced 29 plays, and titles of only 10 of these plays are known.<sup>284</sup> Although the dramatist John Heywood is associated with the first play performed at Court, of the remaining plays – including the named plays – nothing is known of a dramatist. And according to Westcott's biographer, Trevor Lennam, "there is not a shred of evidence to show that Westcott either composed music or performed plays," and, further, that "the scale of [Paul's] dramatic activity in the last decade of Westcott's career would suggest that he was unlikely to be operating the company [and his playhouse] single-handedly." Nonetheless, from the list of known title, it appeared that "no rival company offered so varied a repertory."<sup>285</sup>

While clearly there are many anonymous plays from this early era, anonymity on this grand scale would not seem to have been the standard practice of Leicester. Famous for his entertainment events, Leicester was a "born impresario"<sup>286</sup> and of those events that we know of, four are associated with named, and well-regarded dramatists. Dudley presided over the Christmas festivities of 1561/2 for the Inner Temple, with the first production of *Gorboduc*, written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton.<sup>287</sup> In his second year as Chancellor of Oxford, in 1566, he feted Elizabeth with a performance of Richard Edwards's play, *Palamon and Arcite*.<sup>288</sup> In 1575, Leicester arranged for festivities at his palace at Kenilworth, where playwright George Gascoigne (c. 1535-77) wrote the entertainment dialogue.<sup>289</sup> A visit to Oxford in January 1585 included a

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<sup>283</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, compare II.142-59 (list of plays acted at court) with II.380-82 (list of plays printed).

<sup>284</sup> Lennam, 71-2.

<sup>285</sup> Lennam, 47-8.

<sup>286</sup> Derek Wilson, 81.

<sup>287</sup> Derek Wilson, 134-35.

<sup>288</sup> Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1924), II.112.

<sup>289</sup> Derek Wilson, 160.

production of William Gager's *Meleager*.<sup>290</sup> But for each of these authors, there are printed stage plays with their name specified as author.<sup>291</sup> In particular, Edwards and Gascoigne received contemporary acclaim for their work: Edwards as a "genius" whose fame was "sounded in unmeasured terms by the writers of his day";<sup>292</sup> Gascoigne, especially by Gabriel Harvey (1552-1631) who published a eulogy vividly imagining Gascoigne's glorious entry into Elysian Fields.<sup>293</sup>

Furthermore, where there is ample evidence of Leicester's strong public encouragement of English cultural endeavors (including literary), his public support for contemporary playwrights (aside from those mentioned above) is markedly absent.<sup>294</sup> For example, Eleanor Rosenberg's study on Leicester as a "Patron of Letters" lists ninety-four extant works with dedications to Leicester; only one (by William Gager) is a contemporary play book.<sup>295</sup> This compares sharply with Leicester's support for contemporary historians: according to Rosenberg, the work of the historians he supported "constitute a significant portion of the whole Elizabethan output," including Holinshed, Grafton, and Stow.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Eleanor Rosenberg, *Leicester: Patron of Letters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 137-38.

<sup>291</sup> See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, "Printed Plays," IV.380-81, for published plays by Edwards and Gascoigne; for Gager, see Rosenberg, 361 (no. 79).

<sup>292</sup> Hillebrand, 75; see also Wallace, 115 (Hathitrust #145).

<sup>293</sup> Prouty, *George Gascoigne*, 278-81.

<sup>294</sup> Rosenberg, 306.

<sup>295</sup> Rosenberg, 357-62; see #79, 361.

<sup>296</sup> Rosenberg, 64.

### ***13. Leicester ‘Procures’ a 60-Year Residence for Sheldon at Oriel College, 1566***

Robert Dudley, created Earl of Leicester on 29 September 1564, became the Chancellor of Oxford near the end of 1564; under these new circumstances he planned sumptuous festivities to celebrate the Queen’s first formal visit to Oxford in August 1566. But in the months preceding the celebration, Leicester caused a stir at Oriel College, leading to the resignation of the promising young Provost Roger Marbeck of Oriel from his post. The furor was begun by Leicester’s “vehement” insistence in April 1566 that Oriel grant a 60-year lease to Ralph Sheldon, thereby causing the eviction of the Provost’s brother Edward Marbeck from the residence. There is no evidence that Sheldon either needed – or used – the residence for his family business interests; rather, the Oriel College register describes the transaction as “Leicester procures lease of Dene [the Marbeck residence] for a nominee” (Sheldon). If so, what issue was so urgent to Leicester that he picked a fight to obtain an Oxford residence for Sheldon? As it happens, a contemporary observer recorded that rehearsals for the main play of the Queen’s entertainment, Richard Edwards’s *Palamon and Arcite*, were held in “Mr. Marbeck’s lodging.”<sup>297</sup> Presumably these rehearsals were conducted under the auspices of the new tenant of “Mr. Marbeck’s lodging,” the 29-year-old Ralph Sheldon.

Certainly, at the time of the lease demand, Leicester had pressing concerns: in four months the Queen was to make her first official visit to Oxford. According to historian C.E. Mallet, these festivities for the Queen were particularly important to Leicester, particularly given his recent history:

The University, like all the world, was familiar with [Leicester’s] story and had already attended the burial of his unhappy wife [in September 1560]. The new Chancellor was determined to make his office a reality, and he was of course conspicuous in the memorable visit paid by the Queen to the University in 1566.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> See Frederick S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), 100-01, <https://archive.org/details/universitydramai00boasuoft>.

<sup>298</sup> Mallet, 110.

Of the festivities, Mallet wrote that there was a “note of passionate rejoicing in the welcome given to the Queen . . . [the Queen] represented the dearest hopes of the new generation.”<sup>299</sup> Richard Edwards, the Master of the Children of the Chapel, produced his play *Palamon and Arcite* for the Queen; according to Mallet, when in the course of the play the “Goddess forbade the heroine to lead a virgin life, the whole audience broke into irrepressible applause.”<sup>300</sup> Before the Queen’s arrival on August 31, Edwards had spent nearly two months at Oxford, organizing the entertainment.<sup>301</sup>

On 22 April 1566 – about 4 months before the Queen’s visit – Ralph Sheldon went before the whole society of Oriel with a letter from Leicester, and requested the College grant him a 60-year lease on a residence known as “Dene” for a total payment of 400 marks (267 pounds),<sup>302</sup> to paid in equal shares over the term of the lease.<sup>303</sup> Sheldon’s appearance was recorded on the Dean’s Register of Oriel; the modern editor of the Register summarized the notation: “Earl of Leicester procures lease of Dene for a nominee.”<sup>304</sup> The Latin notation on the Register was written by Roger Marbeck, the then 30-year-old Provost and Public Orator, elected as Provost the previous year, the first Provost ever elected from outside the College.<sup>305</sup>

At issue was the rental of the manor of Dene (or “Deane”), granted the previous year on 20 August 1565 to the Provost’s brother Edward Marbeck.<sup>306</sup> Historically, the manor of Dene was on a farm originally given to the College in 1504<sup>307</sup> and used subsequently for various purposes, including as a residence for fellows to escape

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<sup>299</sup> Mallet, 110-11.

<sup>300</sup> Mallet, 114.

<sup>301</sup> Mallet, 112.

<sup>302</sup> A “mark” was not a currency of England, rather, it was a bookkeeping value used in formal transactions and equivalent to 2/3 of a pound; the rough equivalent value is calculated using 240 pence to a pound (160 pence to a mark).

<sup>303</sup> Sheldon was offering to pay the College approximately 4.4 pounds per year to rent Dene.

<sup>304</sup> *Oriel Register*, 156.

<sup>305</sup> *Oriel Register*, 151-52.

<sup>306</sup> *Oriel Register*, 154.

<sup>307</sup> *Oriel Register*, 8.

sweating sickness<sup>308</sup>; the manor was formally transferred to the College in 1518.<sup>309</sup> Thereafter, the manor was the residence of Oriel fellows and dons,<sup>310</sup> until it was granted to Edward Marbeck.

In his notation on the Sheldon request, Provost Marbeck acknowledged Sheldon's request to be just and honest ("iusta et honesta"), but he indicated that it would not have been granted but for Leicester's vehemence on his behalf ("tum quia Cancellarius noster comes Leycestriae tam vehementer in illius gratiam scripserat a tota societate concessa fuit). In relevant part, Marbeck's notation reads: "[A]tque eius petitio tum quia valde iusta et honesta videbatur, tum quia Cancellarius noster comes Leycestriae tam vehementer in illius gratiam scripserat a tota societate concessa fuit."<sup>311</sup> However, prior to this assertion, the Provost pointedly underscored his brother's prior claim to Dene, writing that Sheldon was requesting to lease the residence "lately made and granted and resolved upon Edward Marbeck" ("nuper factam et concessam et deliberatum Edwardo Marbeck").<sup>312</sup>

The editors of the Register noted that thereafter Provost Marbeck "suddenly" resigned on June 24, and they tie the resignation to Leicester's demand for the Sheldon lease. Of this circumstance they write: "[T]he Provost's relations with the Earl of Leicester are illustrated by the fact that at his request the College granted a sixty years' lease of Dene, previously granted to the Provost's brother Edward, to Ralph Sheldon, who was urgently commended by Lord Leicester. Suddenly on June 24 he resigned: on Dec. 8 he resigned his position as Public Orator."<sup>313</sup>

Leicester's immediate purpose for the residence, and the need for his urgency, is revealed in a contemporary account, apparently by Thomas Neale, Reader of Hebrew at Oxford,<sup>314</sup> cited by historian Frederick Boas. Neale writes that Edwards's *Palamon and*

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<sup>308</sup> *Oriel Register*, 32, note 1.

<sup>309</sup> *Oriel Register*, 46.

<sup>310</sup> *Oriel Register*, see, for example, Heydocke (1529), 77; Penelston (1535), 99.

<sup>311</sup> *Oriel Register*, 156.

<sup>312</sup> *Oriel Register*, 156.

<sup>313</sup> *Oriel Register*, 152.

<sup>314</sup> Boas, 99.

*Arcite*, being “repeated before certayne courtiers in Mr. Marbeck’s lodginge by y<sup>e</sup> players in their Schollers gownes before y<sup>e</sup> Queenes cominge, was so well liked that they saide it far surpassed Damon & Pythias [an earlier play by Edwards], then y<sup>e</sup> whiche nothinge could be better.”<sup>315</sup> Thus, “courtiers” – presumably those working with Leicester on the preparations for the Queen’s visit – conducted a rehearsal for the upcoming play in “Mr. Marbeck’s lodginge,” a residence recently procured by Leicester for a 60-year term by Ralph Sheldon. Marbeck himself seems to have worked cooperatively with the new tenant: he gave a Latin speech upon the Queen’s arrival,<sup>316</sup> and had a lead role in Edwards’s play.<sup>317</sup>

In the month after triumph of *Palamon and Arcite* at Oxford, the playwright Richard Edwards – officially the Master of the Children of the Chapel – died suddenly in his early 40s.<sup>318</sup> Two of the writer Shakespeare’s earliest plays include remembrances of Edwards’s work.<sup>319</sup>

As currently understood, there are no business circumstances to explain Sheldon’s need for the Oxford residence. By 1566, the Sheldon family was associated locally with Leicester: William Sheldon had been appointed one of Leicester’s two informal deputies in Worcestershire in 1560,<sup>320</sup> and Ralph negotiated in early 1560 with Robert Throckmorton (Ralph’s father-in-law) for Leicester’s purchase of Throckmorton’s stewardship of Warwick Castle.<sup>321</sup> While Leicester knew of the Sheldon tapestry works (in 1571 he publicly praised its operations for the employment of the poor, and he

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<sup>315</sup> Boas, 100-1.

<sup>316</sup> Mallet records the fact of Marbeck’s speech for Elizabeth, at 111; he mistakenly calls him the Oriel Provost and “lately” Public Orator: according to the editors of the *Oriel Register*, this should be reversed, with (as noted) Marbeck resigning his post as Public Orator on December 8.

<sup>317</sup> Boas, 105, again citing Neale.

<sup>318</sup> Edwards died on 31 October 1566; Hillebrand, 83.

<sup>319</sup> *Romeo & Juliet* includes a variation of Edwards’s poem *In Commendation of Music*: Wallace, 107, 111 (Hathitrust #137, 141); in *The Taming of the Shrew* (and in *Taming of a Shrew*) the Induction of Sly is likely taken from a short story by Edwards: Wallace, 116 (Hathitrust #146); Bullough, I.58-59; Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 19.

<sup>320</sup> Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court* (Manchester University Press, 2002), 335, 368 (note 195).

<sup>321</sup> Adams, 321, 357 (note 77).

eventually owned two tapestries),<sup>322</sup> there is no known connection between the Oriel lease and the Sheldon tapestry works. Tapestry historian and Sheldon biographer Hilary Turner noted the lease and Leicester's demand but provided no explanation for Sheldon's interest in the residence; of the years after the procurement of the lease, she remarks that "little else is known about Ralph's activities for the rest of the decade [that is, the late 1560s]."<sup>323</sup>

While there is no known record of Sheldon's activities at Oriel College, there is record that he continued friendships with prominent Oriel and Oxford dons until his death in 1613. In his 1612 will, Sheldon provided special bequests to two Oxford dons: his "deare and good friend" Anthony Blencowe, originally a fellow at Oriel under Dudley family sponsorship in 1560, then the Oriel Provost from 1574 until his death in 1617; and Thomas Allen (1540-1632), a well-known scholar who started as a fellow at Trinity College Oxford in 1563, leaving Trinity in 1570 for a place in Gloucester Hall where he remained his entire life. To Blencowe, Sheldon left his "best rode guelding or nagg which I shall have at the tyme of my death"; to Allen, "so much fine black Cloth as will make him a longe Cloake and x li in money to be delivered and payd unto him within one moneth next after my death." The three men were apparently all good friends for their entire lives; Blencowe died shortly after Sheldon in September 1613, and made a bequest to Ralph's son Edward, with his "auntient good friende Mr. Thomas Allen of Glocester hall" as an executor of his will.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Adams, 337; also *The Black Book of Warwick*, ed. Thomas Kemp (Warwick: H.T. Cooke and son, c. 1898), 48 (described in part by Adams, 310).

<sup>323</sup> See Turner, "Biography & Epitaph of Ralph Sheldon," *Tapestries Called Sheldon*.

<sup>324</sup> Alan Davidson, "Ralph Sheldon and the Provost of Oriel," *Midlands History*.



#### ***14. The Queen, Leicester, and the Catholic Problem of Sebastian Westcott***

From the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, there was serious public outcry about a 'papist' influence on the Court entertainments and the child companies. Master Sebastian Westcott, with the Paul's since 1547<sup>325</sup> and a personal favorite of Elizabeth's,<sup>326</sup> was challenged by the Bishop London Edmund Grindal in 1561 for his refusal to take Protestant communion.<sup>327</sup> When two years later Grindal threatened Westcott with excommunication, suggesting that he was unfit to educate children, Robert Dudley wrote to the Bishop in defense of Westcott.<sup>328</sup> The Bishop relented in his threat,<sup>329</sup> but protests against the 'papists' at Court continued: in 1569, the pamphlet *Children of the Chapel Script and Whipt* decried the dramatic activities at the Court Chapel, likening them to "Popish service" with "devil garments."<sup>330</sup> Although Westcott retained his post until his death in 1582, he was convicted for heresy in December 1577, and imprisoned until March 1578.<sup>331</sup>

Sebastian Wescott, an ordained Catholic priest,<sup>332</sup> was a popular figure at Court, fondly referred to simply as "Master Sebastian."<sup>333</sup> Working with the similarly popular (but also Catholic) playwright John Heywood, Westcott produced entertainment for Princess Elizabeth in 1551, and then again in 1559, at the start of her reign.<sup>334</sup> While Heywood fled the country shortly thereafter,<sup>335</sup> Westcott remained at Court, named as Almoner in December 1559, and then given a royal warrant in 1560 to "take up" boys

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<sup>325</sup> See Lennam, 14.

<sup>326</sup> Lennam, 35; Hillebrand, 74.

<sup>327</sup> Lennam, 20; Hillebrand, 120.

<sup>328</sup> Lennam, 21; Hillebrand, 120-21.

<sup>329</sup> Lennam, 21-2.

<sup>330</sup> Chambers, Elizabethan Stage, II.34.

<sup>331</sup> Rosenberg, 302; Lennam, 53.

<sup>332</sup> Lennam, 10.

<sup>333</sup> Lennam, 41.

<sup>334</sup> Lennam, 71; Hillebrand, 117.

<sup>335</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (1910) XIII.438; he returned to England in 1577.

from other parts of the “Reallme” to serve at Paul’s.<sup>336</sup> The Children of Paul’s went on to great success in the next twenty years; by the early 1570s, Paul’s choir was considered “second to none.”<sup>337</sup>

Notwithstanding his success, and that of his company, Westcott’s adherence to the Catholic faith dogged him from the earliest years of Elizabeth’s reign. At Bishop Grindal’s visitation to St. Paul’s in 1561, the Bishop called out Westcott for his continuing adherence to the Catholic faith.<sup>338</sup> When Westcott refused to yield, Grindal announced, in July 1563, his decision to excommunicate Westcott; in response, Robert Dudley wrote to Grindal “earnestly” on behalf of Westcott.<sup>339</sup> Replying to Dudley, Grindal explained his reasons for this severe action, including “a matter of great Moment”: that [Westcott] “remaining therefore in the Mind he doth, with what Conscience can I commit Youth to his Instruction?”<sup>340</sup> Grindal, however, agreed to “forbear prosecuting” Westcott until October.<sup>341</sup> The following year on 8 November, 1564, Westcott bound himself to Grindal to “frame his conscience” to be “agreeable to all” by Easter 1565; if “impossible” then Westcott was to resign his office or forfeit the sum of 100 marks.<sup>342</sup> While Westcott neither resigned nor paid the bond, it also does not seem that he conformed; nonetheless, Grindal permitted him to continue at Paul’s in the Queen’s service.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Lennam, 36.

<sup>337</sup> Lennam, 23.

<sup>338</sup> Hillebrand, 120; Lennam, 20.

<sup>339</sup> Hillebrand, 120; Dudley’s letter is no longer extant, but the comment that he wrote “earnestly” came from Grindal writing to Sir William Cecil, note 18.

<sup>340</sup> Hillebrand, 121.

<sup>341</sup> Lennam, 21.

<sup>342</sup> Hillebrand, 122-23.

<sup>343</sup> Lennam, 22.

## ***15. The Curious Case of William Hunnis***

In 1566, William Hunnis replaced the noted dramatist Edwards as the Master of the Chapel Royal. A Protestant loyalist, Hunnis's other position at Court was that of the Queen's gardener, and he continued as the Queen's gardener even after his appointment as Master. Even with deep investigation, not one line of written dramatic dialogue has ever been attributed to him. Thus, instead of a talented Protestant playwright (such as Thomas Sackville or George Gascoigne), it appears that the Court appointed a stalwart Protestant without serious dramatic pretension.

The contrast between Hunnis and his predecessor could not be starker. The position, traditionally connected with the dramatic presentation of Court entertainments, was previously held by the noted musician and playwright Edwards (c. 1523-66). Edwards, according to Hillebrand, was "possibly the most gifted of all the Chapel masters." A scholar of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Edwards was famous in his day and highly praised for both his poetry and his drama.<sup>344</sup>

By comparison, in the 1560s, Hunnis was a grocer with a shop in Southwark; he became the Keeper of the Queen's Orchard and Gardens at Greenwich in 1562. Even after his appointment to Master of the Chapel Royal, he continued as Queen's gardener, supplying greenery and flowers for the Queen's banquets.<sup>345</sup> There is little evidence of his literary accomplishments before his appointment as Master: in 1549, he published a work *Certain Psalmes chosen out of the Psalter of David*.<sup>346</sup> Although he was in his post for over thirty years until his death in 1597, "not a line of any play which can be even plausibly connected with him has come down to us," according to Hillebrand.<sup>347</sup> Furthermore, again according to Hillebrand, Hunnis apparently temporarily relinquished his office of Master for 1576 until 1580 to musician Richard Farrant who "as a gentleman

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<sup>344</sup> Hillebrand, 75; *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (1910), IX.6.

<sup>345</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, III.349.

<sup>346</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900, vol. 28, "Hunnis, William."

<sup>347</sup> Hillebrand, 85.

of the Chapel and an experienced producer of plays, was exceptionally fit for the post.”<sup>348</sup> However, Hunnis was a Protestant loyalist, having been imprisoned in the Tower in the mid-1550s for his part in a plot against Queen Mary.<sup>349</sup>

As odd as these circumstances appear, certain conclusions may be deduced. First, even though the Queen, Leicester, and the Court gave paramount importance to the Court entertainments, there appears to have been no pressing need to fill the post of Master of the Chapel Royal with a strong, experienced dramatist. If this had been the case, there were obviously far better choices (for example, Sackville or Gascoigne) than Hunnis. Second, if there were no pressing need, this would suggest that there was already a capable dramatist working on the Court productions. The identity of that dramatist is unknown – the two other principals in the Court productions were Westcott and Farrant, both very capable musicians but neither known to be dramatists. Third, it would appear probable that the capable dramatist working on the Court productions was either unable, or unwilling, to act in the traditional post of Master of the Chapel Royal. One possible reason is that the unnamed dramatist was Catholic, a particular problem because, as discussed in the prior chapter, the Court was already under Puritan attack for ‘papists’ such as Westcott, a known Catholic recusant and the Master of the Children of Paul’s, involved in its entertainments. Finally, it seems probable that Hunnis was not appointed simply because he was Protestant (and would thus “balance out” Westcott), but rather because he was specifically intended as a figurehead without real authority. Otherwise, why not appoint a Protestant Master who was also a strong dramatist? So, the question remains: who was the dramatist behind the plays written for the Court and Leicester’s Men in these early Elizabethan years?

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<sup>348</sup> Hillebrand, 95-6.

<sup>349</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, III.349.

## 16. 'Wit and Will,' c. 1567 and Westcott's Playhouse

In spite of the sudden death of dramatist Edwards in October 1566, and the notable absence of any named playwright, seven new plays were produced for the Queen's entertainment during the Christmas season of 1567, including *Wit and Will* and *A Tragedie of the King of Scottes*.<sup>350</sup> And around the same time, it seems likely that Sebastian Westcott set up a playhouse where the public could view the rehearsals of the Children of Paul's.

Although none of the play scripts are extant, one of the plays, *Wit and Will*, appears to have been published anonymously as *The Marriage of Wit and Science* c. 1569. Trevor Lennam, the modern editor of *Marriage*,<sup>351</sup> concluded that *Marriage* – a play for which there is only one extant copy –<sup>352</sup> is, in fact, the published version of *Wit and Will*.<sup>353</sup> In both plays, the major characters are Wit and Will; and there is a delay of only just over a year between the time of the performance of the play (the end of 1567) and the registration of the stage play (August, 1569). Moreover, the published play appears to be an updated version of an older play from the repertory of St. Paul's: *Marriage*, like its source play *Wit and Science*, was meant to be performed by boys;<sup>354</sup> *Wit and Science* was written by John Redford, the previous choirmaster of the Children of Paul's, performed sometime between 1534 and 1547.<sup>355</sup>

But whoever wrote the anonymous published play was highly innovative. The play broke the mold of the traditional scholastic morality plays (and its immediate predecessor play) by adding the brilliantly saucy new comic character, the impudent but

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<sup>350</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.84, 144.

<sup>351</sup> In his book on Sebastian Westcott, Lennam presented a modern edition of *The Marriage of Wit and Science*; Lennam, 119-97. All citations to the text are to Lennam's edition.

<sup>352</sup> Lennam, 85; the single undated quarto is held by the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

<sup>353</sup> Lennam, 73.

<sup>354</sup> Lennam, 101.

<sup>355</sup> Lennam, 90.

sweet young Will, and by structuring the play into five acts. Both the name “Will” and the five-act structure are closely associated with the writer Shakespeare.

*Marriage* is, like its predecessor *Wit and Science*, a standard allegorical lesson of the era: Dame Nature sends her son Wit out into the world to woo Science, meet her parents Reason & Experience, learn from Instruction & Study, and overcome Tediousness, Idleness, and Ignorance. Where *Marriage* differs from *Wit and Science* (and other morality plays) however, is the introduction of the fresh and smart-mouthed Will, a young page whom Dame Nature sends to accompany Wit on his journey. According to Lennam:

The most important differences between the two plays, though, lies in the change of a single character. Confidence, Wit’s messenger, a minor figure in Redford’s allegory, has undergone a metamorphosis in the hands of the adaptor, who has brilliantly recreated him as Will. As Will’s impudent and other imprudent page, Will gives a new direction and vigour to the residual allegory. He appears to exemplify impulse, the contrary influence among Wit’s helpmeets. His ambivalent feelings toward his master’s love affair – a desire to serve Wit expeditiously is modified by his reluctance to see him married – are the source of a succession of amusing scenes.<sup>356</sup>

The dialogue between Wit and Will includes fresh use of material not in the original Redford allegory: the “proverb-capping” dialogue between them is noted as the first of its kind in English drama.<sup>357</sup>

The comic dialogue, though, would seem to harken back to more recent work by Richard Edwards, widely admired for his comedy and for his comedic form. Of Edwards’s known plays, only one is currently extant, *Damon and Pythias*, said to have been shown at Court in Christmas, 1564.<sup>358</sup> In this play, two young servants Will and Jack spar broadly with Grim the Collier, in a similar style to that of the page Will and his master Wit.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Lennam, 91-2.

<sup>357</sup> Lennam, 105.

<sup>358</sup> Hillebrand, 77,

<sup>359</sup> Hillebrand, 77-80.

In major deviation from the two predecessor plays (Redford's *Wit and Science* and Edwards's *Damon*), and in an advance from the standard morality play, *Marriage* is a five-act play.<sup>360</sup> J.P. Collier found this five-act structure to be a "remarkable external feature, not belonging to any other piece of this class [that is, morality plays] that we remember to have met with." He highly commends the author: "[T]he author, whoever he might be, has bestowed great pains upon his undertaking, and the construction of it is sufficiently ingenious, conveying, not without some humour, a very useful lesson."<sup>361</sup>

Lennam characterized the anonymous author as "a strongly individual and practiced writer . . . [with] a richly rhetorical poetic style, but also a gift for proverbial expression and a strong bent towards chivalric romance . . . [and with] the creation of Will he has demonstrated a talent for comic characterisation of a high order."<sup>362</sup> Lennam offers no name; Sebastian Westcott, the choir master of the Children of Paul's, was a fine musician but not noted as a dramatist. Edwards's immediate successors were William Hunnis (master of the Chapel Royal) and Richard Farrant (master of the children of Windsor); neither were known for comedic drama.<sup>363</sup>

Near to this time, Sebastian Westcott seems to have begun operating a playhouse, somewhere on or near the property of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where outsiders could view the rehearsals of the Children of Paul's.<sup>364</sup> The date when such open rehearsals began is unknown. The earliest record of the playhouse, however, is a notice of an official protest made in December 1575 to the City of London Aldermen that Westcott, identified as "someone "that wyll not comunycate with the Church of England," was operating a playhouse that "kepethe playes and resortes of the people to great gaine and peryll of the Corruptinge of the Chyldren with papistrie." By the notice, the Aldermen were instructing a City official to remedy the situation.<sup>365</sup> The protest itself

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<sup>360</sup> T.W. Baldwin, *Shakspeare's five-act structure* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1947), 426, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001018985>, (Hathitrust #448), 490-91 (Hathitrust #512-13).

<sup>361</sup> J.P. Collier, *English Dramatic Poetry*, II.341-41 (Hathitrust #355-56).

<sup>362</sup> Lennam, 106.

<sup>363</sup> See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.34-6; Wallace, 117 (Hathitrust #147).

<sup>364</sup> Lennam, 43.

<sup>365</sup> Lennam, 43.

suggests that the playhouse had been operating for some time before 1575: according to Lennam, the protest seemed to indicate that the playhouse was “operating successfully, drawing crowds and making profit.” Lennam determines that the playhouse may have operated for “over a decade” before it evolved into the “full-fledged commercial venture which so disturbed the aldermen in 1575.”<sup>366</sup>

In fact, public Puritan complaints against the ‘papist’ practices in play rehearsals by the boy actors of the Court had begun as early as 1569. In that year, a notorious pamphlet entitled *Children of the Chapel Script and Whipt* complained of “bawdie fables” enacted by child actors of the Court: “even in her majesties chappel do these pretty upstart youthes profane the Lordes day by lascivious writhing of their tender limbs, and gorgeous decking of their apparel, in feigning bawdie fables gathered from the idolatrous heathen poets.”<sup>367</sup> The pamphlet blames the Queen’s papist “unfledged minions”: “[P]laies will never be supprest, while her majesties unfledged minions flaunt it in silkes and sattens. They had as well be at their Popish services, in the devils garments.”<sup>368</sup> This would strongly support some type of open rehearsals by the Court boy actors as early as 1569, and the taunt regarding papist ‘minions’ would certainly implicate the openly Catholic Westcott.

Was the play *Wit and Will* an early expression of the writer who became ‘Shakespeare,’ and were the open rehearsals held by Westcott one the earliest public stages for the earliest plays of Shakespeare? Clearly, the name “Will” in variations followed the writer his entire career – including before the 1593 publication of the first work officially naming the author as “William Shakespeare”: see the poet Edmund Spenser’s c. 1590 query about the absence from the comic stage of “pleasant Willy” discussed in Chapter 31. See also Chapter 5 regarding Sir John Harington’s 1596 annotation “Will: Shel- / don,” referring to Ralph Sheldon and a young boy (Will) who talks impertinently to his elders.

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<sup>366</sup> Lennam, 43-4.

<sup>367</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.34-5.

<sup>368</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.34.



Moreover, the thematic interplay of ‘wit and will’ – and, even more obviously, the interplay of the impudent page boy Will and his master Wit – persists and expands in Shakespeare’s earliest plays. See, in particular, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, where pairs of characters – Speed and Valentine in the former, and Moth and Don Armado in the latter – seem sophisticated updates of the impudent page Will and his master Wit. *The Taming of A Shrew* – the principal source of the later published *The Taming of The Shrew*<sup>369</sup> -- abounds with boy pages (including one named Will) and their masters. In his commentary, Bullough even suggests that “*A Shrew* may not so much the source-play as Shakespeare’s first shot at the theme.”<sup>370</sup> Could these plays (or early versions of them) – with characters so plainly drawn for comedies enacted by boy actors – have been some of the plays which were openly rehearsed in Westcott’s early playhouse?<sup>371</sup> Could they have contributed to the popular reputation of “pleasant Willy,” the loss of whom was seriously lamented in Spenser’s 1590 poem as being “dead of late”?

Of these three early plays, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* has arguably the most internal and external evidence of a first production date of 1578/9. Alfred Harbage carefully examined the play and found its poetry to be “doggerel” and full of “tumbling measures” – “peculiarities” others agreed were characteristic of early Elizabethan poetry. Of all the Shakespeare plays, Harbage could only compare it to *Comedy of Errors*, a play preceded by *Historie of Error* in 1577 (see Chapter 23).<sup>372</sup> He also raised the strong possibility that it was written for boy actors, pointing out its large number of parts requiring non-adult actors (five women and a boy), and the boisterous repartee. Harbage mentions that T.W. Baldwin also found the play’s “only-rudimentary adherence to a five-act structure to

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<sup>369</sup> Bullough, I.58.

<sup>370</sup> Bullough, I.58.

<sup>371</sup> The Court Revels Accounts for the period show two plays performed by the Children of Paul’s that possibly correspond to the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the *Taming of A Shrew*: *The historie of Titus and Gisippus*, February 1577 (original source of the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* likely Boccaccio’s tale of Tito and Gisippo, later developed into the story of Titus and Gisippus by Sir Thomas Elyot in 1531; see Bullough, I.203); *A Morrell of the marriage Mynde and Measure*, 1 January 1579. See E.K. Chambers, IV.152, 154.

<sup>372</sup> Harbage, 114-16.

indicate an early date. The difficulty Harbage had with identifying a possible early date was the limitations of the actor Shakspeare's biography, which leaves only the 1580s – a time when the premier boys troupe (the one that performed *Historie of Error* in 1577), the Children of Paul's, was effectively no longer operating (see Chapter 27).<sup>373</sup>

However, other historical evidence points to a first production around 1578, at a time when the Children of Paul's was at its peak, having recently performed *Historie of Error* at the Court on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul's Court productions. Felicia Hardison Londre lists a number of tight parallels to the late 1570s: a performance at Court on 11 January 1579 of "The Double Maske: A Maske of Amazones and A Maske of Knights presented for the French envoy Simier; the play itself is a well-accepted satire on Euphuism, a literary style prominent in Court in 1578-79; the play's source, Pierre La Primaudaye's *L'Academie francaise*, was published in 1577; the Queen's Progress in 1578 had included an inept performance of the Nine Worthies; the French envoy was in England negotiating a marriage between Elizabeth and the Duc d'Alencon, who in 1578 had presented an elaborate entertainment with soldiers masquerading as Russians.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Harbage, 122-25; on the play's source, see also Bullough, I.427-28.

<sup>374</sup> Felicia Hardison Londre, "Elizabethan Views of the 'Other'," in *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. Londre (New York: Routledge, 1997), 327-28.

**D. 1570s: SHELDON, PLOWDEN,  
BELLEFOREST, & THE EARLY  
BLOCKBUSTER 'SOURCE-PLAYS'**

## 17. Edmund Plowden, Sheldon, and Shakespeare's Plays

Edmund Plowden (c. 1518-85) was an eminent jurist and prominent official of the Middle Temple, but also the brother-in-law of Ralph Sheldon, married to his sister Katherine since probably the late 1550s.<sup>375</sup> His influence on Shakespeare's plays is hard to overstate: *King John*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *Merchant of Venice* all owe significant debt to Plowden's legal writings, notwithstanding the highly esoteric nature of Plowden's work; each of these plays are discussed separately herein. And Shakespeare seems to nod to Plowden, setting the iconic scene in Act 2 of *1 Henry VI* where the noble lords chose their sides by picking either a white (Yorkist) or red (Lancastrian) rose in the garden on the west end of the Middle Temple Hall. As Treasurer to the Middle Temple, Plowden oversaw the design and construction of the Hall in the 1560s. Two of Plowden's legal writings are particularly relevant to the plays: his 1566 legal tract on succession, and his case reports, *Plowden's Reports*, first published in 1571. Neither would have been easily accessible: his legal tract on succession was an anonymous manuscript, never published, and his case reports (entitled *Les Commentaries*) were published in Norman French (a dialect used only in the English law courts), with no English translation until 1761.

Brothers-in-law Plowden and Sheldon seemed to have shared close personal and professional lives. Plowden may have been first acquainted with Sheldon's father William through their mutual work with the commissions of the peace, established under Queen Mary in 1554.<sup>376</sup> When William's 19-year-old son Ralph was admitted to the Middle Temple in November 1556, the 38-year-old Plowden was ascending the hierarchy of the Temple. As noted, Plowden was Treasurer of the Inn until 1570; thereafter he went on to publish his ground-breaking case reports in 1571. At the same time, in 1571 he, along with Ralph, were acting as executors in the estate of William Sheldon, who had died the previous year. Both Sheldon and Plowden were avowed Catholics, and both

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<sup>375</sup> There is no known record of the marriage, see Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, *Edmund Plowden: An Elizabethan Recusant Lawyer* (UK: Hobbs for the Catholic Record Society, 1987), 51.

<sup>376</sup> Parmiter, 31.

suffered professionally for their Catholic faith. For example, according to scholar Marie Axton, it was not until the accession of James I in 1603 (nearly two decades after Plowden's death) that the Plowden family could "safely" disclose that a Catholic lawyer had written the seminal tract on the succession claim of the Catholic Mary Stuart; in fact, it was only the copy of the tract provided to James I that made it clear who the author was of the anonymous original pamphlet.<sup>377</sup>

In the annals of English law, Edmund Plowden is revered.<sup>378</sup> The date of his admission to the Middle Temple is unknown, but he himself said that he began his study of law in 1538.<sup>379</sup> As noted in Chapter 10, he was first appointed to office at Middle Temple in 1556 as the Steward for Christmas, then in 1557 as Reader, both of which positions had much to do with the entertainment and feasts held at the Middle Temple.<sup>380</sup> In 1561 through 1570, he was Treasurer, and during this time commenced on building a new Hall for the Temple, continuing as Proctor and promoter for the new Hall even after his term as Treasurer.<sup>381</sup> Around 1566, Plowden entered into the ongoing 'pamphlet war' over the rights of succession to Elizabeth, forcefully defending the right to succession by Mary Queen of Scots.<sup>382</sup>

In the history of English law, however, Plowden is most famed for publishing the first modern series of court reports, written in the judicial Law Norman French language, entitled *Les Commentaries, ou, Les Reportes*.<sup>383</sup> When he entered the study of law at Middle Temple around 1538, the Year Books – the law reports traditionally used by the English law courts – had ceased.<sup>384</sup> Around 1550 in the reign of Edward VI, Plowden commenced maintaining his own personal reports on the cases before the law courts; from these private reports he eventually published the first volume of case reports,

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<sup>377</sup> Axton, 216.

<sup>378</sup> Summations of Plowden's life include those by Parmiter, above, and by Richard O'Sullivan, "Edmund Plowden: Master Treasurer of the Middle Temple (1561-1570)," *Catholic Lawyer*, 3 (Jan. 1957) 44-58.

<sup>379</sup> Parmiter, 5, 11.

<sup>380</sup> Parmiter, 46-7.

<sup>381</sup> O'Sullivan, 51-2.

<sup>382</sup> Parmiter, 90.

<sup>383</sup> O'Sullivan, 47-8.

<sup>384</sup> O'Sullivan, 45.

at his own expense, in 1571.<sup>385</sup> He published a second series of reports in 1578/9, also in Norman French;<sup>386</sup> there was no English language edition of these court reports until 1761. The reports were distinguished for their accuracy and integrity, and their author famed for his legal knowledge.<sup>387</sup> Plowden, however, remained a staunch Roman Catholic, and in 1569, refused to take the Oath of Supremacy.<sup>388</sup> It is believed, nonetheless, that after the death of Lord Chancellor Sir Nicholas Bacon in 1579, Elizabeth invited Plowden to be Lord Chancellor but that he declined, citing his Catholic faith.<sup>389</sup>

The impact of Plowden's legal writings on the plots of Shakespeare's plays is considerable. In *King John* – and in its source-play *The Troublesome Reign of John King of England* – the main plot revolves on the legal claims of John's cousin Arthur of Brittany to the succession of the English throne. In constructing the plot, however, Shakespeare mirrored the succession issues of Plowden's succession debates (that is, the legal claims of Elizabeth's Scottish cousin Mary to the throne) rather than those of the Plantagenet history as set forth in the chronicles.<sup>390</sup> The legal scholar Ernst Kantorowicz laid out, in 1957, his now widely accepted thesis that Plowden's legal theory of the "King's Two Bodies" – which Plowden writes of first in his succession tract, then later in his case reports – underpins the plot of *Richard II*.<sup>391</sup> In *Hamlet*, legal scholars have long puzzled over Shakespeare's reference to *Hales v. Petit* (1561) recorded in 1 Plowden 253;<sup>392</sup> later study identified other plot twists drawn from another Plowden case *The*

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<sup>385</sup> O'Sullivan, 47-8.

<sup>386</sup> O'Sullivan, 48.

<sup>387</sup> O'Sullivan, 48 footnote 7; 52-3.

<sup>388</sup> O'Sullivan, 55.

<sup>389</sup> O'Sullivan, 56; [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/1509-1558](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/1509-1558).

<sup>390</sup> *King John*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann, *The Arden Shakespeare* (Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1951, revised 1981; reprinted Singapore: Thomson Learning, 2001), xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>391</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton University Press, 1957); while Kantorowicz focuses on Plowden's case reports as the source of the theory, see pp. 7-23, a later study by Marie Axton, "The Influence of Edmund Plowden's Succession Treatise," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 37 (May, 1974): 209-26, [www.jstor.org/stable/3816851](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3816851), points out that Plowden originally made his case for the King's Two Bodies in his succession tract published in 1566.

<sup>392</sup> George W. Keeton, *Shakespeare's Legal and Political Background* (London: Pitman, 1967), 185-90.

*Queen v. Saunders & Nichols* (1572),<sup>393</sup> as well as clear allusion to Plowden's concept of the King's Two Bodies.<sup>394</sup> The *Merchant of Venice* presents the concept of equity as a modification to common law (rejection of Shylock's legal demand for Antonio's 'pound of flesh' as a remedy for contract enforcement); Plowden's report on *Eyston v. Studd* (1574) was the leading case on such equitable issues of common law practice.<sup>395</sup>

In a key scene in *1 Henry VI* Act 2, Scene 4, Shakespeare opens the 'War of the Roses' between the nobles who pick either a white rose (Yorkist) or a red rose (Lancastrian) in "The Temple Garden"; in doing so, Shakespeare departed from the chronicles to invent his own dramatic scene in the garden by the edge of the Middle Temple Hall, seemingly commemorating the Hall designed by his brother-in-law Plowden. In his book, *The Middle Temple*, George Godwin explains this scene: at the west end of the Great Hall of the Middle Temple, the south bay window overlooks the lawn that sweeps to the Thames; beneath this window, a rose tree grew (within memory of the Godwin), and it was in this garden that the scene preceeded. According to Godwin, the quarrel seemed to have developed from the "putting of a case" in the Hall.<sup>396</sup> In *Shakespeare & the Lawyers*, O. Hood Philips describes the practice in more detail: daily at dinner, the young lawyers dined in "messes of four" in the Temple Hall, while a case was put on and the lawyers were expected to argue it thoroughly.<sup>397</sup> In this instance, within the Hall the argument was met with silence, and hence taken to the Garden for further deliberations. After the deliberations failed, Plantagenet returned to the Hall to

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<sup>393</sup> O. Hood Philips, *Shakespeare and the Lawyers* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1972), 79.

<sup>394</sup> Jerah Johnson, "The Concept of the 'King's Two Bodies' in *Hamlet*," *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, 18, no. 4 (Autumn 1967): 430-434, [www.jstor.org/stable/Record/2867645](http://www.jstor.org/stable/Record/2867645).

<sup>395</sup> See Lorna Hutton, "Not the King's Two Bodies, Reading the 'Body Politic' in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2," *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutton (Yale University Press, 2001), 171-75.

<sup>396</sup> George Godwin, *The Middle Temple* (London: Staples Press Ltd., 1954), 65-6.

<sup>397</sup> Philips, 32. While Philips is skeptical of Godwin's claim that the scene shows "intimate knowledge of the system of Mootings [at Middle Temple]," he agrees that the scene shows some detailed familiarity with Temple practices as it "clearly shows knowledge of the custom of dining in messes of four."

dine with the customary table of four (see *I Henry IV* 2.4.133-134: [Plantagenet]: “Come, let us four to dinner: I dare say [T]his quarrel will drink blood another day”).



## 18. Sheldon As ‘Annotator’ of Hall’s Chronicle

In 1940, British bookseller Alan Keen found a copy of Edward Hall’s Chronicle, *The Union of the Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* first published in 1548; Keen’s volume was a “shabby folio” of the fourth edition printed in 1550.<sup>398</sup> Keen determined that the book was probably originally owned by Sir Richard Newport, a prominent Shropshire man who died in 1570.<sup>399</sup> What caught Keen’s interest, though, were extensive annotations in an Elizabethan script (in a different hand than Newport’s) on the margin of the text. Keen suspected that the annotations were connected to the Shakespeare history plays, and that the Annotator was the writer of those plays.

Keen’s subsequent investigation, however, failed to prove either issue, so the same questions remain: (1) who wrote the annotations; and (2) how, if at all, are the annotations related to Shakespeare’s history plays. As will be discussed below, the close match of Ralph Sheldon’s signature hand with that of the annotation script provides compelling evidence that Sheldon was the author of the annotations. Concerning the second question, a comparison of the relevant texts (Hall’s and the annotations) strongly suggests that the annotations formed the basis of the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, which, in turn, was a principle source for Shakespeare’s history plays.

To ascertain whether Ralph Sheldon was the Annotator, a signature of Sheldon dated 28 October 1585 was obtained from a legal file maintained by the UK National Archives (TNA Sta.Cha.5R12/34); this signature is shown below as Figure 1.

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<sup>398</sup> Alan Keen and Roger Lubbock, *The Annotator* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1954), 1, 8.

<sup>399</sup> Newport signed his name “Rychard Newport” twice in the pages of the folio, and included a date of 6 April 1565 next to his initials. From the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Keen identified two men named “Rychard Newport” but eliminated one candidate when his signature failed to match that in the folio. Keen, 5, 31.



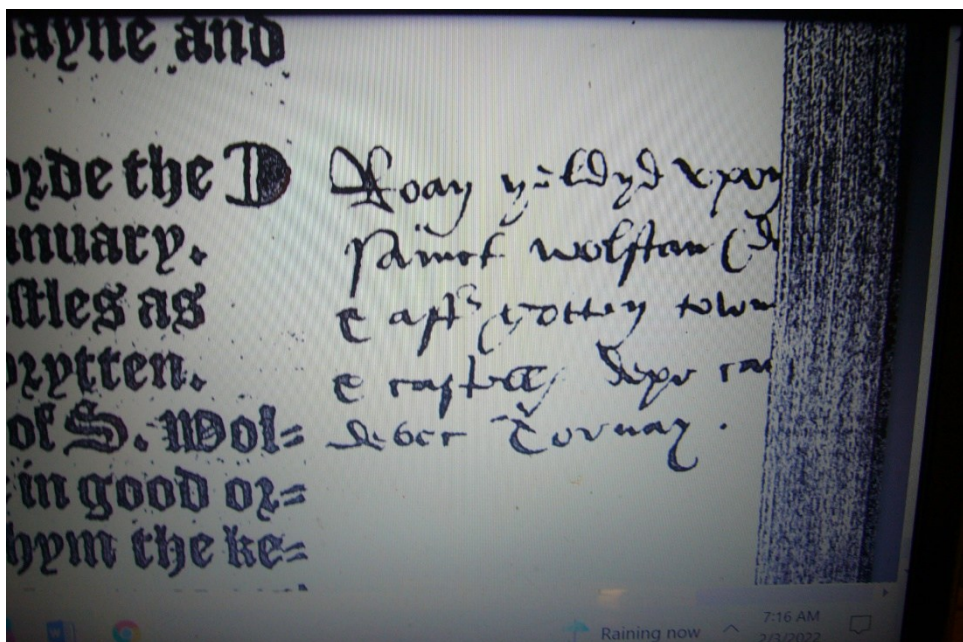


Figure 2. From Hall, Henry V.fxxxii; see [www.oxford-shakespeare.com/annotator.html](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/annotator.html), page 70 (page 23 of segment 47-69), bottom right-hand margin.

Comparison of Ralph Sheldon's signature (actually 'Raffe' Sheldon) in Figure 1 with the excerpt in Figure 2 shows significant congruence. In general, both hands are variations of the standard English 'secretary hand' and both are similarly uneven in presentation. Both hands have irregular variations in the spacing between the letters, in the slant (mostly to the right), and in the relative size of the letters. For this last point, compare the 'af' in the signature (**R**a**ff**e) – that is, a relatively small 's' above the main line of the signature) with the 'af' in 'after' – that is, the first two letters of the second word in the third line: both show a smaller 'a' above the baseline of the hand.

All of the letters in the signature matched the hand in the annotations, and the most significant of these can be seen in the comparison of Figure 1 and Figure 2. Technically, there were matches for eleven forms involving the ten letters in the signature: 'R', 'a', 'ff' (taken as one form), ending 'e', 'S', 'h', 'e', 'l', 'd', 'o', and ending 'n'. Comparing Figure 1 and 2, the matches can be seen between 'R' [see '**R**oan'],

‘a’ [throughout, and discussed above], ‘d’ [yeldyd], ‘l’ [yeldyd], the ending ‘n’ [Roan], and in the same line at the end. ‘upon’].<sup>402</sup> The connecting letters are also relevant: the ‘ld’ in Sheldon and the ‘ld’ in ‘yeldyd show a similar slant of the ‘l’ and encroachment on the ‘d’; the ‘on’ in Sheldon uses the same open-top ‘o’ to connect to the ‘n’ as does the annotator in writing ‘upon.’ Of the matches, though, by far the most important are that between the ‘R’ in Raffe and Roan, and the ending ‘n’ in Sheldon and the ending ‘n’ in the annotator script (see Roan and upon).

Of particular note is the ending ‘n’ with a downstroke curling left. The same ending ‘n’ and ‘m’) with the downstroke curling left is used throughout the annotations (like ‘Roan’ and ‘upon’ in Figure 2). According to Keen, this form was old-fashioned and rare in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>403</sup> Nonetheless, it can be found in the final ‘n’ of Sheldon, where the last stroke of the ‘n’ is brought down, curving to the left, before curling up in a final stylistic flourish (see Figure 1).

Most remarkable, however, is the similarity of the upper case ‘R’ (in referring to Elizabethan script, the ‘majuscule’) in both hands: compare ‘R’ in ‘Raffe’ that begins the signature with the majuscule ‘R’ in the excerpted ‘Roan.’ Both the signature and the annotation script show the same intricate design of ‘R’ with a sharp triangle in the base of the letter, formed by precisely the same stroke (compare Figure 1 and Figure 2).

A search of available Elizabethan script alphabets and writing samples could find no sample of the same ‘R’ with the same distinct form as used in the scripts of Sheldon and the Annotator. Among the Elizabethan script, the upper case ‘R’ is one of the most frequent majuscule letters, with many variations on the formation of the letter. Heather Wolfe of the Folger Shakespeare Library has compiled an assortment of

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<sup>402</sup> For comparisons of the remaining letters, see the Annotations: ‘ff’ is at Henry IV, f.xx<sup>a</sup>, ‘offendyd,’ see Keen, 130 and digital page 22 of segment 1-22, left margin; ending ‘e’ is at Henry IV, fiv<sup>a</sup>, ‘venice’, see Keen, 127 and digital page 6 of segment 1-22, left margin; ‘S’ is at Henry V, f.xxi<sup>b</sup>, ‘Sigismunde’, see Keen, 142 and digital page 11 of segment 1-22, left margin; ‘sh’ is in ‘shortly’, same excerpt as ‘e’ (and ‘venice’) above [note: ‘shortly’ also shows the sharp rightward slant of ‘l’ in Sheldon].

<sup>403</sup> Keen, 106.

Elizabethan alphabets and script samples;<sup>404</sup> perhaps the most relevant is a collection of samples – by alphabet letter – put together by W.S.B. Buck in “Examples of Handwriting 1550-1650” (1996). Buck shows over 90 different specimens of the majuscule ‘R’ and none match the triangular base form used by both Sheldon and the Annotator. Comparison with other alphabets such as those included in John Baildon and Jean de Beau Chesne’s table of forms entitled ‘Secretary Hand’ (1571)<sup>405</sup> and a general compilation of alphabet letters by bibliographer Ronald B. McKerrow (1872-1940)<sup>406</sup> also showed no match for the majuscule R.

Thus, the signature ‘R’ and the matching annotation ‘R’ would seem to be unique: although they match each other, they match no other known sample of the same letter. This occurrence, together with the rare appearance of the same ending ‘n’, would seem definitively not random.<sup>407</sup>

The identification of Sheldon as the Annotator is corroborated by other clues offered in the annotations. From the substance, Keen concluded that the Annotator was probably Roman Catholic.<sup>408</sup> At the same time, he matched the specific secretary hand used by the annotator to a similar hand from a 1564 council register in Stratford-on-Avon<sup>409</sup> (a location near to Sheldon’s family home) and he noted that the annotations retain spellings that can be considered provincial and “old-fashioned” for the time.<sup>410</sup> The annotations also includes a phrase not taken from Hall, “Suche prince, suche people”

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<sup>404</sup> See Heather Wolfe, *The Alphabet Book* (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2020; [https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/mediawiki/media/images\\_pedia\\_folgerpedia\\_mw/7/79/AlphabetBook2020](https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/mediawiki/media/images_pedia_folgerpedia_mw/7/79/AlphabetBook2020)).

<sup>405</sup> This table is included in Muriel St. Clare Byrne, “Elizabethan Handwriting for Beginners,” *Review of English Studies*, 1 (1925) 198-209.

<sup>406</sup> Ronald McKerrow, “Note on Elizabethan Handwriting,” reprinted in Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, included in Wolfe’s Folger compilation cited above.

<sup>407</sup> Vanessa Wilke, Curator of Medieval Manuscripts, Huntington Library reviewed the material described above; of the comparison, she wrote: “It can often be difficult to get much out of signatures, but the oddities of letter shapes, particularly the R, l, and n, seem to indicate that the annotations may very well have been in the same hand”; she concluded that the author’s presentation showed a “compelling case,” Wilkie email to the author dated 10 May 2022.

<sup>408</sup> Keen, 12-14.

<sup>409</sup> Keen, 106.

<sup>410</sup> Keen, 89-90, 106.

aside a passage in Hall “that as princes change, the people altereth, and as kynges go, the subjectes followe”;<sup>411</sup> the phrase calls to mind *Memorial of Suche Princes* (1554), the book immediately preceding the *Mirror for Magistrates*, a book later suppressed by the Lord Chancellor to Queen Mary.<sup>412</sup> As with the old-fashioned spelling and handwriting style used by the Annotator, this reference to the earliest version of *Mirror* seems to point to someone writing in the first decades of the “latter half of the sixteenth century,” that is, likely in the decades of 1560 and 1570.

While the generic description of the annotator as a young man from Midlands of Roman Catholic persuasion writing sometime in the 1560s or 1570s matches Ralph Sheldon, yet another possible characteristic also has parallels with Sheldon: the Shropshire origin of the Hall folio. Sir Richard Newport (c. 1511-70), Lord of Ercall and Sheriff of Shropshire was a member of one of the leading families of Shropshire, and his father-in-law Sir Thomas Bromley (d.1555) was the Chief Justice of the Queen’s Bench under Mary.<sup>413</sup> Sheldon’s brother-in-law Edmund Plowden was also of an old Shropshire family with prominent legal connections;<sup>414</sup> as justice of the peace in Shropshire he worked closely with Chief Justice Thomas Bromley in the mid-1550s.<sup>415</sup>

But why was Sheldon annotating Hall’s Chronicle? As presented below, there are numerous correlations between the annotations and the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. In his book on *The Case for Shakespeare’s Authorship of “The Famous Victories”* (1961), Seymour M. Pitcher compared the annotations, the *Famous Victories*, and the Shakespeare history plays; he records twenty-three annotations with correlations either to the *Famous Victories*, the history plays, or both.<sup>416</sup> From this

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<sup>411</sup> Keen, 19, 135; Bullough, IV.287.

<sup>412</sup> Archer and Hadfield, 3, 17-18.

<sup>413</sup> Keen, 31.

<sup>414</sup> Richard O’Sullivan, “Edmund Plowden,” *Catholic Lawyer*, 3 (Jan. 1957) 44.

<sup>415</sup> See Parmiter, 33-5. The legal papers Sir Matthew Hale held at the Lambeth Palace Library include opinions by Edmund Plowden, Thomas Bromley, Solicitor-General, and Gilbert Gerard, 1577-8; Thomas Bromley (1530-87) was a cousin of Chief Justice Thomas Bromley, and was appointed Lord Chancellor in 1579.

<sup>416</sup> Pitcher, Appendix B, 231-50.

evidence, it would appear that Sheldon annotated Hall's Chronicle to draw the plot outline of *Famous Victories*, the precursor of his early history plays.

Scholars have long puzzled over the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*: was the play an early draft of Shakespeare's history plays or was it the source-play from which it was drawn? That is, did Shakespeare himself write the play or did he 'borrow' the play to create his own? Whichever is true, scholars now agree that the play was a foundation of the history plays. Sometime most likely in the mid-1570s, Sheldon seems to have annotated a volume of Hall's Chronicle, as the handwriting of the 'Annotator' appears to closely match that of Sheldon's. These annotations sharply parallel the plot structure of *Famous Victories*.

In their history of the origins of English drama, A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller recognized that the early English vernacular plays turned English drama into an "entirely new direction," moving from the academic to the popular.<sup>417</sup> Of this new variety of play – which drew from the miracle plays mixed with national history as used previously by French writers – they note "by common consensus, the earliest example" as *Famous Victories*. Of the play itself they describe that it "departs as widely as possible from classical standards in its utter formlessness, its lack not only of choruses but of acts, its combination of comic and serious interests, its mixture of prose with indifferent verse."<sup>418</sup>

The views of prominent scholars on the role of *Famous Victories* as a source for Shakespeare's three plays on the life of Henry V (Parts 1&2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*) have evolved over past decades. J. Dover Wilson struggled with the concept: in a 1919 article with Alfred Pollard, he concluded that *Famous Victories* could not be the immediate source for Shakespeare's history plays, rather, that they both derived from a lost original;<sup>419</sup> but by 1945, he acknowledged a "very intimate connexion" between *Famous*

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<sup>417</sup> *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller, vol. 5 (New York: McMillan; Cambridge University Press, 1933), 91-2.

<sup>418</sup> A. W. Ward and Waller, 92.

<sup>419</sup> Alfred Pollard and John Dover Wilson, "The 'Stolne and Surreptitious' Shakespearean Texts," *London Times Literary Supplement* (Jan., Mar., 1919); see Seymour M. Pitcher, *The Case for Shakespeare's Authorship of "The Famous Victories"* (State University of New York, 1961), 163-64.

*Victories* and Shakespeare's three plays, although "what the connexion is has never been established."<sup>420</sup> Irving Ribner, in his 1957 history of early history plays, was convinced that *Famous Victories* had a "far greater" influence on Shakespeare's plays than "most writers have supposed"; in reaching this conclusion, Ribner cited Bernard M. Ward's 1928 article on the close structural and textual connections between *Famous Victories* and the history plays.<sup>421</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, in his 1966 commentary on the sources of the three plays, finds that all three plays have *Famous Victories* as a major source, with the greatest resemblance between the old text and *Henry V*.<sup>422</sup> Kenneth Muir, in 1978, concluded that "[I]t may be assumed that the original [*Famous Victories*] provided the basic structure for Shakespeare's trilogy on the hero of Agincourt."<sup>423</sup> In the 2016 Arden edition of *2Henry IV*, editor James C. Bulman finds *Famous Victories* "enormously influential on Shakespeare's Henry IV plays."<sup>424</sup>

According to work by Bernard M. Ward, aside from a single instance in the last scene of the play, all the references to the chronicles in *Famous Victories* are available in Hall's history, leaving the possibility that the author drew principally from the 1550 Hall work, rather than from the 1578 Holinshed history. In fact, Ward concludes in his article on the *Famous Victories* that the author of the play most likely derived all his historical information from Hall rather than Holinshed. Ward reached this conclusion after determining that there are five instances in the play where the historic phrase is in Hall, but not Holinshed; the only instance where the historic reference is in Holinshed but not Hall (alluded to above) appears to have been a later revision to the last scene of the original play.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> John Dover Wilson, "The Origins and Development of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*," *The Library*, ser. 4, vol. 26 (June 1945): 3; see Pitcher, 4.

<sup>421</sup> Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 73. Bernard Ward's 1928 article is discussed infra.

<sup>422</sup> Bullough, IV.167-79 (*1Henry IV*); IV.250 (*2Henry IV*); IV.347-48 (*Henry V*).

<sup>423</sup> Muir, 91.

<sup>424</sup> Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. James C. Bulman, Arden 3<sup>rd</sup> series (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 14-15.

<sup>425</sup> Bernard M. Ward, "The *Famous Victories* of *Henry V*: Its Place in Elizabethan Dramatic Literature," *Review of English Studies*, 4, no. 15 (July 1928): 270-94; 279-81.



In his article, Ward proposes that *Famous Victories* was written around 1574, before the publication of Holinshed's *Chronicles* but after an incident reported in a letter to Lord Burghley in May 1573 involving the young Earl of Oxford (1562-1604).<sup>426</sup> According to the letter, two men crossing Gad's Hill were ambushed by three men on horseback who were Lord Oxford's men. Ward notes the similarities between the incident and that in the play where Prince Hal and three of his companions ambush two men at Gad's Hill. Ward further notes that the author of *Famous Victories* adds – counter to history as shown in Hall's *Chronicle* – the Earl of Oxford as the “principal adviser and lieutenant” and the “chief warrior-courtier” to King Henry V.<sup>427</sup> As part of this role, the author gave Lord Oxford the credit for organizing the palisade of stakes – the strategy that eventually won the battle<sup>428</sup> (see *Famous Victories* 14.1182).<sup>429</sup>

With Hall's *Chronicle* as the play's principal source, and the possibility that the play was written in the early 1570s, is there evidence that the actual annotations are reflected in the *Famous Victories* text? It is argued herein that the annotations can be seen as a direct precursor to the play's text for two reasons: first, the sheer density of matches between the subject matter of the annotations and the play's text, particularly in the play's scenes 13-17; second, some annotations add quirky glosses to Hall's text; these same, specific glosses are included in the play's text.

By contrast to the very detailed and complex text of Hall's *Chronicle*,<sup>430</sup> the texts of both the annotations and the *Famous Victories* are simple and compact, stylistically similar. The Hall folio found by Keen was not only rare but would have also been bulky and somewhat unwieldy.<sup>431</sup> On the side margins of the bulky book, the

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<sup>426</sup> Bernard Ward, 285-86.

<sup>427</sup> Bernard Ward, 283, 287.

<sup>428</sup> Bernard Ward, 283-84; Ward determines, therefore, that the author must have been a “whole-hearted supporter of the House of Oxford.” However, this author would point out that such a complimentary episode would serve to blunt the edge of the use of the far less complimentary episode of the ambush at Gad's Hill.

<sup>429</sup> The citation to *Famous Victories* refers to the text as presented in Bullough, IV.299-343; all subsequent citations to this play are to Bullough.

<sup>430</sup> A sample of this text can be found in Bullough, IV.286-88. The full text of Hall's *Chronicle* is available through EEBO: [quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A02595](http://quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A02595).

<sup>431</sup> See Tillyard, 40; Tillyard describes both the rarity and the bulkiness of Hall's *Chronicle*, apologizing to his readers for using it as a source.

Annotator's notes highlight points from the complex text that also form the direct basis for the plot of *Famous Victories*. In appendix 2 to his book, Keen set forth a transcription of the annotations.<sup>432</sup> One sequential group of these transcriptions seems particularly close to the action of the play, central to the battle scenes 13-17. In the table below, these consecutive transcriptions (from Keen, 140-41) are listed below, matched with the derivative lines in *Famous Victories*:

Table 2: Comparison of Annotations with *Famous Victories* Text

<b>Keen Appendix Page</b>	<b>Annotations</b>	<b><i>Famous Victories</i> Text</b>
140	(1) gret oddes betweene the eglisse armye and the frenche  The frenche man noteth the nature of the englisse man	Line 14.1154: Comparing the French army to the English army: "And we fortie Thousand, ten to one." Lines 13.1135-37: French captain describes the English: "Why take an English man out of his warme bed And his stale drink, but one moneth, And alas what will become of him?"
140	(2) An oration of ther captayne against the englisse armye moche coragiose  First affirming the englisse armye weake	Lines 13.1123, 1134: The French captain's speech "Why who ever saw a more flourishing armie in France?"  "And on the other side, a site of poore English scabs?"
140	(3) A notable order of Kynge henry his battayle The inventynge of stakes which now I thinke be morres pykes	Lines 14.1174-80: King Henry's order: "Then I wil, that every archer provide him a stake of A tree, and sharpe at both endes, And at the first encounter of the horsemen,

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<sup>432</sup> Keen, 127-50.

<b>Keen Appendix Page</b>	<b>Annotations</b>	<b><i>Famous Victories</i> Text</b>
		To pitch their stakes downe into the ground before them, And then recoyle backe, and shoote wholly altogether, And so discomfit them.
140	(4) At the end of Kinge henrye his oration he concludeth that eng(land) prayeth for their success(es)	Lines 1210. 1214: King Henry's oration: "For all England praieth for us Cry S. George, and God and S. George helpe us."
140-41	(5) A triumph of the frenchemen before victorye	Lines 14.1191-95: The French Herald addresses Henry: "And other of my Lords, considering the poore estate of thee And they poore Countrey men, Sends me to know what thou wilt give me for thy ransome? Perhaps thou maist agree better cheape now, Then when thou art conquered."
141	(6) The rerewarde of Frenchmen ranne always without order A cowardlye acte of VI horsemen of fraunc(e)	Line 16.1309: [A Englishman addresses a Frenchman] "And whiles he turnes his backe, the Frnch man runnes his wayes."
141	(7) Prisoners pitifully slayne	Lines 16.1283-84:"For the Kings Tents are set a fire, And all that speake English will be kild."
141	(8) Thanks to god gevin for victorye	Lines 15.1229-30: King Henry: "Yet the honorable victorie which the Lord hath given us, Doth make me much rejoyce."
141	(9) The castell of Agincour(t) gave the name of the batt(ayle)	Lines 15.1255-60: King Henry to the Herald: "What Castle is this so neere adjoining to our Campe? [Herald]: . . Tis cald the Castle of Agincourt. [Henry]: . . I will that this be

Keen Appendix Page	Annotations	<i>Famous Victories</i> Text
		for ever cald the battell of Agincourt.”
141	(10)prisoners taken by the englisshemen noble men of fraunce slayne a marvelose number of dukes earles lordes and knights of the frenche armye slayne Some wryte that only(e) XXV Englishmen we(re) slayne but some other say that V or VI C were slayne	Lines 15.1220-26: Lord Oxford to King Henry: “There are of the French armie slaine, Above ten thousand, twentie sixe hundred Whereof are Princes and Nobles bearing banners: Besides all the Nobilitie of France are taken prisoners. Of your Majesties Armie, are slaine none but the good Duke of Yorke, and not above five or six and twentie Common souldiers.”

While Table 2 shows an instance of high correlation between the annotations and the usage of Hall in the *Famous Victories*, the apparent direct connection between the text of the annotations and that of the play can be best seen in instances where the annotations deviate from the original text from Hall, and those same deviations are suggested by the text of *Famous Victories*. Examples of this can be found in the annotations labeled 1, 2, and 3 in Table 2.

The first annotation listed notes the “gret oddes” between the numbers of the French and English armies; *Famous Victories* then refers to the specific odds as “ten to one” (*Famous Victories* 14.1154). In Hall, however, the difference between the French and English forces is given as “sixe times”: “surely thie wer esteemed to be in number sixe times as many or more [in the French army] than was the whole compaigny of the Englishmen with wagoners pages and all [emphasis added].”<sup>433</sup> It would seem that the Annotator recognized the dramatic “gret oddes”; then, similarly, the author of *Famous*

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<sup>433</sup> Hall (<https://quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A02595>), xlvij. In his notes to the text of *Famous Victories*, Bullough points out that the author of *Famous Victories* used “strange arithmetic” to reach the odds of ten to one; see Bullough, IV.332, footnote 8.

*Victories* took dramatic license to accentuate the differences in numbers of the two forces, using the ratio of “ten to one” to underscore what would be “gret oddes.”

The second annotation refers to the French “captayne” who gave an oration to his troops. In both *Famous Victories* and Hall the oration is quoted at length, with *Famous Victories* following Hall very closely.<sup>434</sup> But while both the annotation and *Famous Victories* refer to a “captain” as the orator, Hall’s text very specifically identifies the orator as the Constable of France, and differentiates him from the lower-ranked French “capitaynes”: “[D]uring which season, the Constable of Fraunce saied openly to the capitaynes in effect as followeth [oration follows].”<sup>435</sup>

The final example of deviation of the annotations and *Famous Victories* from Hall can be seen in the annotation 3 from the table above. In that annotation, the Annotator suggests that in his order to the troops, King Henry invented “stakes which now I thinke be morres pykes.” Then, in *Famous Victories*, the author describes these stakes, as ordered by King Henry: “Then I wil, that every archer provide him a stake of A tree, and sharpe at both endes [emphasis added]” (*Famous Victories* 14.1174-1175). By contrast, however, Hall describes a stake bound with iron: “he [the King] caused stakesbound with yron sharpe at both endes.”<sup>436</sup> Admittedly, in this case, it is not clear what the Annotator had in mind with his mention of “morres pykes”: was it, as described in *Famous Victories* simply a “tree. . . sharpe at both endes”; or was it Hall’s “stakesbound with yron”?

Principal among the evidence supporting the connection between the annotations and *Famous Victories* is the sheer density of correlations between the two texts. Of Pitcher’s list of twenty-three annotations which correlate to *Famous Victories* or the later history plays, eleven are between the annotations and scenes 8-9 of the *Famous Victories*.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> See Bullough, IV.331, footnote 2.

<sup>435</sup> Hall, (<https://quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A02595>), xlvij.

<sup>436</sup> Hall, (<https://quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A02595>), xlvij.

<sup>437</sup> Pitcher, 232-42; the eleven correlations between the annotations and *Famous Victories* scene 8-9 are shown in II – IV, VI – XIII.

The dating of the *Famous Victories* is problematic: the play was acted by the Queen's company sometime between 1583 and 1588; it was entered on the Stationers' Register in 1594 and published in 1598.<sup>438</sup> However, as noted above, Ward proposed that *Famous Victories* was written around 1574, before the publication of the first edition of Holinshed's Chronicles in 1577 but after an incident reported in a letter to Lord Burghley in May 1573 involving the young Earl of Oxford (1562-1604).<sup>439</sup>

The annotations were found in a volume of Hall's Chronicle that seems to have belonged originally to a Shropshire man who died in 1570; presumably, the annotator received the volume sometime after the man's death. Given this assumption, Ward's dating of the play (after 1573 but before the publication of Holinshed's Chronicles in 1577) well fits the theory that the annotations plotted out the dramatic course of the original *Famous Victories*.

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<sup>438</sup> Bernard Ward, 273.

<sup>439</sup> Bernard Ward, 281, 285-86.

### ***19. Plowden's Succession Tract and the Source-Play 'The Troublesome Reign of King John'***

Three plays, *Troublesome Reign*, its successor play *King John*, and *Richard II*, focus – much like the 1561 play *Gorboduc* – on the succession issues of the Elizabethan era. Modern research by Mortimer Levine, Marie Axton, and Ernst Kantorowicz has shown Edmund Plowden to be a lead writer in the succession debate, beginning in the mid-1560s, with his legal arguments underpinning all three plays. Unanswered, however, is the question of when these plays were originally written. The succession debates in the mid-1560s cited the specific case of John and his French-supported cousin Arthur to argue the rights of Elizabeth and her Scottish cousin Mary Stuart. There is a question critical to dating the plays, though: were the plays intended to 'mirror' events of the early Elizabethan era or those of the later years with the 1587 execution of Mary Stuart and the 1588 victory over the Spanish Armada?

Even more so than *Famous Victories*, the *Troublesome Reign of King John*, first published in 1591,<sup>440</sup> is controversial on all aspects: its sources, its date, and its undoubted relationship to Shakespeare's *King John*, a play not published until 1623, over thirty years after *Troublesome Reign*.

As with the history plays of Shakespeare, the primary source of *Troublesome Reign* was long presumed to be Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577, 1587), until, as with the Shakespeare plays, deeper research was undertaken. In 1948, John Elson published his study on the sources of *Troublesome Reign*, writing:

*T.R.* derives, my findings indicate, not only from Holinshed as had previously been supposed, but also from a much older manuscript play of *Kyng Johan* by Bishop John Bale, from Polydore Vergil's Latin chronicle *Anglica Historia*, and

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<sup>440</sup> Citations to the *Troublesome Reign* are to Bullough's transcription, Bullough IV.72-151.

from John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, usually known as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.<sup>441</sup>

Bullough generally agrees, commenting "[O]bviously, the author of *The Raigne* went to some pains to consult several authorities . . ."<sup>442</sup>

Similar to Hall's Chronicle (c. 1548) upon which early Shakespeare histories are largely based (see Chapter 11), the sources of *Troublesome Reign* are of an early vintage: John Bale (1561), Polydore Vergil (1555), and John Foxe (1563).<sup>443</sup> To this list, Bullough also added the possibility of Matthew Paris's *Historia Majora* (1571).<sup>444</sup> As, in fact, Hall's Chronicle was unavailable to the writer because it did not cover the medieval monarchy of King John, it would seem that these sources would be those that would be alternatively available in the 1560s and early 1570s, before the first Holinshed edition of 1578.

Of these sources, two are Latin chronicles (Vergil and Paris), and one – Bale's *Kyng Johan* – exceedingly rare. Bale's play was available only in one known manuscript which was, according to Bullough, was revised by Bale in 1561, and held at Ipswich "probably so that Queen Elizabeth might see it," where it remained until the nineteenth century.<sup>445</sup> Notwithstanding the rarity of the Bale play, Elson found over 100 parallels between Bale and *Troublesome Reign*;<sup>446</sup> 10 parallels appear in John's poisoning scene alone, none of which are found in Holinshed (although some are found also in Foxe).<sup>447</sup> The actual usage of Holinshed in *Troublesome Reign* is unclear; however, it is definitely less than in the 1623 *King John*, which, according to work by Honigmann, follows Holinshed more closely than was done in *Troublesome Reign*.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> John Elson, "Studies in the King John Plays," *J.Q. Adams Memorial Studies* (The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948): 182, [archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.187842/2015.187842](http://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.187842/2015.187842).

<sup>442</sup> Bullough, IV.6.

<sup>443</sup> Bullough, IV.3, III.8, IV.3.

<sup>444</sup> Bullough, IV.6.

<sup>445</sup> Bullough, IV.3.

<sup>446</sup> Elson, 188.

<sup>447</sup> Elson, 192.

<sup>448</sup> See E.A.J. Honigmann, *King John, Arden Shakespeare* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1951, 1981), xi-xv; also Bullough, IV.22. In his review of the sources for *King John*,



Professor Lily B. Campbell, in her 1968 book on Shakespeare's "Histories," argued that *Troublesome Reign* (and ultimately, *King John*) focused on the Plantagenet times of King John to mirror the Tudor politics of the Elizabethan era, altering historic events to match the legal claims made in the late 1560s succession debates and those made in the aftermath of the 1569 Northern Rebellion and the 1570 papal excommunication of Elizabeth.<sup>449</sup> *King John* editor E.A.J. Honigmann cautiously agreed with Campbell, citing Shakespeare's "manipulation of facts" (following *Troublesome Reign* in *King John*) as bringing out the "similarities of the reigns of John and Elizabeth excitingly, almost dangerously."<sup>450</sup>

To support her view that the *Troublesome Reign* mirrored Tudor (not Plantagenet) politics, Campbell points out specific instances where the writer did not follow the historic chronicles, and suggests that the author deliberately altered the history, to better mirror the current political situation under Elizabeth.<sup>451</sup> Honigmann compares similar language in *King John*, and concludes, as did Campbell, that "Shakespeare seems to think of Tudor rather than Plantagenet history" when he altered his history.<sup>452</sup> Both Campbell and Honigmann mention two of the same instances: first, in *King John*, in a passage drawn from *Troublesome Reign*, where Elinor tells John that he holds the throne through "strong possession," not through right (Honigmann, *King John* 1.1.40);<sup>453</sup> and second, where it is mentioned that a will bars Arthur's succession (Honigmann, *King John* 2.1.192-194).<sup>454</sup> Honigmann, on the first point, notes: "While the legitimacy of Elizabeth's title to the succession was in hot debate, because the pope did not recognize it, John's 'usurpation' is Shakespeare's fiction."<sup>455</sup> On the second point, Campbell and Honigmann refer to Henry VIII's will which barred the right of Mary to the throne,

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Muir does not consider the sources for *Troublesome Reign*, only commenting that Shakespeare's "main sources" in *King John* were *Troublesome Reign* and Holinshed; Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 83.

<sup>449</sup> Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories* (Huntington Library, 1968), 136-39.

<sup>450</sup> Honigmann, xxiii-xxix.

<sup>451</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 144-147.

<sup>452</sup> Honigmann, xxvii.

<sup>453</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 145; Honigmann, xxvii.

<sup>454</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 145; Honigmann, xxvii; see *Troublesome Reign*, Part 1, scene 2, 519-520.

<sup>455</sup> Honigmann, xxvii.

something which they imply had no direct parallel in the will of King Richard to his sons.<sup>456</sup>

Clearly, both from the alteration of the historic facts, and from its inflamed Protestant rhetoric, *Troublesome Reign* can be seen as a deliberately ‘topical’ play of the Tudor era; the question remains, however, to what years of the Elizabethan period did its topicality apply?<sup>457</sup> Campbell herself and other commentators extended the period of its apparent ‘topicality’ from the succession debates of the 1560s to the 1580s through the 1587 execution of Mary and the 1588 Armada.

There is evidence, however, that the topicality only extended to the early period of the Northern Rebellion: Bullough argued that to remind the audience of Mary’s execution would have made the “the Queen a murderess.”<sup>458</sup> Further, he noted that there was little, if anything, in the play to portray the English victory against the Spanish Armada.<sup>459</sup> He discarded the notion that the play included the period of the Armada by pointing out how fleeting the supposed references were: if the author had the Armada in mind, “it is strange that not more was made of the destruction of Lewis’s supply vehicles [the only reference to naval action], which is dismissed in two brief references” [see Honigmann, *King John*, 5.3.9-13; in *Troublesome Reign*, Part 2, 957-963].<sup>460</sup>

Both issues underlying the argument for topicality – John’s supposed usurpation and King Henry’s will – were part of the aforementioned “hot debate” over succession to Elizabeth, started in the mid-1560s with competing legal tracts, including a central tract written by Edmund Plowden. In this debate, the argument was made that the case of Elizabeth and Mary was parallel to that of John and Arthur,<sup>461</sup> much the same as was

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<sup>456</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 146; Honigmann, xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>457</sup> Honigmann seemed to raise the question of the period of the ‘topicality’ when, after dismissing a possible reference to Mary’s execution, he returned to L.B. Campbell’s discovery of the connection between the plays and the tracts of the 1560s succession debate. Referring to this, he noted that the “question of topicality is not closed” especially if it were indicated that Shakespeare knew of the tracts and the debate; Honigmann, xxviii.

<sup>458</sup> Bullough, IV.1

<sup>459</sup> Bullough, IV.2.

<sup>460</sup> Bullough, IV.2.

<sup>461</sup> Levine, 102.

implied by the alteration of facts in *Troublesome Reign* and *King John*. Among the issues argued in these tracts was that John had come to the throne not by his English birth but by “might and usurpation,”<sup>462</sup> and further, that Henry VIII’s will barred succession of the Stuarts to the throne.<sup>463</sup>

In her study, while Campbell referred to the 1569 succession tract of Bishop John Leslie as the source for these arguments,<sup>464</sup> later research by Mortimer Levine and Marie Axton would show Edmund Plowden as lead writer in the debate, at an earlier date.<sup>465</sup> Levine and Axton has made it clear that there were various different tract writers, and Axton makes the case that Leslie’s arguments were based upon an earlier tract by Edmund Plowden in 1566.<sup>466</sup>

Given the early dates of the sources of *Troublesome Reign*, combined with the similarly early dates of the obvious ‘topical’ issues – the mid-1560s succession debates, the 1569 Northern Rebellion, the 1570 papal excommunication of Elizabeth – there seems no literary reason why the play could not have been written also at an earlier date (say, the late 1570s) when the inflamed tone of *Troublesome Reign* would have incurred no political backlash.

Concerning the relationship between the two plays, *Troublesome Reign* and *King John*, Tillyard wrote: “[T]he plays are very close in construction, but their intentions are quite different.” Regarding *Troublesome Reign* he said: “[it] is a Chronicle Play exploiting the frivolity and the treachery of the French and picturing John as a king more good than bad, the righteous champion of Protestantism, against papal tyranny yet not virtuous enough to be God’s agent of definitive reformation.” *King John*, though, “is but mildly Protestant in tone and shows no extreme hostility to the French.”<sup>467</sup>

Despite these differences in tone – and notwithstanding the “common opinion” that Shakespeare took his plot for *King John* from *Troublesome Reign* and “rewrote it in

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<sup>462</sup> Levine, 102.

<sup>463</sup> Levine, 147.

<sup>464</sup> L.B. Campbell, *Histories*, 142.

<sup>465</sup> Axton, 218-19.

<sup>466</sup> Axton, 218-219.

<sup>467</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 215.

his own language, with a different intention” – Tillyard suggests that Shakespeare may have been the author of both plays.<sup>468</sup> To make this point, he quotes W.J. Courthope, commenting on *Troublesome Reign* in his 1911 *History of English Poetry*:

In the energy and dignity of the State debates, the life of the incidents, the variety and contrast of the characters, and the power of conceiving the onward movement of a great historical action, there is a quality of dramatic workmanship exhibited in [*Troublesome Reign*] quite above the genius of Peele, Greene, or even Marlowe. . . . If we assume Shakespeare to have been the sole author of *The Troublesome Raigne*, we credit him with a drama doubtless crude, ill-constructed, full of obvious imitation, such as might be expected from a dramatist of small experience, but yet containing more of the elements of greatness than any historic play which had yet been produced on the English stage.<sup>469</sup>

By this, Tillyard nods to Courthope’s suggestion the *Troublesome Reign* was most likely the early effort of a dramatist who, while having only “small experience,” shows great “dramatic workmanship”: he was, in fact, the same writer who later wrote *King John*.

What if, as suggested by Courthope, *Troublesome Reign* was indeed the beginning efforts of a talented playwright, one who had a brother-in-law especially involved the ongoing succession debate of the 1560s? And what if that playwright was strongly nationalistic with great loyalty to his Queen but also a stalwart Catholic? That is, what if he were someone who, in writing his one of his first English history plays adopts a severely jingoistic Protestant tone for the purposes of a Protestant Tudor monarchy (or possibly, merely follows a royal suggestion to recreate Bishop Bale’s older play)? Or, as suggested by Alfred Hart (see Chapter 11), was the writer simply “trying to do the State some service”?

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<sup>468</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 216.

<sup>469</sup> Tillyard, *History Plays*, 216, quoting from W.J. Courthope, *A History of English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1911), IV.466.

## 20. Plowden's 'Kings Two Bodies' and Shakespeare's *Richard II*

If there were any doubt about the influence of Edmund Plowden on the writings of Shakespeare, it would be dispelled by reference to the overwhelming impact of Plowden's theory of the 'King's Two Bodies' on *Richard II*. While explicit parallels to the theory appear in other Shakespeare plays, such as *Henry V* and *Hamlet*, the theory underpins the entire drama of *Richard II*. Plowden first publicly expounded on his theory in his tract on the succession debates of 1560s, alluded to in the prior discussion of *Troublesome Reign*. But where *Troublesome Reign* used the legal arguments in the succession debate as a technical means of bringing topical political sense into a stage drama, *Richard II* is an extended reflection on the poetic meaning of the concept of the 'King's Two Bodies.' From the mid-1930s, Shakespeare editor J. Dover Wilson proposed that the two plays – *Troublesome Reign* and *Richard II* (or a predecessor play) – have so many "striking parallels" that they were written at the same time or by the same author;<sup>470</sup> the mutual use of Plowden's writings, particularly as connected with his succession tract, would seem to strongly support that thesis.

Ernst Kantorowicz, in his book *The King's Two Bodies*, opens his chapter on *Richard II* with a quote from Shakespeare's *Henry V* referring to kingship that begins with "[T]win-born with greatness, subject to the breath/ [O]f every fool" (*Henry V* 4.1.231-232);<sup>471</sup> a similar quote can be found in *Hamlet*: "[T]he body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" (*Hamlet* 4.2.26-27).<sup>472</sup> However, in *Richard II*, the use of the legal fiction (and legal jargon) of the "Kings's Two Bodies" – a theory of kingship prevalent in Elizabethan England – is most significant. As masterfully demonstrated by Ernst Kantorowicz, the legal concept was a synthesis of cases reported by Plowden, and it formed the very "substance and essence" of the tragedy of *Richard II*.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> *Richard II*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1939, reprinted 1971), x, footnote 2; see also *King John*, *The New Shakespeare*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1936; reprinted 1969), viii.

<sup>471</sup> Kantorowicz, 24.

<sup>472</sup> See Johnson, 430-34.

<sup>473</sup> Kantorowicz, 7-41; quote, 26.

Kantorowicz's work makes it clear that Plowden's writings on the "King's Two Bodies" are central to Shakespeare's *Richard II*. As quoted by Kantorowicz, the theory is summarized in one of Plowden's 1571 case reports:

"His Body natural . . . is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age . . . [B]ut his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government . . . and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities . . ."<sup>474</sup>

According to Kantorowicz, in *Richard II*, the "fiction of the oneness of the double body breaks apart," leaving the King's Two Bodies – the natural and the politic – "standing in contrast to each other."<sup>475</sup>

While Kantorowicz ties the theory solely to Plowden's case reports,<sup>476</sup> Marie Axton's work clarifies that Plowden first wrote of the theory in his earlier treatise on the English succession: his theory of the King's Two Bodies introduces his succession tract, written in 1566 as an unpublished, anonymous manuscript.<sup>477</sup> In October 1562, early in her reign, Elizabeth became ill with smallpox; when she convened Parliament in 1563, the most critical question for the members was succession: if their Queen should die without issue, how would her successor be determined?<sup>478</sup> If the Queen died childless, she was the last of Henry VIII's direct descendants; the most pressing alternative claims came from two great-granddaughters of Henry VII – Mary Stuart, granddaughter of Henry VII's eldest daughter Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scotland; and Catherine Grey, granddaughter of Henry VII's younger daughter Mary Tudor, Duchess of Suffolk.<sup>479</sup>

In 1563, Member of Parliament John Hales wrote a controversial tract on the subject of succession, arguing that the Suffolk claim was superior to the Stuart claim, and moreover, that Mary Stuart's claim was invalid, in part, because she was born in

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<sup>474</sup> Kantorowicz, 7: citing Plowden's Commentaries.

<sup>475</sup> Kantorowicz, 31.

<sup>476</sup> Kantorowicz, 7-23; Axton, 209.

<sup>477</sup> See Axton, 209, footnote 2.

<sup>478</sup> Levine, 45.

<sup>479</sup> Levine, 11.

Scotland.<sup>480</sup> In response, Plowden – using his theory of the King’s Two Bodies – refuted Hales’s argument that Mary Stuart was disqualified from succession because of her “alien” birth.<sup>481</sup> Plowden’s unpublished essay was very influential, and his arguments were reprised by others in the ongoing pamphlet debate, including by Bishop John Leslie in a book published in 1569.<sup>482</sup> The Parliament was dissolved in January 1567, without settling the succession,<sup>483</sup> a rebellion in 1569 by northern Lords supporting Mary’s claim failed, but showed the danger of the unresolved succession question.<sup>484</sup>

Although both *Troublesome Reign* and *Richard II* appear to have drawn on the legal arguments and theory of these early Elizabethan succession debates, their purpose in doing so seems quite different between the two plays. As discussed in the previous section, Campbell and Honigmann appear settled that *Troublesome Reign* (and *King John*) used the legal arguments of the succession debates to introduce some ‘topicality’ into the play(s). In *Troublesome Reign*, however, King John is not deposed; rather, as befits the anti-Catholic polemic that *Troublesome Reign* seems to have been, John is poisoned by a Catholic monk (see *Troublesome Reign*, Part 2, scene 8, 1091-94).<sup>485</sup> Instead, the ‘topicality’ of the play seems most obvious in the plot by the English lords to revenge Arthur by rebelling against John (see *Troublesome Reign* Part 2, scene 2, 142; Part 2, scene 3, 455-456).<sup>486</sup> To this, the Bastard has some angry words: if the lords should rebel against a “King annoyed by the Lord” then “please hell”

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<sup>480</sup> Levine, 63; Hales also argued that Catherine Grey’s claim was superior because Henry VIII’s will appointed the Suffolk line of his younger sister to follow his own children and their issue, 11; 63.

<sup>481</sup> Levine, 111.

<sup>482</sup> Axton, 211.

<sup>483</sup> Levine, 198.

<sup>484</sup> Levine, 203-4.

<sup>485</sup> Bullough, IV.148.

<sup>486</sup> Bullough, IV.123, 131. See Ruth C. Wallerstein, *King John in fact and fiction* (University of Pennsylvania PHD Diss., reprinted by the University of California Libraries), according to Wallerstein’s narrative, the idea that the barons revolted because of the death of Arthur seems unique to Bale’s play *King Johan*, as other histories show other motives: compare p. 41 with “exactions” by John (39); John was seen as an “oppressor” of his people (25); the barons were “filled with disgust to see their French lands going” (32).

Make havock of the welfare of your soules,  
For heere I leave you in the sight of heaven,  
A troupe of traytors, foode for hellish feends;  
If you desist, then follow me as friends,  
If not, then doo your worst as hatefull traytors. (Part 2, 3.475-480)<sup>487</sup>

In *King John*, Bastard is even more adamant: rebel lords are “degenerate, ingrate revolts,” who are “ripping up the womb” of “your dear Mother England” (*King John* 5.2.152-154). Under the suggestion of ‘topicality’ then, this would seem the writer’s answer to the 1569 Northern Rebellion by the Catholic Lords in support of Mary’s claim.

In *Richard II*, on the other hand, Richard is wrongfully deposed, a direct violation of the central principle of the ‘King’s Two Bodies’ whereby an attack against the anointed king is an unlawful attack against the “body corporate of the realm.”<sup>488</sup> Kantorowicz outlines the royal fate of Richard, as shown in the “bewildering central scenes” of the play wherein Richard is “cascading: from divine kingship to kingship’s ‘Name,’ and from the name to the naked misery of man.”<sup>489</sup> As argued by Kantorowicz, this play is an extended contemplation on the legal role of the English monarch.

Notwithstanding the philosophical differences of the two plays, the use of the same esoteric legal material would seem to bind them together. J. Dover Wilson, in his 1939 edition of *Richard II*, found the plays *King John* and *Richard II* “so closely allied both in general atmosphere and in detail, that it is difficult not to believe that they were composed at the same period.” Further, he notes that the “striking parallels between *Richard II* and *The Troublesome Reign* may be explained as due either to proximity of the dates of *Richard II* and *King John* or to *The Troublesome Reign* and the play used by Shakespeare for his *Richard II* being written by the same author.”<sup>490</sup>

The other similarity unremarked upon by Dover Wilson, but evident in his study on *Richard II* and in the later studies on *Troublesome Reign*, is the wide variety of very

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<sup>487</sup> Bullough, IV.132.

<sup>488</sup> Kantorowicz, 15.

<sup>489</sup> Kantorowicz, 27.

<sup>490</sup> J. Dover Wilson, *Richard II*, ix-x.



early sources used in both plays. Whereas *Troublesome Reign* used two early Latin chronicles (see prior discussion, Chapter 19), the writer of *Richard II* appears to have used three medieval French manuscripts: *Le Chronicque de la Traison* (c. 1399); Le Beau's *Chronicque de Richard II depuis l'an 1399*; and Creton's *Histoire*.<sup>491</sup> Acknowledging that the "traditional notion of Shakespeare's dependence on Holinshed seems to be evaporating," Wilson raises the fundamental question: "Was Shakespeare a profound historical scholar or merely the reviser of such a scholar's play?"<sup>492</sup> Wilson postulated a lost play of *Richard II*, contemporaneous with *Troublesome Reign*.<sup>493</sup> To which Muir responded, in 1978, that the "strongest argument against Dover Wilson's theory is that it presupposes an unknown dramatist – the author, too, of *The Troublesome Raigne* – who possessed the erudition denied to Shakespeare."<sup>494</sup>

Like the dating of *Troublesome Reign*, the dating of the original production of *Richard II* is highly problematic. While the standard edition of the play was published in 1597, Bullough has suggested the play was written in 1595.<sup>495</sup> However, the play was included in Francis Meres's 1598 list of Shakespeare's "most excellent" plays, suggesting an earlier date. Moreover, the Lord Chamberlain's Players performed *Richard II* sometime before the Essex rebellion in 1601; when asked about the performance in legal testimony, Augustine Philips, a member of the company, told the tribunal that the players proposed an alternative play because the actors believed the "play of Kyng Rychard to be so old & so long out of use as that they shold have small or no company at y<sup>r</sup>."<sup>496</sup> As with *Troublesome Reign*, there would seem no evidence from the play itself that would not allow an original performance sometime in the late 1570s, and therefore – as proposed by J. Dover Wilson – a date contemporaneous with the original *Troublesome Reign*. This would seem consistent with a reasonable interpretation of Augustine Philips's presumably sworn testimony.

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<sup>491</sup> J. Dover Wilson, xlv-xlvii.

<sup>492</sup> J. Dover Wilson, lxxiv-lxxv.

<sup>493</sup> J. Dover Wilson, lxxv.

<sup>494</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 47.

<sup>495</sup> Bullough, III.353.

<sup>496</sup> The UK National Archives, doi.org/10.37078/341.

## 21. Plowden, Belleforest, and the Dating of 'Hamlet'

As with *Troublesome Reign*, *King John*, and *Richard II*, the seemingly irrefutable evidence of the scholarly sources of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – particularly the 1570s legal case reports of Edmund Plowden and the 1576 edition of the French language *Histoires Tragiques* by Francois de Belleforest – is challenging to fit with the conventional biography of Shakspeare. After centuries of puzzlement, legal scholars agree that the holding of *Hales v. Petit* (*Hales*, 1561), reported by Plowden in 1571, is embedded in the arguments of the gravediggers in the play; another Plowden case, *The Queen v. Saunders & Nichols* (*Saunders*, 1572) has been seen as the inspiration for the intricate denouement murder scene in the last act. Also, there is consensus that Belleforest's French novella (1576) – with no known English translations until 1608 – was the source of the central *Hamlet* tale.

These circumstances would suggest, like those of *Troublesome Reign* and *Richard II*, that the play could have been written and performed in the 1570s, when the sources were current. And, in fact, in this case, there are contemporary reports (accepted by modern observers) that the play was performed well before its publication in 1602; however, in response, modern scholars have proposed a so-called 'Ur-Hamlet,' a lost play whose author developed the early and foreign sources, working out the *Hamlet* plot, to be later co-opted by the playwright Shakespeare. While the early esoteric sources (and the contemporary reports of early performance of the play) may be difficult to square with the traditional man from Stratford, they are, on the other hand, entirely consistent with the known history of Ralph Sheldon and his brother-in-law Plowden.

In addition to the clear reference to Plowden's 'King's Two Bodies' discussed in the prior section, the play's dialogue and plot also incorporate the holdings of two cases reported by Plowden – both in Norman French – in the 1570s. Modern legal scholars concur that the arguments of the gravediggers over the reason for Ophelia's death in *Hamlet* (*Hamlet* 5.1.1-25), are a restatement of the legal holding in an obscure

Elizabethan lawsuit, *Hales v. Petit*.<sup>497</sup> The connection between the gravediggers's scene and *Hales* was first recognized in the late eighteenth century;<sup>498</sup> the central question is whether Ophelia's death by drowning was a suicide or an accidental death. In *Hales*, the court determined that because the decedent (Sir John Hales) had thrown himself into the water, his death was a suicide. In *Hamlet*, however, Shakespeare takes the holding of the case to a further hypothetical, using the circumstances of Ophelia's death: while Hales jumped into the water and died, in Ophelia's case, she jumped into the water but then sunk under the water because of the weight of the flowers. The gravedigger specifically argues the facts of Ophelia's case: "[B]ut if the water comes to him and drown him, he drowns not himself" (*Hamlet* 5.1.18-19); therefore, Ophelia's death (where the water 'came to her') was, under the law, an accident, allowing her to be given a Christian burial. That Shakespeare intended the legalistic manipulation of the original holding is clear from the cynical remark of the second gravedigger: "[I]f this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial" (*Hamlet* 5.1.21-23). In 1957, Middle Temple scholar Richard O'Sullivan summed up Shakespeare's sophisticated view of the case: "[somehow Shakespeare] came to know the ultra-metaphysical arguments that were made by Counsel in the case, and made fun of them in the gravedigger scene. . ."<sup>499</sup>

The second case, *The Queen v. Saunders & Nichols*, was tried in Warwick in 1572 at the Assizes court, with a holding suggestive of *Hamlet*. As described by legal scholar O. Hood Philips, the case held that "if A persuades B to poison C, and then B gives the poison to C, who eats part of it and gives the rest to D who is killed by it, A is not accessory to the murder of D."<sup>500</sup> This parallels the end plot of *Hamlet*: in Act 4.7 the King (A) persuades Laertes (B) to murder Hamlet (C); then in the duel in Act 5.2, both a

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<sup>497</sup> See, for example, O. Hood Philips, *Shakespeare and the Lawyers* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1972), 76-79; George W. Keeton, *Shakespeare's Legal and Political Background* (London: Pitman, 1967), 185-190; the case is reported 1 Plowden 253.

<sup>498</sup> Philips, 78.

<sup>499</sup> O'Sullivan, 50.

<sup>500</sup> Philips, 79; the case is reported in 2 Plowden 473. Philips is reporting on correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 July 1950, p. 453.

poisoned sword and poisoned chalice are inadvertently switched, leading to the death of Laertes (B) and the Queen (D).

Bullough is emphatic that the original play – that is the *Ur-Hamlet* – and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* were both based on Belleforest’s French tale, rather than a history by the Dane Saxo Grammaticus written in 1514; Bullough writes: “Undoubtedly the original play of *Hamlet* was based on the French novella, and I see no proof that either Shakespeare or his predecessor [the unknown author of *Ur-Hamlet*] used Saxe Grammaticus at all.”<sup>501</sup> The tale of ‘Amleth’ comes from the fifth volume of *Histoires Tragiques*, a volume that was issued in at least ten editions, with the first in 1570. Bullough follows A.P. Stabler, a noted *Hamlet* historian: “[Stabler] points out that the 1576 edition [of Belleforest’s fifth volume] is occasionally more like Shakespeare than the 1582 text.”<sup>502</sup> There was no known English translation of the *Hamlet* story until 1608, after the first publication of the Shakespeare play, so the author of the tale would have translated the story from the original French.<sup>503</sup>

That there were performances of the play on the English stage before 1589 is well-accepted. In that year, Thomas Nashe gave an address to the “Gentlemen Students of Both Universities” wherein he warned students against bad writers who “will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of Tragicall speeches.”<sup>504</sup> From this, there was created the notion of the ‘*Ur-Hamlet*’; Bullough believed that Thomas Kyd, the author of *The Spanish Tragedy* (unknown date, thought to be between 1582 and 1592), may have written the *Ur-Hamlet* because of the parallels between Kyd’s play and *Hamlet*. Of course, the possibility that an earlier Shakespeare play was imitated by Kyd was not considered.<sup>505</sup> From this, Muir concluded: “[W]e have, of course, to remember that the

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<sup>501</sup> Bullough, VII.15.

<sup>502</sup> Bullough, VII.11, citing A.P. Stabler, *The Histoires Tragiques de Francois de Belleforest*, University of Virginia Ph.D. dissertation 1959 (Lib. Cong. Mic. 59-4246); ‘The Sources of Hamlet: Some Corrections of the Record,’ *Research Studies*, xxxiii. 1964; “Melancholy, Ambition and Revenge in Belleforest’s Hamlet,” PMLA, lxxxi (1966): 207-216.

<sup>503</sup> See Bullough, VII.11; the first known English translation of the French novella was *The Hystorie of Hamblet* (1608), by an anonymous author.

<sup>504</sup> Bullough, VII.15.

<sup>505</sup> Bullough, VII.16-17.

main source of *Hamlet* was the lost play, and echoes of books published before 1589 may have been present before Shakespeare took a hand.”<sup>506</sup>

At the same time that Plowden was reporting the *Saunders* case – a case considered in Warwick in 1572 – he would also have been working with his brother-in-law to close the estate of Sheldon’s father. Warwick is near to Sheldon’s home in Beoley, Worcestershire. And an early incident around the same time also near Sheldon’s home suggests another immediate connection with *Hamlet*. According to a 1569 coroner’s report, a young girl named Jane Shaxpere drowned while picking “yellow boddles” or marigolds; she died in Upton Warren on the river Salwarpe, in Worcestershire, about 16 miles from Sheldon’s home in Beoley.<sup>507</sup> The similarity between Orphelia’s drowning death and that of Jane Shaxpere is striking. Again, as discussed in the prior chapters on *Troublesome Reign* and *Richard II*, between the 1570s sources, and the recognition of some early versions of the play, there is no reason to rule out the logical possibility of an early version of *Hamlet* performed perhaps on the new public stage in the late 1570s, a play written by same author who later edited his play before publication in 1602.

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<sup>506</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 170.

<sup>507</sup> *The Guardian*, 8 June 2011.

## 22. England's First Belleforest Translators: Shakespeare & R.S.

Before 1608, there were two published translators of Belleforest's French novellas: the writer Shakespeare and R.S. Shakespeare based his plays *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* on two Belleforest novellas. In 1577, R.S. published translations of four other Belleforest novellas, suggested to be "orphan" texts in the introduction to the book. Between them, Shakespeare and R.S. translated six novellas from four separate volumes of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, with R.S.'s stories from volumes 1 & 2, and Shakespeare's stories from volume's 3 & 5; editions of all these volumes would have been published before 1577.

The identity of R.S. seems heavily obfuscated, in much the same pattern as appears to have been done in a later work by R.S. published in 1593: whereas in the later book 'R.S.' is a 'gentleman of the Inner Temple' but one who was never admitted to the rolls of the Inner Temple (see Chapters 6 and 32), in the earlier book the introduction claims that the translation "would have bene better poolyshed. . .[if God had] lent to the Autour longer lyfe," insinuating (but pointedly not declaring) R.S.'s death. The identity of the writer of the introductory text, 'T.N.' also seems deliberately obscured, with two prefaces, each by someone identified as 'T.N.': the writer of the second preface, however, appears to have been Thomas North, the noted translator of *Plutarch's Lives* (1579), writing at the same time he was living with George North, the author of *Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels* (1576), a rare manuscript subsequently tied to at least 11 Shakespeare plays. Notwithstanding R.S.'s suggested expiration, it is argued that the two Belleforest translators were one and the same person, Ralph Sheldon, writing in the 1570s as a Court dramatist under deep cover.

As discussed previously, the source of the *Hamlet* tale has been definitively linked to a novella published in the 1576 edition of the fifth volume of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (see Chapter 21); regarding the source of *Much Ado*, the research is slightly less conclusive. According to C.T. Prouty, Shakespeare may have used Belleforest's translation of Matteo Bandello, or he may have used the original Italian

novella by Bandello.<sup>508</sup> Bullough concludes that Shakespeare was “certainly acquainted” with both;<sup>509</sup> but he also notes that “Shakespeare appears to have known Belleforest’s version of Bandello’s story of Timbreo and Fenicia [the *Much Ado* predecessor] when he wrote *Much Ado*.”<sup>510</sup> In their work, both Prouty and Bullough cite early editions of the third volume of Belleforest, with Prouty citing the 1574 edition,<sup>511</sup> while Bullough cites the 1569 edition.<sup>512</sup>

The early dates of the Belleforest editions used by the writer Shakespeare accord with proposed dates of the possible first stage performances of the two plays: *Much Ado*, in December 1574;<sup>513</sup> *Hamlet*, as early as 1577.<sup>514</sup> As there were no published English translations of either Belleforest edition,<sup>515</sup> the writer Shakespeare either procured a translation or translated the two stories himself.

As noted in earlier sections, there is no known publication under the name of “Ralph Sheldon” in the EEBO records; there are, however, publications by author(s) with the initials R.S. (see Chapter 6), including a book published in 1577 entitled *Straunge, lamentable, and tragicall hystories translated out of French into Englishe by R.S.*<sup>516</sup> The book is an English translation of four stories from Francois de Belleforest’s first two

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<sup>508</sup> Prouty, *The Sources of ‘Much Ado About Nothing,’* (Yale University Press, 1950), 1.  
<sup>509</sup> Bullough, II.67.

<sup>510</sup> Bullough, VII.10-11. For the influences of Belleforest, see also Prouty, 30-1.

<sup>511</sup> Prouty, *Much Ado*, 31; see Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 113.

<sup>512</sup> Bullough, II.65.

<sup>513</sup> Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. F.S. Boas (Oxford: Clarendon, 1916), xiii, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012193008>, (Hathitrust #17). Boas ties the translated story of “Fenicia” to a play listed as “Panecia,” performed at Court by Leicester’s Men on New Year’s Day 1574/5 before the Queen.

<sup>514</sup> See John Casson, “The Annotated *Amleth*: Belleforest in the British Library,” *Electronic British Library Journal* (2016): 1; <https://www.bl.uk/ebli/2016articles/pdf/ebliarticle72016.pdf>.

<sup>515</sup> Bullough refers to a translation of the Hamlet story in anonymous *The Historie of Hamblet* (London, 1608) but notes that it was based on the 1582 edition of the Belleforest story, an edition which contained “many textual alterations” from the 1576 edition used by the writer Shakespeare. See Bullough, VII.11. In his book on *Much Ado*, Prouty uses his own translation of the Belleforest story; see Prouty, 31, footnote 29.

<sup>516</sup> R.S., *Straunge, lamentable, and tragicall hystories* (London: Hugh Jackson, 1577) <https://quod.lib.mich.edu/e/eebo/A03434>.

volumes of *Histoires Tragiques*, all of which are stories originally written by the Italian Matteo Bandello.

While the aforementioned Belleforest stories used for the Shakespeare plays came from Belleforest's Volumes 3 and 5 (*Le Troisieme Tome* and *Le Cinquiesme Livre*), the four stories translated by R.S. are found in Belleforest, Volumes 1 and 2 (*Tomes I & II*). From Volume 2 (*Tome II*), the first story translated (John Maria, Duke of Milan) corresponds with story XI in the volume. The last three stories are translated from Volume 1 (*Tome I*): the second story (an amorous old man and his concubine) translates story IX of *Tome I*, the third story (the revenging Muslim slave) is story XI, and the fourth story (the Marques of Ferraria) is story V.<sup>517</sup> Thus, if combined with the editions from which the two Shakespeare plays were derived, all the translations discussed herein come from the first, second, third and fifth volumes of Belleforest, each available before 1577.

The book by R.S. is introduced by two separate essays, each by someone signed 'T.N.' According to a 2007 article by Dennis McCarthy in *Notes & Queries*, the two essays are written by two different writers, each with initials 'T.N.'<sup>518</sup> The first essay McCarthy attributes to the translator Thomas Newton, who wrote – as is indicated in the work – from his home in Butley, England. The second essay, though, McCarthy ascribes to Thomas North, the translator of *Plutarch's Lives* from its French translation by writer Jacques Amyot. McCarthy reached his conclusion from an analysis of the language and phrases in the second preface; he shows the connection between the language in the preface and North's translation of Amyot's introduction to *Plutarch's Lives*, a work not published until 1579, two years after the publication of the translation by R.S. As noted by McCarthy, these two essays by two 'T.N.' has led to the "understandable belief" that Newton [the first 'T.N.'] wrote both essays. But if McCarthy's thesis is correct, such confusion (between the identities of the two 'T.N.s) would be not only understandable

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<sup>517</sup> Rene Sturel, *Bandello en France au XVIe siècle* (Bordeaux: Feret, 1918), 56-7, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010883755>.

<sup>518</sup> McCarthy, "Thomas North," 244-48.



but also to be expected; why then did the writer(s) create such seemingly deliberate confusion?

Moreover, T.N. seems intent on creating further obfuscation by apparently alluding to the author's absence and apparent untimely death, using hints that seem ambiguous, at best. In the preface, the second 'T.N.' announces that he intends, with this publication, to "enrole the wryter [R.S.] in the group of "well meaning wryters." He [T.N., "the penner hereof"] does this to bring the "matter to better passe" by "enterlacing pleasure with profyte"; to this he adds:

[A]nd for that it is none of the least part of mercy, to father the Fatherlesse, and protect the pore Orphane, from the greedy jawes of ravenous rakers, I have here restored him to his due, and set forth hys travayle even as he left it . . . for I accoumpt it no good dealing, than any man should thrust his lyeth into an others Harvest, or lyke Esopes Crow to usurpe and jette abroade, deckt with the Feathers of other bewtifuller Byrds . . .

So, T.N. having written in an almost comic vein about the "Fatherlesse" and "Orphane" translation, apparently abandoned by its author, he goes on to suggest the translation "would have bene better poolyshed" if God had "lent to the Authour longer lyfe." However, T.N.'s arch tone hardly holds sadness for someone's premature demise. Rather, it seems to suggest an equally arch intention: perhaps it is meant to be read that the harried Author did not wish to publish on his own because he had too many other things to do, and too little time (God has not lent him enough time) in which to do them all.

On the Register of the Stationers' Company, the work is listed to 'R. Smythe,' a name that has (for obvious reasons) been conflated with R.S.<sup>519</sup> But as registry in the Stationers' Register does not necessarily show authorship, is R.S. actually 'R. Smythe'?

If the text of the book has deliberately (as it seems) obfuscated the identities of both the author R.S. and the preface writer T.N., it appears unlikely that the actual identity of the author would be included forthrightly in the Stationers' Register. Rather, it would seem more likely that the name 'R. Smythe' was included to deepen the ruse, not

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<sup>519</sup> McCarthy, "Thomas North," 244.

simply eliminate the confusion. The name ‘Smythe,’ after all is a most common English surname, and as shown in the Index of Names in the 1541 Subsidy Roll of London, the most common surname in London in 1541 after the alternatively spelled ‘*Smith*.’<sup>520</sup> However, as it happens, ‘R. Smythe’ – Robert Smythe – is also the name of a lawyer with whom Ralph Sheldon shared Middle Temple chambers during (at least) 1559-60.<sup>521</sup>

A similar sense of obfuscation and ambiguity as to the author’s identity seems shared in another book by writer R.S. *The Phoenix Nest* (1593). The book (see Chapter 32) is an elegant volume of poetry, with tributes to both the Earl of Leicester and his nephew Philip Sidney. The volume is introduced as being “set forth by R.S. of the Inner Temple Gentleman.” In his modern edition of the book, Hyder Edward Rollins details an extensive search for a possible candidate for the editor R.S. from the Inner Temple admission list, with no success. As the audience for this book of very select poetry would surely include members of the Inner Temple, a deliberate falsehood would be certainly transgressive. So, like that of the 1577 book by R.S., there must be an element of ambiguity in the turn of the phrase as stated in the book. For example, the author might have been known to be a member of the Middle Temple – thus sharing premises with the Inner Temple – but one who was also known to be regularly confused as a member of the Inner Temple by someone such as Leicester, who had rooms at the Temple and who actively patronized the Inner Temple.

Thomas North has substantial connection with the writer Shakespeare. North’s 1579 translation of *Plutarch’s Lives* (from Jacques Amyot’s French version) is considered the main source of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*,<sup>522</sup> as well as a major source of *Timon of Athens*.<sup>523</sup>

However, in addition to this direct connection, North also had other important links to the writer. First, he was the younger brother of Roger North, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron North

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<sup>520</sup> See Sara L. Uckelman, *The Index of Names in the 1541 Subsidy Roll of London* ([www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/names/english/engsurlondon1541.html](http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/names/english/engsurlondon1541.html)).

<sup>521</sup> See *Middle Temple Records Admission*, 122, 128; name index, 134.

<sup>522</sup> See Bullough, V.13.

<sup>523</sup> Bullough, VI.235-39.

(1530-1600), who was a longtime friend and supporter of the Earl of Leicester.<sup>524</sup> Further, in 1576, around the time North would have been organizing the publication of R.S.'s translation, North was living at Roger North's manor Kirtling Hall in Cambridgeshire.

Residing at Kirtling Hall at the same time was English diplomat and scholar, George North, then writing an unpublished manuscript, *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels*.<sup>525</sup> In 1576, George North dedicated this manuscript to Lord North, making note of Thomas North as an excellent writer.<sup>526</sup> This manuscript, with no known copies, was found recently at the British Library – identified with Wroxton Abbey, Oxfordshire where the North family had their estate beginning in 1762.<sup>527</sup> Since its rediscovery, language from this manuscript has been tied to at least eleven Shakespeare plays.<sup>528</sup>

It would seem possible, therefore, that R.S. or Ralph Sheldon, the writer Shakespeare, being fully occupied with his work on the later volumes of Belleforest in producing the new plays, simply had not the time to use his translations from the earlier Belleforest volumes. Rather than abandon his efforts altogether, however, he allowed Thomas North (another translator-writer) to publish them, but with very ambiguous attribution. As with all the writer's efforts, these stay shrouded through apparently deliberate obfuscation.

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<sup>524</sup> Dictionary of National Biography 1885-1900, ed. Sydney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co.; [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary\\_of\\_National\\_Biography](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography), 1885-1900/North, Roger\_ (1530-1600).

<sup>525</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter, 8.

<sup>526</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter, 8, see manuscript fol. 0, fol. 1v.

<sup>527</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter, 10.

<sup>528</sup> Folger Library *Shakespeare Unlimited: Episode 93*, "Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter on the George North Manuscript" (<https://folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/george-north-manuscript>). The Folger examines McCarthy and Schlueter's claims regarding North's manuscript as a source of "*Richard III*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI, Part II*, and at least eight other plays."

### 23. ‘The Historie of Error’: the First ‘Comedy of Errors’

The *Comedy of Errors* is an odd play: it is the only Shakespeare play based on classical Latin drama<sup>529</sup> and it is the shortest Shakespeare play.<sup>530</sup> It is an English version of the Latin play by Plautus, *Menaechmi*; because of its old-fashioned rhymes, scholars believe that it could have been a revised version of an early lost play *The Historie of Error* performed at Court on New Year’s Day 1577 by the Children of Paul’s. As it happens, *Historie* was performed on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Children of Paul’s first Court performance – a Latin version of Plautus’s *Menaechmi* – suggesting strongly that it was, as well, an English version of the same Plautus play.

Court records show that the “Children of Powles” performed “The historie of Error” on 1 January 1577 at Hampton Court.<sup>531</sup> This date was 50 years – almost to the day – when an unknown group recited the Latin play Plautus’s *Menaechmi* at Court on 3 January 1527. While it is unclear in modern records whether this group was the Children of St. Paul’s (the diplomatic records which recorded the performance referred to ‘gentlemen’ rather than ‘boys’), Chambers wrote that this was “probably” performed by the Children of St. Paul’s.<sup>532</sup> But whether or not this actual performance was by Paul’s on this particular day, the year 1527 was definitely the first year that the group performed for the Court, making the year 1577 definitely the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul’s first performance in 1527 at the Court.<sup>533</sup> What play could be more appropriate to commemorate this anniversary than the English version of the same Plautus play as performed in 1527?

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<sup>529</sup> See Sidney Thomas, “The Date of the Comedy of Errors,” *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, 7, no. 4 (1956): 381, [jstor.org/stable/2866357](http://jstor.org/stable/2866357): according to Thomas, “[I]n no other play does Shakespeare so closely and deliberately imitate a Latin drama.”

<sup>530</sup> Thomas, 380.

<sup>531</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.93, 151.

<sup>532</sup> Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, 2v. (Oxford University Press, 1903) II.196, [archive.org/details/medievalstagevo030639](http://archive.org/details/medievalstagevo030639).

<sup>533</sup> Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, II.196.

Scholars have long been puzzled by the circumstances of the Shakespeare play, particularly about when it was first written. Its known performances are scarce: there are two known dates of performances: one at Gray's Inn in December 1594, and the second at Court for Christmas, 1604.<sup>534</sup> Scholars have debated, however, when it was first written; some scholars have concluded – based on inference from one bit of dialogue – that the play was written earlier than its performance at Gray's Inn, sometime between 1589 and 1593.<sup>535</sup> But because of other points in the dialogue, particularly the “doggerel couplets” in Act III.1, other scholars suspect that the play was a revised version of an earlier “pre-Shakespearean” English play, possibly the lost 1577 play, *Historie of Error*.<sup>536</sup>

These scholarly debates overlook – most likely because of the birthdate of the conventional Shakespeare writer – the remarkable convergence between the subject matter of *Comedy of Errors* and the known date of the performance of *Historie of Error* at Hampton Court by the Children of Paul's on 1 January 1577: this was 50 years of the first performance by the Children of Paul's at court when, on 3 January 1527, they apparently performed the Latin play *Menaechmi*. The date for the original court performance of the *Menaechmi* comes from the record written by a Venetian diplomat on the occasion of a “sumptuous supper” given by Cardinal Wolsey on 3 January 1527, at which “the Cardinal's gentlemen recited Plautus' Latin comedy entitled the *Menaechmi*” before King Henry VIII.<sup>537</sup> Because the company of actors is unnamed, and are referred to as the Cardinal's “gentlemen” there has been question in modern times as to the

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<sup>534</sup> Thomas, 377.

<sup>535</sup> Thomas, 377; Thomas summarizes the debate over the date but disagrees with its conclusion: he believes the play was constructed specifically for one private performance (Gray's Inn) and revised at a later date.

<sup>536</sup> Allison Gaw, “The Evolution of the Comedy of Errors,” *PMLA*, 41 no. 3 (Sept. 1926): 632-35, [jstor.org/stable/457620](https://www.jstor.org/stable/457620). Bullough refers to this theory but he believed, with E.K. Chambers, that it was more probable that the archaic dialogue was a deliberate script innovation, see Bullough I.3; this author suggests that these two theories are not necessarily inconsistent (that is, the original dialogue, even if originally written for the 1577 play, could have been deliberately archaic).

<sup>537</sup> *Calendar of State Papers (Venetian)*, vol. 4 (1527-33), ed. Rawdon Brown (London: Longman & Co., 1871) 2 (No. 4, 4 Jan. 1527), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008885759> (Hathitrust #46).

identity of the players.<sup>538</sup> But, as Chambers reports, it was in the year 1527 when the Children of Paul's first performed at court, and while they definitely performed an "anti-Lutheran" play before Henry VIII later that year, they "probably also [performed] the *Menaechmi* before Wolsey."<sup>539</sup>

In the article, "The Evolution of the *Comedy of Errors*" (1926), Allison Gaw provides further support for the convergence between *Comedy* and *Historie*: he finds that the aforementioned "doggerel couplets" in Act III.1 of the *Comedy* most likely identify the *Comedy* with the *Historie*.<sup>540</sup> According to Gaw, both the novelty of the classical Latin plots (actually combining material from a second Plautus play, *Amphitruo*, with the *Menaechmi*) and the use of tetrameter couplets fit both the known tastes of the Queen and the fashions at the time of *Historie*.<sup>541</sup>

So, who wrote the first play *Historie*? Gaw cannot explain exactly who might have written the *Historie*; he points out that neither the then-high master of St. Paul's (John Cook) nor its choirmaster (Sebastian Westcott) were known to be dramatists.<sup>542</sup> The fact that the very similarly named play *Comedy of Errors* is the most recognized English vernacular version of *Menaechmi* seems too close to be coincidental. And, like *Romeo & Juliet*, the only English claimant to a play with the story of *The Comedy of Errors* is the writer Shakespeare.

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<sup>538</sup> See, for example, Wallace, 88-9 (Hathitrust #118-19).

<sup>539</sup> Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, II.196; [archives.org/details/mediaevalstagevo030639](https://archives.org/details/mediaevalstagevo030639).

<sup>540</sup> See Alfred Harbage, 115, 132. In reviewing the possibly early origins of *Love's Labor's Lost*, Harbage notes that *Comedy of Errors*, as well as *Love's Labor's Lost*, "contain[s] 'built-in' evidence of a date before 1590"; in making this comment, Harbage is referring to the doggerel verse in both *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Comedy of Errors*. He cites the work of Allison Gaw.

<sup>541</sup> Gaw, 635.

<sup>542</sup> Gaw, 635-36.

## 24. *Westcott's Arrest and the Puritan Attacks on the Stage*

Although Westcott had long been protected from the Puritan complaints by the loyalty of the Queen to her favorite musician (and the advocacy of Leicester – see Chapter 14), the sheer popularity of the plays performed in his playhouse seemed have caused a reaction to his ‘papism,’ focusing attention on the stubbornly ‘heretical’ beliefs of Westcott. By the Puritan protest against the operation of Westcott’s playhouse in December 1575, Westcott himself stood accused of being a Choir Master who was corrupting his young charges at Paul’s with papism. While it is unclear what happened to Westcott’s playhouse in the aftermath of the protest, by the end of 1576, Richard Farrant (a musician who had taken over the duties of the Master of the Chapel Royal, a position also held by William Hunnis – see Chapter 15) had obtained a lease on the old Blackfriars Monastery as a stage for the Children of the Chapel.<sup>543</sup>

While the protest against Westcott’s playhouse at the end of 1575 appears to have come to naught,<sup>544</sup> and the child actors continued on a public stage with their plays, Westcott himself was eventually convicted of heresy by the Privy Council at Hampton Court on 20 December 1577.<sup>545</sup> Westcott was imprisoned at Marshalsea on 31 December, and remained there until 19 March 1578; his imprisonment, however, had been delayed a week because he presented a play to the Queen on 29 December.<sup>546</sup>

The first two playhouses built solely for stage performances – the Theatre and the Curtain – were both opened in the fields north of London by the end of 1577.<sup>547</sup> At nearly the same time that Westcott was arrested, and roughly coincident with the initial

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<sup>543</sup> Wallace, 132.

<sup>544</sup> Lennam, 44.

<sup>545</sup> Lennam, 53; Rosenberg, 302.

<sup>546</sup> Lennam, 53.

<sup>547</sup> For the significance of the moment, see William Ringler, “The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 5, no. 4 (1942): 412-14, [www.jstor.org/stable/3815757](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815757); also Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, I.284-85.

year of operation of these first public English playhouses, two ministers – Thomas White and John Northbrooke – shot the opening volleys in what became a protracted attack on the English stage: White in a November 1577 sermon at Paul’s Cross;<sup>548</sup> Northbrooke in a pamphlet registered for publication in December 1577, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes*.<sup>549</sup> In his sermon, White railed against “the sumptuous Theatre housee, a continuall monument of Londons prodigalitie and folly . . . . scholes of vice, dennes of Theeves, & Theatres of all lewdnesse.”<sup>550</sup> Northbrooke used a dialogue between “Youth” and “Age” to similar effect: Youth: Doe you speake against those places [such as] the Theatre and Curtaine . . . ? Age: Yea, truly; for I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedie way, and fitter schoole to work . . . than those places . . . [they should be] forbidden, and dissolved, and put down by authorities, as the brothell houses and stewes are . . . .”<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Thomas White, *A sermon preached at Pawles Crosse on Sunday the thirde of November 1577* (London, 1578) <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15108>.

<sup>549</sup> John Northbrooke, *A treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes* 1577, ed. John Payne Collier (London: Reprinted from the Shakespeare Society, 1843), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000248674>.

<sup>550</sup> White, 47-8.

<sup>551</sup> Northbrooke, 85-6.



## 25. Plowden & Equity, Law Merchant, and the ‘Merchant of Venice’

The contemporary writings on Stephen Gosson in 1578 suggest that there was an early version of the *Merchant of Venice* (the *Jew*) in the public theater at that time.<sup>552</sup> As with the plays *Troublesome Reign*, *King John*, *Richard II*, and *Hamlet*, the contemporaneous legal philosophy of Edmund Plowden appears to have informed the construction of *Merchant of Venice*. Thus, where lawyer Portia argued for mercy in a case where the strict letter of the law would result in the unintended death of the defendant, she followed Plowden’s commentary on *Eyston v. Studd* (1574) that “moral virtue” must “correct the law” in the face of an unjust outcome.<sup>553</sup>

When, in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* Shylock sues Antonio to enforce his bond and its penalty of a “pound of flesh”, a most famous legal trial commences (*Merchant of Venice* IV.1). Lawyers have long remarked on two odd aspects of this trial: (1) as one American lawyer put it: “the trial scene always seemed inconsistent with Shakespeare’s supposed legal learning, for the proceedings in it are such as never could have occurred in any court administering English law;”<sup>554</sup> and (2) Portia never calls for equitable relief from enforcement of the penal bond, something that was apparently available in Shakespeare’s time.<sup>555</sup> However, as explained by legal scholar B.J. Sokol, the basis for the trial did, in fact, exist in England: under the statute of ‘Staple,’ the pragmatic procedure of ‘Law Merchant’ was used to quickly resolve trade disputes involving, for example, the international wool trade. Furthermore, by using this type of tribunal – rather than the common law or chancery courts – Shakespeare was deliberately eschewing a

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<sup>552</sup> See Bullough, 1.445-46; Bullough quotes Stephen Gosson from his *Schoole of Abuse* (1578) on a play called the *Jew*, and considers it a “possibility” that the writer Shakespeare used this early play as a source for the *Merchant of Venice*: that is, Bullough allows that *Jew* may have been an early “ghost play.”

<sup>553</sup> *The Commentaries, or Reports of Edmund Plowden*, 2v. (London, 1816), II.466a, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008595431>.

<sup>554</sup> Keeton, 150; quoting John T. Doyle, “Shakespeare’s Law: The Case of Shylock,” *Overland Monthly* (July 1886).

<sup>555</sup> B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, “Shakespeare and the English Equity Jurisdiction: *The Merchant of Venice* and the Two Texts of *King Lear*,” *The Review of English Studies*, 50, no. 200 (Nov. 1999): 426; also Keeton, 144.

technical argument over chancery equitable relief, a legal option that was generally not available in Law Merchant cases. Rather, Shakespeare was making a case where the clear intent of the law could lead invariably to extremely unjust results, thereby raising the issue foremost in *Eyston*, the need for equity – as a “moral virtue” – to “correct the law.”

Until the seventeenth century, the Law Merchant tribunals operated almost wholly separately from the English common law courts,<sup>556</sup> and much like the court in *Merchant of Venice* – but very unlike the common law courts – provided merchants with speedy justice.<sup>557</sup> Designed to be informal trials held at markets (or “staples”), local officials determined the outcome with reference to the custom of merchants; merchants, thereby, were not required to sue at common law. The procedure was used to resolve disputes between English and foreign merchants on English soil, regulating commerce without expensive delays.<sup>558</sup> As described by B.J. Sokol in “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Law Merchant” (1992), the procedures of Law Merchant accord with details of the play:

[The Law Merchant offered] swift and summary judgement somewhat informally in the presence of the leader of the city and a number of fellow merchants . . . The international nature of the Law Merchant also accords with the use in the Venetian play of a young lawyer from Rome, recommended from Padue, to judge a case brought by an ‘alien’ (4.1.345) Jew.<sup>559</sup>

The informal procedure of Law Merchant differed in one other way from the common law, a deviation critical to the plot and moral of the *Merchant of Venice*: unlike suits under common law, the parties in Law Merchant suits had no recourse to equitable relief in the chancery courts, absent proof of fraud.<sup>560</sup> Thus, while Portia may have been able to procure an injunction from the chancery court for review of the penal bond in a common law case,<sup>561</sup> she had no such option under the Law Merchant. This legal twist

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<sup>556</sup> Francis M. Burdick, “What is the Law Merchant,” *Columbia Law Review*, 2, no. 7 (Nov. 1902): 478-79.

<sup>557</sup> Burdick, 474.

<sup>558</sup> B.J. Sokol, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Law Merchant,” *Renaissance Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 62-3.

<sup>559</sup> B.J. Sokol, *Renaissance Studies*, 63.

<sup>560</sup> B.J. Sokol, *RES*, 428.

<sup>561</sup> See Edith G. Henderson, “Relief from Bonds in the English Chancery: Mid-Sixteenth Century,” *The American Journal of Legal History*, 18 (Oct. 1974): 298-306,

laid bare the sheer injustice of the situation: under the Law Merchant, not only could Shylock enforce an overdue bond on which full payment was offered, but also he could enforce its penalty even though it meant death to Antonio.

As Shakespeare's play has it, Shylock followed the letter of the law, but at the same time attempted a most grievous crime. Commentary of German philosopher Hermann Ulrici presented by Keeton summarizes the moral depravity of Shylock's proposed action:

[The] legal, formal, external justice Shylock obviously has on his side, but by taking and following it to the letter, in absolute one-sidedness, he falls into the deepest, foulest wrong, which then necessarily recoils ruinously on his own head.<sup>562</sup>

At the time of Shakespeare, no one was better known for his theory on equity and its use as a principal of interpretation to improve the common law than Ralph Sheldon's brother-in-law Edmund Plowden.<sup>563</sup> By exposing such a stark case of injustice under the letter of law, Shakespeare seems to follow Plowden in his commentary on equity and the law. Plowden viewed equity as not "part of the law" but rather "a moral virtue which corrects the law," as set forth in his report on *Eyston*:

And experience shews us that no Law-making can foresee all Things which may happen, and therefore it is fit that if there is any Defect in the Law, it should be

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[www.jstor.org/stable/845168](http://www.jstor.org/stable/845168). As described by Henderson, single (unconditional) penal bonds (like Shylock's) were fully enforceable at common law in the mid sixteenth century, but defendants could petition the chancery courts for an injunction and obtain equitable relief under exceptional circumstances. Such injunctions were progressively more frequent as the century progressed, with Chancery intervention in such common law cases "almost routine" by the 1590s; Henderson, 299. Henderson noted, however, that the legal situation must have changed "drastically" in the 1580s and 1590s because by the 1590s the Chancery court intervened not just in "exceptional" cases but rather, routinely in the whole class of penal bonds. Henderson could give no explanation for this change; Henderson 304-6.

<sup>562</sup> Keeton, 150.

<sup>563</sup> See Lorna Hutson, "Not the King's Two Bodies: Reading the 'Body Politic' in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2," *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (Yale University Press, 2001), 171-175.

reformed by Equity, which is no Part of the Law, but a moral Virtue which corrects the Law.<sup>564</sup>

In that case, the letter of the law required that a widow forfeit joint property inherited after the death of her husband. The ruling of the court allowed the widow to keep the property – notwithstanding the letter of the law:

[The effect of following the letter of the law would be] to bar [the widow], after the Death of her Husband, from disposing of her Inheritance, [which] would be contrary to all Reason, and it has no Affinity nor Connection with the Matter or the Intent of the statute 11 H.7.<sup>565</sup>

Shakespeare's case of Shylock's bond would enlarge Plowden's equitable argument. While Plowden, in *Eyston*, was principally dealing with the legislative intent of unjust penal statutes,<sup>566</sup> Shakespeare's play raises the larger question of unjust common law (that is, the enforcement of penal bonds). Thus, it expands the application of equity from statutory construction to broader issues of "moral Virtue": one law cannot fit all situations consistently; therefore some sort of "equity" must be recognized to correct the singular situation (such as Shylock's murderous penal bond) where injustice is incurred.

The informal legal procedure of Law Merchant tribunals would, no doubt, be familiar to someone like Ralph Sheldon, a legally trained businessman whose family had dealt in the international wool trade for decades. It was, however, the holding in Plowden's *Eyston* that shaped the dramatic twist of the plot wherein Portia defeated the unjust bond of Shylock.

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<sup>564</sup> Edmund Plowden, *The commentaries, or Reports of Edmund Plowden*, (London: S. Brooke, 1816), II.466a, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008595431>.

<sup>565</sup> *Plowden's Commentaries*, II.464a.

<sup>566</sup> Hutson, 174-75.

## **E. 1580s: SHELDON & THE THEATER IN RETRENCHMENT**

## *26. Sheldon's Arrest (1580)*

The decade beginning in 1580 brought bad fortune to Sheldon. In a similar fate to that of the Master of Paul's Sebastian Westcott, Sheldon's long-time Catholic recusancy finally resulted, in fall 1580, with his arrest and a short stay in Marshalsea prison; later prosecutions in the decade eventually led to his removal from all public office.

Sheldon quietly had failed to attend English Protestant church services since around 1570 and, for a time, escaped consequence. However, in the spring of 1580, a group of Jesuit priests, led by Fathers Campion and Persons, undertook a religious 'mission' to aid the struggling Catholics in England. This mission was widely viewed by English authorities as a militant invasion, and part of the continuing political threat of the Catholic pope and his allies. With the arrival in England of the Jesuits, English officials cracked down on the Queen's subjects who were seen as sympathizers with the Jesuit invasion. Sheldon was swept up in this reprisal.

In August 1580, Sheldon was included in a group of prominent Catholics summoned before the Privy Council. Under questioning by Bishop Whitgift, Sheldon admitted that he had not attended church services for the prior ten years.<sup>567</sup> However, his recusancy may not have escaped earlier notice. According the Sheldon biographer, Hilary Turner, Sheldon was not included on a list of recusants from Worcestershire in October 1577; Whitgift himself later apologized for this as an "administrative blunder."<sup>568</sup> In 1579, Sheldon avoided taking an oath of loyalty to the Queen as a Justice of the Peace by claiming to be out of the country; Turner points out that ten years previously, his brother-in-law Plowden had also refused the oath.<sup>569</sup>

Although originally committed (as were other recusants) to Marshalsea prison, Sheldon was transferred in November 1580 (upon a claim of ill-health) to the custody of the Dean of Westminster, who was the former chaplain to William Cecil, Lord Burghley,

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<sup>567</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 565.

<sup>568</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 566.

<sup>569</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 566.

Queen Elizabeth's Lord High Treasurer.<sup>570</sup> In an entry dated 31 December 1580, the Calendar of State Domestic Papers refers to a specific document that was "delivered to Mr. Sheldon, to persuade him to conform."<sup>571</sup> According to Turner, this document was labeled "Sheldon's perswasion" in Burghley's handwriting.<sup>572</sup> On 8 January, Sheldon went before the Privy Council and declared that he would "yielde himselfe dutifull and obedient unto her Majestie and in token thereof to be contented to repair unto the church and in all other things to serve and obey her Highness as becomethe a dutifull subjecte."<sup>573</sup> In his memoir, Jesuit Robert Persons commented on Sheldon's decision to conform: ". . . in London Ralph Sheldon a very powerful and rich man, whose fall caused so much talk and scandal to the rest, that it was made the subject of pasquinades, one of which was: "Sheldon is fallen; and do you ken why? Through *oves et boves et pecora campi*."<sup>574</sup>

Notwithstanding his public conformity, Sheldon never again held public office other than his long-standing position as Justice of the Peace, and legal actions against him continued. Around 1583, his son-in-law John Russell attempted to persuade authorities in Worcestershire to take action against his mother-in-law (Sheldon's wife Anne Throckmorton) and Russell's wife Elizabeth for holding Catholic mass; his action was eventually dismissed but litigation with Russell continued.<sup>575</sup> Then, in 1587, Sheldon was once again indicted for recusancy (even after members of the Grand Jury testified on his

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<sup>570</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 565.

<sup>571</sup> Calendar of state papers, Domestic series, of the reign of Elizabeth, vol. 1 (London, 1856), 691 (No. 69, 31 Dec. 1580), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011543470>, (Hathitrust #711).

<sup>572</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 567.

<sup>573</sup> Turner, "Sheldon conformity," 565-66; citing *Acts of the Privy Council*, vol.12, 301-02.

<sup>574</sup> Catholic Record Society Publications, vol. 4 (London: Arden Press, 1907), "Father Persons' Memoirs," 5. That the rhyme had significant currency among influential Londoners of the time seems borne out by courtier Sir John Harington's reference to the same pasquinade in his *Apologie* (1596), wherein Harington pays tribute to Sheldon as someone who would have been in the Queen's Privy Council but for his recusancy. See Donno, 239-40.

<sup>575</sup> See STAC 5/R41/32; a deposition by Ralph Sheldon in the case Russell v. Sheldon (1585). For a description of the deposition see Leslie Hotson, 29-34; also see Turner, Sheldon conformity, 570.

behalf) and convicted;<sup>576</sup> at this time, he was removed from his position as Justice of the Peace.<sup>577</sup> Nonetheless, according to historian Turner, during this period, Sheldon his life “very publicly” and rode to London “three and four times a year.”<sup>578</sup>

Subsequently, Sheldon paid fines for a period of three years, until 1590. Even so, Hilary Turner has carefully traced the consequences of Sheldon’s 1587 recusancy conviction, and comments on the relatively lenient treatment Sheldon received, as compared to his “more openly Catholic” friends. He had no detention, was not required to surrender his arms; there were no limitations on new land purchases, and the final year’s fine was recorded as debt, not paid. The fines paid by Sheldon in this period appear to have been the only such fines ever paid by Sheldon; in 1588, he contributed 50 pounds to defray the costs of the English fight against the Spanish Armada.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> Alan Davidson, “The Recusancy of Ralph Sheldon” *Worcester Recusant*, 12 (Dec. 1968); Davidson writes that the Grand Jury originally did not indict Sheldon due to favorable testimony by grand jurors that he was seen at church, but as there were no witnesses to say that he had engaged in common prayer he was indicted on the final day of the Assizes.

<sup>577</sup> Turner, “Sheldon conformity,” 571.

<sup>578</sup> Turner, Ralph Sheldon biography, *Tapestries Called Sheldon*; this information comes from Sheldon’s household accounts for the years 1586-88, held at the Warwickshire County Record Office, CR 2632, f.185.

<sup>579</sup> Turner, “Sheldon conformity,” 571-72.



## 27. Response to Puritan Attacks: Controls over Actors & the Stage

The era of the first English commercial theater beginning in the late 1570s and early 1580s brought substantial moral outrage, leading to retrenchment of the budding theater industry. In what E.K. Chambers viewed as the “struggle” between the City and the Court, London City authorities grew increasingly alarmed in the early 1580s about the disorder surrounding the public playhouses. While the Queen’s Privy Council defended the actors and the stage performances, in 1583 it consolidated the leading actors of the day into one theater troupe, the Queen’s Men, under the principal control of Sir Francis Walsingham.<sup>580</sup> With this consolidation, Leicester’s Men was dissolved and had its final performance at Court on February 10, 1583.<sup>581</sup>

Sharing some of the same concerns as the Puritan clerics, London City authorities pressed for limitations on the operations of the playhouses and the theater companies. The Court responded to these calls for restriction, however, with offers of compromise. Thus, for example, when London City asked for a ban on Sunday theater performances, the Court agreed but insisted that weekday performances be continued.<sup>582</sup>

While the adult actors of Leicester’s Men were subsumed by the Queen’s Men, child actors of Paul’s were no longer part of the Court entertainment from the period of 1582 until February 1587. Sebastian Westcott continued in his employment as Master of Paul’s even after his imprisonment and release in March 1578; however, at the end of 1581, just before Westcott’s death in 1582, the performances of the Children of Paul’s at Court came to an abrupt – and unexplained – halt. In his account, the historian Hillebrand puzzled over the incident:

During this period of over twenty years [1560-82] the children of Paul’s had appeared at court almost once a year, that is to say, with a regularity which showed the esteem in which they were held. But from now [26 December 1581] until February 27, 1587, they disappeared under their familiar name from court.

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<sup>580</sup> McMillan and MacLean, 11, 24-5.

<sup>581</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.99.

<sup>582</sup> Scott McMillan and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen’s Men* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9-10.

We may talk of inhibition, of their giving offense at court through one of their plays, of various possible circumstances which could have stopped them for a time; it is all useless speculation. Rather let us say that they *did* cease.<sup>583</sup>

It is possible that the Children of Paul's continued to stage plays at the Blackfriars playhouse but this is unclear. In 1584, the dramatist John Lyly – under the patronage of the Earl of Oxford – took over the Blackfriars playhouse after it had been vacated after the death of Richard Farrant in 1580. The Children of Paul's may have joined with the Earl of Oxford's child actors ('Oxford's boys'). Even so, there is no record of any performance at Court of the Children of Paul's until 1587.<sup>584</sup> Even so, by 1590, the Children of Paul's were officially dissolved.<sup>585</sup> Likewise the Children of the Chapel Royal also stopped operating; this group did not return to the Court for 17 years, until a new Blackfriars playhouse was opened in 1600.<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> Hillebrand, 132.

<sup>584</sup> Hillebrand, 133-37.

<sup>585</sup> Hillebrand, 143.

<sup>586</sup> Hillebrand, 151.

## 28. Sidney's Criticism of the Stage (1583) and the Rise of 'New Poetry'

A major defense to the Puritan criticism of the stage and poetry, though, came from the poets themselves, most influentially by Leicester's nephew Sir Philip Sidney, a powerful advocate of a higher standard of literature and a new style of English vernacular poetry.

While various ministers decried the evils of the theater, playwright Stephen wrote Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse*, a pamphlet describing Gosson's first-hand experiences with the abuses in the stage, and he dedicated the work to courtier-poet Philip Sidney.<sup>587</sup> The pamphlet advertised "an invective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and such the Catepillers of a Commonwealth."<sup>588</sup> It set forth Gosson's first-hand account of stage performances, and exhorted Sir Richard Pipe, Lord Mayor of London: "If your Honour desire too see the Citie well governed, you must as well sette to your hand to thrust out abuses. . ."<sup>589</sup>

Gosson's pamphlet was the first such attack to draw a published defense of the stage.<sup>590</sup> In reply, poet-scholar Thomas Lodge wrote *Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays* (1579),<sup>591</sup> a work that Gosson claimed that Lodge had written after being paid by professional actors.<sup>592</sup> Multiple other scholarly voices also rose to respond to the critics; however, most of the defense centered upon a humanist defense of the "arte of poesie," neatly side-stepping the allegations of abuse and lewdness leveled at the professional English stage.

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<sup>587</sup> Ringler, *Gosson*, 119.

<sup>588</sup> G. Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays* 2v. (Oxford University Press, 1904), I.61.

<sup>589</sup> Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1579), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01953>.

<sup>590</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, I.256; William Ringler, *Stephen Gosson* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 64, 66.

<sup>591</sup> Smith, I.60-86; also Thomas Lodge, *Protopogenes can know Apelles* (London, 1579), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A06172>.

<sup>592</sup> Ringler, *Gosson*, 68. See Gosson's attack on Lodge and his "cavils": Gosson, *Playes confuted in five actions* (London, 1582), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01951>.

Arguably, though, the most significant response to the attacks by Gosson and others came from Philip Sidney himself, writing the *Apologie for Poetrie* (also routinely referred to as *Defence of Poesie*), published in 1595 but likely written around 1583.<sup>593</sup> For his defense of contemporary poetry (and within it, drama), Sidney relied on the theory of humanism – that just as classic Latin and Greek poetry could both delight its audience and teach moral lessons to man, so too could modern poetry. This work inspired other learned responses, including Sir John Harington’s *Briefe Apologie*.<sup>594</sup>

However, Sidney’s criticism of contemporary English playwrights in his *Defence of Poesie* is harsh, and he is particularly critical of the mixture of the comic with tragedy (coupled together as the “tragicomicall”). Regarding this, he declared that “it is the Comick, whom the naughtie Playmakers and Stage-keepers have justly made odious.”<sup>595</sup> Of the stage plays, Sidney singled out only the pioneering *Gorboduc* (1562) for any praise:

Our Tragedies and Comedies (not without cause cried out against), observing rules neyther of honest civilitie nor of skillful Poetrie, excepting *Gorboduck* (againie, I say, of those that I have seene), which notwithstanding, as it is full of stately speeches and well sounding Phrases, clyming to the height of *Seneca* his stile, and as full of notable moralitie, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtayne the very end of Poesie . . .<sup>596</sup>

Sidney’s *Defence* was the foremost piece of literary criticism of the Elizabethan era and set forth the rules for both poetry and drama of the age.<sup>597</sup> It inspired a new generation of poets – including Edmund Spenser, John Harington, and Thomas Lodge – to new standards of English vernacular poetry.

In his own poetry, Sidney altered the English art of poetry, bringing in new meters, forms, and conceits developed from his experience with other European poetry.<sup>598</sup> Sidney’s novel approach led these young poets to major experiments in English poetry,

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<sup>593</sup> Smith, I.148.

<sup>594</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, I.257-58.

<sup>595</sup> Smith, 175-76.

<sup>596</sup> Smith, 196-97.

<sup>597</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, I.257-58.

<sup>598</sup> John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 111-12.

expanding the meter, vocabulary, and diction of poetry written in the English vernacular. John Buxton, in his study of Sidney, argues that the poetic experiments of Sidney and his friends (including Edmund Spenser) were responsible for the creation of a “New Poetry” in England, thereby establishing England among the greatest literatures of Europe “at one bound.”<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Buxton, 104, 112, 252.

## 29. *Leicester's Demise (1583-88)*

But if Sheldon's fate in the 1580s was unfortunate, Leicester's was immeasurably worse. The loss of his control of the premier acting company in 1583 – consolidated as the Queen's Men and under the watch of Francis Walsingham – signaled the rapid diminishment of Leicester's power at Court. As even his nephew Sidney had decried the "odious" stage comedy and the "naughtie Playmakers," Leicester could hardly escape blame for the apparent chaos of the public playhouses. Moreover, with his reputation long marred by the suspicious death of his first wife in 1560,<sup>600</sup> an anonymous book published in 1584 known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* accused him of a lifetime of vile deeds. He led a failed expeditionary force to the Netherlands in 1585/6; and he died 4 September 1588, at the age of 56, with little public mourning.

In the mid-1580s he faced grave personal losses with the death of a young son in 1584 and of his nephew the eminent poet Philip Sidney in 1586, but these sorrows were compounded by a venomous personal attack in 1584 by the anonymous pamphleteer in *Leicester's Commonwealth*. The book alleged "an abominable life, plots, treasons, murders, falsehoods, poisonings, lusts, incitements and evil stratagems employed by Lord Leicester"<sup>601</sup> Widely believed to have been written by a militant Catholic propagandist, the book accused Leicester of all variety of nefarious deeds.<sup>602</sup> Although, according to Leicester biographer Derek Wilson, the "Queen and Council were unanimous in denouncing" the work,<sup>603</sup> there was no "official or semi-official counterblast" to the book.<sup>604</sup> Leicester's nephew Philip Sidney wrote a stirring defense of his uncle, which was later found in manuscript but apparently not printed at the time.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> See Derek Wilson, 122-23.

<sup>601</sup> The title of the book as it circulated on the continent in French and Latin; see Derek Wilson, 253.

<sup>602</sup> Derek Wilson, 255-58.

<sup>603</sup> Derek Wilson, 264.

<sup>604</sup> Derek Wilson, 268.

<sup>605</sup> See Arthur Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State* (London: Osborne, 1746), I.62, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000766974>.

The book destroyed Leicester's reputation for centuries. Although the Queen and the Privy Council publicly denounced *Leicester's Commonwealth*, there was no printed public refutation challenging the libelous attack during Leicester's life or in the immediate aftermath of his death. Wilson concludes that Leicester himself "did not rise personally to the libelous attack."<sup>606</sup> The first printed defense appeared only in 1593, with a ringing denunciation of Leicester's "wicked Libellors" under the title "The dead mans Right" introducing the poetry collection *The Phoenix Nest* edited by R.S.<sup>607</sup>

In December 1585, Leicester embarked upon his ill-conceived expedition to aid the Protestant Netherlands in the ongoing war in the Low Countries, leading an expeditionary force ultimately numbering over 14,000,<sup>608</sup> including three of Sheldon's sons-in-law.<sup>609</sup> The campaign ended badly with the battle at Zutphen in September 1586, where Leicester's nephew Sir Philip Sidney died from a war wound. Leicester returned to England in November 1586. In 1588, Leicester headed the efforts in the defeat of the Armada in August 1588, but died shortly thereafter on 4 September 1588.

While the Queen was reportedly devastated by Leicester's death, the rest of the country was not. Eleanor Rosenberg noted that upon Leicester's death the "stream of praise and defense which his protégés had maintained for almost three decades suddenly ceased."<sup>610</sup> Of his demise, Derek Wilson remarks that "it is difficult to understand how a man who occupied such a prominent place in the life of the nation can have passed so rapidly into obscurity."<sup>611</sup>

Rosenberg points out those few who defended their late patron Leicester, including Edmund Spenser and John Florio. Of these few, however, only 'R.S.,' in his

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<sup>606</sup> Derek Wilson, 269.

<sup>607</sup> See Derek Wilson, 309; Rosenberg, 348-49.

<sup>608</sup> Adams, 181.

<sup>609</sup> Adams, 349: Sir Francis Clare of Caldwell; Sir John Russell of Strensham M.P.; Francis Trentham of Rocester. At the time of the expedition, Trentham was not yet married to Sheldon's daughter Katherine.

<sup>610</sup> Rosenberg, 346.

<sup>611</sup> Derek Wilson, 309.

book *The Phoenix Nest*, attempted a written vindication of Leicester against his “libellors.”<sup>612</sup>

While the introduction to *The Phoenix Nest*, “The dead mans Right,” does not specifically name *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, it deals directly with those who “odiously” slandered Leicester during his lifetime. The introduction is unsigned, and its modern editor Hyder Edward Rollins presumed it was written by the book’s editor R.S. (the pronoun “I” is used throughout).<sup>613</sup> The preface announces that its writer sought to “admonish” the “vile and envious toongs” for the “satisfaction of mine own conscience, by discharging the dutie of a Christian.”<sup>614</sup> The author clearly recognized the absence of any earlier refutations, noting that the Earl “meekly” bore the attacks “without publishing defence of his innocence.”<sup>615</sup> At the beginning of the essay, moreover, the danger of such silence was pointed out: the “wise and silent digesting of such inhonest and scurrilous cartels” wrongly imputed the “guiltiness” of those attacked.<sup>616</sup> The author suggested that the lack of any counterattack left the “libellors” free to destroy the reputation of Leicester, writing that “the instruments of those libellors, being without fear of controllment, since his death are become over scandalous and at too much libertie.”<sup>617</sup> So, in his essay the writer attempts to “persuade” with “more modestie and pietie of speech”: in eight paragraphs, he presents his personal defense of the wisdom and virtues of Leicester.<sup>618</sup> The end of the introduction begins with a distinctive phrase “[B]eseeching God,” a phrase that “R.S.” uses similarly at the conclusion of his note to “Lord W.H.” (see Chapter 37);<sup>619</sup> the same phrase is found in Shakespeare at *Henry V* 2.2.156.

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<sup>612</sup> Rosenberg, 346-50.

<sup>613</sup> But see Rollins, *Nest*, 113 for Charles Collins’s theory that the piece was written by Nicholas Breton, a view that Rollins discounted; also others have suggested that the piece was added as an afterthought by the printer.

<sup>614</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 4.

<sup>615</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 6.

<sup>616</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 5.

<sup>617</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 6.

<sup>618</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 6.

<sup>619</sup> An EEBO search showed 124 instances of “beseeching God” in 85 records between 1580 and 1610; however, in this case it is argued that the very similar positioning of the phrase – as part of the ending salutation – strengthens the significance.



Ralph Sheldon's strong support for Leicester in the 1580s and after Leicester's death in 1588 seems indicated by the fact that three of Sheldon's sons-in-law volunteered for Leicester's expedition to the Netherlands, but it is perhaps more directly indicated by a tapestry map of Warwickshire commissioned and created by Sheldon around 1588-90.<sup>620</sup> Leicester had long been a patron of the Sheldon tapestry works: he owned at least two of the Sheldon tapestries, and in 1571, he recommended the works as a model for Warwickshire to follow.<sup>621</sup> The depiction on the Warwickshire tapestry of both the Sheldon home at Beoley, Worcestershire and the Leicester's castle of Kenilworth would seem to suggest, according to historian Turner, "the kinship and patronage relationship" between Sheldon and Leicester. Although the homes shown on the maps were generally drawn with accuracy, the Sheldon home at Beoley was "an imaginary confection of towers and turrets," and although Beoley was located in Worcestershire it was included on the Warwickshire map. Then, Leicester's castle of Kenilworth is shown on the same map, and as described by Turner, it is "the largest structure, massively out of scale in relation to almost any other feature on the tapestry."<sup>622</sup> By this gesture, Sheldon appears to have paid special homage (as was done in the *Phoenix Nest* in the same period) to Leicester, a man abandoned after his death by many of his former allies.

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<sup>620</sup> The exact date of the Warwickshire tapestry is unknown, but it was one of four tapestry maps commissioned by Sheldon intended for decoration of his home at Weston by Long Compton in Warwickshire, completed in 1590, see Turner, *No Mean Prospect*, 5. While the Warwickshire tapestry includes a date '1588' (see Turner, 40, fig. 39), Turner argues that the actual date of the tapestry was probably later as it "depict[s] the completed house [Weston], with some accuracy" (Turner, 39).

<sup>621</sup> See Adams, 337, notes 210 and 211.

<sup>622</sup> Turner, *No Mean Prospect*, 26.

### 30. The ‘Shake-scene’ and Its New Stage Voices

Given the almost complete dearth of reliable information on the dates of the first performances of the Shakespeare plays, even approximate dating of the plays can be fraught, and may be near-impossible. However, with what is known of the plays, and what has been discussed so far in this book, one thing can be stated with assurance: there were Shakespeare plays produced on the stage in the 1580s. Of these plays, some can be proposed with little doubt: one or more of the three parts of *Henry VI*; one or both parts of *Henry IV*. While it may have diminished with the difficult events of the 1580s, the “Shake-scene” (to reinterpret the phrase coined by Robert Greene in 1592,<sup>623</sup> in the slangy sense of playhouses devoted to the Shakespeare work) was still alive and well. Nonetheless, talented new and younger playwrights, most educated at university or a premier London grammar school, had joined the scene in the 1580s: playwrights like Greene, Thomas Nashe, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd, and others.

Two quotes, one by Nashe and the other by Greene, written at nearly the same time in 1592, make the conclusion that one or more of the *Henry VI* plays were performed in the latter years of the 1580s inescapable. Of Part 1 of *Henry VI*, Nashe wrote around August 1592 that the play’s main character Talbot had been “embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at once”; as Bullough points out, Nashe’s comment meant many performances and large audiences.<sup>624</sup> Written around the same time, Greene’s comment on the ‘Shake-scene’ includes definitely reference to Part 3 of the trilogy.<sup>625</sup> The playhouses were shut down from the plague in the second half of 1592; Bullough concludes that all three parts of *Henry VI* could not have been produced and performed in two years;<sup>626</sup> this seems especially true with audiences of ten thousand people for Part 1 alone.

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<sup>623</sup> Munro, *Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 2.

<sup>624</sup> Bullough, III.23.

<sup>625</sup> Bullough, III.23.

<sup>626</sup> Bullough, III.23.

Part 1 of the Henry VI trilogy includes a dramatic scene invented by Shakespeare: the opening of the War of Roses in the “Temple Garden” (Act 2, Scene 4). It is well documented that the garden is by the edge of the Middle Temple Hall, a building designed and constructed by Edmund Plowden (see Chapter 17). As Plowden died in 1585, the unique location of this pivotal scene would seem a suitable memorial for the legal mind behind so many of the Shakespeare plays.

A quote from the actor Richard Tarlton makes it clear that one, or all, parts of the *Henry V* trilogy preceded the performance of *Henry VI*: as one of his jests, Tarlton spoke of an instance “[A]t the Bull at Bishops-gate was a Play of Henry th fift, wherein the Judge was to take a box on the eare.”<sup>627</sup> This could be a reference to the *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, or to Part 2 of *Henry IV*. But either way, it preceded the *Henry VI* trilogy because Tarlton died in 1588. However, because Tarlton’s acting career began around 1570, it could have referred to a play produced as early as the 1570s.

In his 1598 commentary, Francis Meres refers to Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*.<sup>628</sup> The play was first registered in February 1598; Bullough, in his notes of Part 1 of *Henry IV*, suggests that because the printed title of the play mentioned the “humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaffe” rather than those of the originally named Sir John Oldcastle, the play “had been performed frequently and for some time before it was registered.”<sup>629</sup> This would seem consistent with Mere’s notice of the play. Yet, in his edition of Part 1 of *Henry IV*, J. Dover Wilson finds no recorded performance of the play earlier than 1600, although he writes that “[L]ate 1597 is the usually accepted date of the earliest public performance” of the play.<sup>630</sup> The comments by Meres and Bullough are not consistent with a play that only had its first performance in 1597, at the earliest. The dating of the Tarlton comment, and the suggestion of extended performances allowing the evolution of the play in the Falstaff/Oldcastle character seem to require that the play (or some part of

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<sup>627</sup> Richard Tarlton, *Tarltons jests* (Andrew Crook: 1638); <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A13376>.

<sup>628</sup> See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.246.

<sup>629</sup> Bullough, IV.155.

<sup>630</sup> Shakespeare, *The First Part of the History of Henry IV*, ed. J. Dover Wilson, *The New Shakespeare Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 1944, reprinted 1968), xxix.

the *Henry V* trilogy) to have been performed earlier than the 1590s and most probably later than the 1570s.

Meanwhile new playwrights and poets brought new voices to the English stage, and most who are still known in this modern era were of a generation younger than Ralph Sheldon, starting with John Lyly (1553-1606), George Peele (1556-96), Thomas Kyd (1558-94), Thomas Lodge (1558-1625), Robert Greene (1558-92), Christopher Marlowe (1564-96), Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), Ben Jonson (1572-1637). All these poets were educated in the classic sense, as required by Elizabeth's proclamation in 1559. Most were university graduates (Lyly, Peele, Lodge: Oxford; Greene, Marlowe, and Nashe: Cambridge), but even those who were not university graduates had studied at premier London grammar schools (Kyd: Merchant Taylor; Jonson: Westminster).

### 31. Where's 'Pleasant Willy'?

Was the writer Shakespeare (or the comic Will) absent from the stage at the end of the 1580s? Edmund Spenser's poem *The Teares of the Muses* (registered in 1590; printed in 1591) includes the Muse Thalia lamenting that "[O]ur pleasant Willy, an is dead of late." Shakespearean scholar Alfred Harbage (1901-76), editor of the Pelican Shakespeare, tied Thalia's lament to the writer Shakespeare, and pronounced it an "unsolved puzzle" that is "one of the strangest of our dramatic history."<sup>631</sup> Harbage's dilemma was twofold: he could not find any other logical candidate for 'Willy' than Shakespeare; but at the same time the standard biography of the writer seemed inapt, with Harbage stating "[I]f Shakespeare suddenly appeared in the role of playwright in 1590, of course the lines could not refer to him."<sup>632</sup>

This lament which, as discussed further below, indicates significant direct proof of a different dating for the comic plays; however, the precise reason for the lament is ambiguous. While it is somewhat consistent with the death of the writer's great patron Leicester, and with the ongoing prosecution of Ralph Sheldon, this idea seems undermined by the fact that – as discussed in the last section – there were still major Shakespeare plays on stage throughout the 1580s. A more likely reason for Thalia's lament may relate to the loss of the great Shakespeare comedies (that is the writings of the comic "Will" rather than the dramatic Shakespeare) of the earlier decades, specifically those performed at the Court and at Sebastian Westcott's (and subsequently Richard Farrant's) playhouses by child actors. Spenser (c. 1552-99) grew up in East London and attended the prestigious Merchant Taylor's School in Central London beginning in 1561. His young formative years may have been spent in attendance at the early, great Shakespeare comedies performed at Westcott's rehearsals in the mid-1560s.

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<sup>631</sup> Harbage, 129. Harbage gave the lecture in "Seminars on Shakespeare" in Stratford, Ontario in 1961;

<sup>632</sup> Harbage, 130.

Despite his dilemma, Harbage concludes that Spenser could only have been referring to Shakespeare, and to explain his conclusion, he quotes from three stanzas of Spenser's poem:

And he the man, **whom Nature selfe had made**  
**To mock her selfe, and Truth to imitate,**  
With kindly counter under Mimick shade,  
Our pleasant *Willy*, an is dead of late;  
With whom all joy and jolly merriment  
Is also deaded, and in dolour drent.

In stead therof scoffing Scurrilitie,  
And scornfull Follie with Contempt is crept,  
Rolling in rymes of shameless ribaudrie  
Without regard, or due Decorum kept,  
Each idle wit at will presumes to make,  
And doth the Learneds task upon him take.

But that the same gentle Spirit, from whose pen  
Large **streames of honnie and sweete Nectar** flowe,  
Scorning the boldnes of such base-borne men,  
Which dare their follies forth so rashlie throwe;  
Doth rather choose to sit in idle Cell,  
Than so himself to mockerie to sell.<sup>633</sup> [Emphasis added.]

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<sup>633</sup> Harbage, 129-30; Spenser's poem can be found at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12774>, the quoted stanzas under those of "Thalia."

Harbage can find no one else who fits the lines,<sup>634</sup> and he comments that if the lines do refer to Shakespeare, “it would be the irony of the ages that the fact remains unconceded” because the poem contains the standard clichés about Shakespeare:

The idea of Shakespeare as the source of “streames of honnie and sweete Nectar” furnishes the first critical *cliché* that appears to authenticate allusions to his writing; and the idea of Shakespeare as one “whom Nature selfe had made to mock herself, and Truth to imitate” (i.e. that he was as true to nature as nature herself) furnishes the second critical *cliché* and the one which endured for a century and a half.<sup>635</sup>

Of the reference, Harbage concludes that “[P]erhaps it is just too obvious to be believed.”<sup>636</sup>

Even so, Harbage did not disassociate himself with the Stratford man, he simply suggested that the Stratford man might have commenced his earliest work in “coterie theatres” (i.e., the “little leagues”).<sup>637</sup> Nonetheless, this would not explain what seems to be Spenser’s allusion to a gap between performances in the “big leagues”; ‘Willy’ seems to have been absent for a period at the end of the 1580s from a stage where he had been before, and where he had been critically acclaimed. A more understandable, and far less complicated, reason for this lament would have been the loss of the great Shakespeare comedies written for the Children of Paul’s and the Children of the Chapel Royal.

This lament would suggest that, in fact, there were no comedies by Shakespeare in, at least, the later 1580s. Could Shakespeare have taken to heart the criticism of Leicester’s nephew Philip Sidney on the “odious Comick,” and commenced adjusting his work to the higher standard of the ongoing experiments in vernacular poetry by poets such as Sidney, Spenser, and Thomas Lodge? The work of these poets expanded the meter, the vocabulary, and the diction of poetry; could even the eminent ‘Willy’ have failed to be both inspired and challenged by the new direction in literary English poetry?

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<sup>634</sup> Harbage specifically rejects the suggestion of E.K. Chambers that Willy was John Lyly; he notes that the lines do not “suggest the literary personality” of Lyly, and that Lyly was “not inactive as a playwright in 1589-90”; 130.

<sup>635</sup> Harbage, 131.

<sup>636</sup> Harbage, 131.

<sup>637</sup> Harbage, 131-32.

In 1947, American Shakespearean scholar Alwin Thaler (1891-1977) presented the case that Sidney's *The Defence* [or Defense] of *Poesie* [or Poesy] (c. 1583) did, in fact, keenly affect Shakespeare's "own critical sense."<sup>638</sup> He quotes the editor of Sidney's work, A.S. Cook: "what Sidney outlined, Spenser and Shakespeare executed, though not always in the precise forms which he himself would have approved."<sup>639</sup> Thaler offers the view that "almost every major idea or principle in the *Defence* can be illustrated in some measure by Shakespeare's practice."<sup>640</sup>

While Thaler supports his thesis with numerous examples of Shakespeare's adherence to (or agreement with) Sidney's criticism, he includes evidence that Sidney's discussion of the poet's imagination was the source for Shakespeare's lines on the same subject in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>641</sup> Specifically, he compares quotes from *Defence* with lines from *AMND*:

#### From Sidney

- (1) Whatsoever action . . . the historian . . . recite[s], that may *the poet* . . . make his own . . . having all, *from* Dante his *heaven* to his *hell*, under . . . his *pen* (*Def.* 169);
- (2) [Philosophical definitions] lie dark before the *imaginative* and judging power, if they be not . . . *figured* forth by the speaking picture of *poesy* (*Def.* 165);
- (3) Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any . . . subjection *lifted up* with the vigor of his own invention, doth [make] . . . *forms such as never were* in nature (*Def.* 156);
- (4) The poets *give names* . . . to make their picture the more lively (*Def.* 185);

#### From Shakespeare (*AMND* 5.1.7-18)

The lunatic, the lover, and *the poet*  
 Are of *imagination all compact*  
 . . . .  
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from *heaven* to *earth*, *from earth to heaven*;  
 And as imagination *bodies forth*  
 The *forms* of *things unknown*, the poet's *pen*

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<sup>638</sup> Alwin Thaler, *Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney* (Harvard University Press, 1947), 4.

<sup>639</sup> Thaler, 3; Cook published his edition of Sidney's critical essay in 1890; however, the standard edition of Sidney's work is G. Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2v. (Oxford University Press, 1904).

<sup>640</sup> Thaler, 4.

<sup>641</sup> Thaler, 8.



Turns them to shapes, and *gives to airy nothing*  
A local habitation and *a name*.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination.

Thus, Thaler draws together Sidney's and Shakespeare's philosophical view of the role of the poet.



**F. 1590s: POST-LEICESTER:  
POETRY RISES FROM THE  
PHOENIX NEST**

### 32. R.S. & ‘*The Phoenix Nest*’ (1593)

The small, elegant poetry anthology *The Phoenix Nest* (1593) was remarkable, not the least because of its mysterious editor, R.S.<sup>642</sup> The collection included some of the finest ‘new’ poetry by the elite poets of Oxford and was intended as the first English language elegy to the man who inspired the new style English vernacular poetry, the late Sir Philip Sidney, a fellow Oxfordian. The volume was an extended production of new meters and forms of English poetry. The predominant style (in 23 of 97 poems) was that used by Shakespeare in his *Venus & Adonis* published the same year – the six-line iambic pentameter stanza, rhyming *ababcc*; but it also focused on the English sonnet, commonly referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet (14 poems). The major contributor to the anthology was Oxford-educated Thomas Lodge (16 poems), a poet whose works are recognized as the inspiration for both Shakespeare’s *Venus & Adonis* and his play *As You Like It*.

Unlike other poetry miscellanies of the era, this volume was not a commercial venture put together by booksellers and printers, rather it was a literary work assembled by R.S., compiled from hand-written poems by the great Oxford poets. As discussed variously elsewhere, the identity of R.S. seems oddly concealed behind the description of him as “of the Inner Temple *Gentleman*”; but, particularly given the book’s vigorous defense of Leicester, the appellation must have some colorable application to R.S. Two of the collection’s principal contributors, Nicholas Breton and Sir Walter Raleigh, are connected to R.S. in other printed works, and both studied at Oriel College, Oxford.

The great leap forward in English poetry – brutally characterized by C.S. Lewis as a movement from the “drab age” to a “golden” era<sup>643</sup> – seems to have been celebrated

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<sup>642</sup> A transcription of *The Phoenix Nest* is available on EEBO, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A11254>.

<sup>643</sup> C.S. Lewis labeled the period 1530-80 as the “drab age” in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 64. While later scholars have objected to his characterization of these early decades, see, for example, Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shank, “Doing Away with the Drab Age,” *Literature Compass*, 7, no. 3 (2010): 160-76, eprints.whiterose.ac.uk.79008, no one dismisses the

in the *Nest*. Its publishing history begins on 8 October 1593, when John Jackson and partners entered at Stationers' Hall "for their Copie under thandes of Master Hartwell and bothe the wardens a book intituled *the Phoenix neste* etc. Compiled by R.S."<sup>644</sup> English poet and critic Sir Edmond Gosse (1849-1928) attributed the origins of the anthology to a concerted effort to renew Philip Sidney's attempt to create a new English poetical literature. Gosse wrote that Sidney "had appeared as the morning star who was to herald a millennium of poetical appreciation," and that upon his tragic death, his poetic art, "the Phoenix" had "gone up to Heaven in an aromatic cloud." Gosse continues:

But the characteristic of a Phoenix is that when it is burned up and gone, it is on the very brink of revival. From the ashes of its nest, the Arabian wonder is new-born. The idea of the compilers of this anthology [the *Nest*] was, in my opinion, that although the Phoenix, Poetry, had blazed on the funeral pyre of Sidney, it was reincarnated in the lyrical work of the young men who had taken heart of grace to pursue their art since their hero's death."<sup>645</sup>

Thus, the poetry of *Phoenix Nest* – the first English language elegy to Sidney, having been preceded by four elegies (from Cambridge in 1586, two from Oxford in 1587, and one from Leiden in 1587) mainly in Latin<sup>646</sup> – ushered in the "golden era" of English poetry.

While six of the poets of the *Nest* – that is, Gosse's "young men" – are identified by initials (in the same manner as R.S.), none are identified by name. Even so, poems in the *Nest* have been firmly attributed to eleven poets,<sup>647</sup> ten of whom are associated with Oxford. Three Oxford poets are the largest known contributors: Thomas Lodge (c. 1558-1625), Trinity College 1577, "T.L., Gent." with 16 poems; Nicholas Breton (c. 1545-c. 1626), Oriel College (date unknown), "N.B., Gent." with 8-9 poems; and Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1552-1618), Oriel College 1572, with 8 poems. Six other Oxford poets have

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notion that the subsequent period beginning in the 1580s was a "golden age" of English poetry, see, for example, Eric Nebeker, "Broadside Ballads, Miscellanies, and the Lyric in Print," *ELH*, 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 990. [www.jstor.org/stable/27742970](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27742970).

<sup>644</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, x.

<sup>645</sup> Edmund Gosse, as quoted in Rollins, *Nest*, xxxvii.

<sup>646</sup> John Buxton, "Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis and Sidney," in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*, eds., Jan van Dorsten, Dominic Baker-Smith, and Arthur F. Kinney (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 105, 110 (note 7).

<sup>647</sup> See Rollins, *Nest*, xvii-xx.

been connected to the *Nest*, each with one poem: Edward de Vere (1550-1604), Earl of Oxford, “E.O.”; George Peele (1556-96), Broadgates Hall 1571 and Christ Church College 1574, “G.P. Master of Arts”; Thomas Watson (1555-92), Oxford c. 1570, “T.W.”; Edward Dyer (1543-1607), Broadgates Hall; Matthew Roydon (died 1622), Oxford 1580; and Robert Greene (1558-92), Oxford M.A. 1588. Another Oxford graduate, Dr. Richard Eedes (1555-1604), Christ Church College 1571, is thought to have contributed prose dialogue. The lone Cambridge graduate, Sir Fulke Greville (1554-1628), Baron Brooke, was a life-long friend of Philip Sidney, and is thought to have written the third poem of the collection.

Harvard professor Hyder E. Rollins (1889-1958), the modern editor of the *Phoenix Nest*, and the editor of at least four other such miscellanies,<sup>648</sup> commented on the singular excellence of the *Nest*: while all the earlier miscellanies were “strictly commercial publications” the *Nest* was a “purely literary work.”<sup>649</sup> He noted, in particular, the superiority of its poetry texts, as well as the very careful printing of the book.<sup>650</sup> Of the former, he was struck by the fact that in “almost” every case “where duplicate texts [of the poems published in the *Nest*] survive those in *The Phoenix Nest* are superior.” Of its printing, Rollins declared that the *Nest* was “the most carefully printed miscellany, one of the most carefully printed books, of the period.”<sup>651</sup>

But what really separates the *Nest* from its predecessors was the quality and invention of its poetry. According to Rollins, the book stood at the “parting of the ways” between the “old and new,” in its subjects, and its metrical and stanza forms. Although he counted 6 poems in the older forms such as the poulter’s measure, the predominant form (used in 23 poems) was the six-line iambic pentameter used by Spenser in *Teares of the Muses* (1591) and by Shakespeare in *Venus & Adonis* (1593).<sup>652</sup> Rollins pointed out that

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<sup>648</sup> In addition to his edition of *The Phoenix Nest* in 1931, he published modern editions of *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions* (1926), *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1927), *Tottel’s Miscellany* (1928), and *England’s Helicon* (1935).

<sup>649</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, ix.

<sup>650</sup> Compare the commentary that Shakespeare’s play scripts scarcely had a “blot”: Munro, *Shakespeare Allusion*, 316 (John Heminges and Henry Condell in First Folio); 348, confirmed by Ben Jonson.

<sup>651</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxxi.

<sup>652</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxxvii-viii.

the book laid “stress” on the sonnet, but that such “stress” was both “old and new”; although there was some experimentation with the sonnet form, most (fourteen poems) were of the “conventional English, or Shakespearean, type.”<sup>653</sup>

To Rollins, the chief mystery of *Nest* was the identity of its editor, R.S.<sup>654</sup> (see the detailed discussion of his unsuccessful search for his identity in Chapter 6). Notwithstanding the beauty of the poetry, R.S.’s contribution cannot be overstated. At the beginning of his edition, Rollins quotes A.H. Bullen, modern editor of the later miscellany *England’s Helicon* (1600) regarding R.S.: “All lovers of poetry are indebted to the taste and zeal of this unknown editor.”<sup>655</sup>

So, who was this talented man? Clearly connected with Oxford, it also seems undeniable that he was significantly associated with Leicester. As discussed (see Chapter 29), a stirring defense of Leicester opens the book and is the first – likely courageous – published refutation of the anonymous allegations of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*.

Moreover, it seems that R.S. was familiar with Philip Sidney’s manuscript in defense of his uncle and may have, in fact, used the manuscript for the inspiration of his own public defense. While R.S. clearly formed his arguments independent of those in Sidney’s manuscript, the two pieces share a similar tone and language throughout. They both talk of libel and “libell[o]rs” and of railing and “rail[o]rs; R.S. of “defamatory libels”,<sup>656</sup> Sidney of “defamatori Libeller.”<sup>657</sup> Sidney writes that “[T]raitors to all wise Princes are odious,”<sup>658</sup> while R.S. opens his piece with “wicked Libellors have most odiously sought the slander of our wise, grave, and Honorable superiors.”<sup>659</sup> Sidney writes “this gentle Libelmaker . . . which never knew Blushing”;<sup>660</sup> R.S.: “I marvel the father of this pestilent invention blush not as red as his cap.”<sup>661</sup> Sidney talks of “a bundle

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<sup>653</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxxviii.

<sup>654</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxi.

<sup>655</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, ix.

<sup>656</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 5

<sup>657</sup> Collins, 62.

<sup>658</sup> Collins, 64.

<sup>659</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 5.

<sup>660</sup> Collins, 64.

<sup>661</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 6.

of Railings, as if it came from the mouth of some half drunk Skold in a Tavern”;<sup>662</sup> R.S.: “hearing the toongs of runaways and rogues . . . proclaim hateful and envious lies . . . in alehouses. . .”<sup>663</sup> Whatever the source of these similarities – coincidence or not – it seems likely that R.S. had read Sidney’s manuscript.

But what of the epithet “Inner Temple *Gentleman*” describing R.S.? Despite a thorough search (discussed in Chapter 6), Rollins was unable to identify R.S. as an Inner Temple Gentleman; however, the strong link between Leicester and the *Nest* may provide a clue. Leicester began a long association with the Inner Temple in the summer of 1561, when his assistance resolved a legal dispute in favor of the Temple. As a result, the Inner Temple members passed a resolution pledging legal counsel to Leicester (then Dudley) and his heirs in any legal actions brought against him.<sup>664</sup> Subsequently, Leicester was admitted to the Inner Temple in December 1561,<sup>665</sup> and by 1576, occupied chambers on the Inner Temple premises.<sup>666</sup>

While it does appear that Leicester availed himself of the legal talent of the Inner Temple,<sup>667</sup> on at least one occasion he used a member of the Middle Temple – Ralph Sheldon – in an important legal matter. In early 1560, Robert Dudley approached Sir Robert Throckmorton (Ralph Sheldon’s father-in-law) to purchase the constabship and stewardship of Warwick Castle; beginning in 1560, Sheldon negotiated the sale which was concluded 26 February 1562.<sup>668</sup> He did this work at roughly the same time that the Inner Temple members had promised free legal service to Leicester forever; could this have been the impetus for an ‘honorary’ claim as an ‘Inner Temple Gentleman’?

The largest contributors to the *Nest* had significant connections with either Sheldon or Shakespeare. As has been discussed at length elsewhere (see Chapter 13), Leicester procured a 60-year lease of an Oriel College residence for Sheldon in 1566; as

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<sup>662</sup> Collins, 63.

<sup>663</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 7.

<sup>664</sup> Derek Wilson, 134.

<sup>665</sup> Derek Wilson, 134.

<sup>666</sup> Derek Wilson, 172.

<sup>667</sup> See, for example, Derek Wilson, 219.

<sup>668</sup> Adams, 321, 357 note 77.



it happens, two of the major contributors to the *Nest*, Nicholas Breton and Walter Raleigh, were also of Oriel College, with Raleigh attending in 1572, and Breton probably in the late 1560s. In addition, Raleigh was of the Middle Temple, and related to Sheldon by his marriage in 1591 to Elizabeth Throckmorton (cousin to Sheldon's wife Anne Throckmorton).

However, the largest contributor, Thomas Lodge, is definitively connected with the writer Shakespeare. In 1589, Lodge published a poem, *Scylla's Metamorphosis*, which is the recognized model for Shakespeare's *Venus & Adonis*: it is an epic narrative using the same six-line stanza as in Shakespeare's poem, drawn from an episode from the same source as Shakespeare, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and written in a similar style to that of the Shakespeare poem.<sup>669</sup> Lodge also wrote *Rosalynde or Euphues Golden Legacy* (1590) which is well-accepted as the primary source of the Shakespeare play *As You Like It*, a play whose first publication was "staied" according to a notation in the Stationers' Register on 4 August 1600.<sup>670</sup>

The play *As You Like It* itself seems to bear a strong metaphorical resemblance to Lodge and Sheldon putting together a collection of radical new poetry in the fields around Oxford. The major character Orlando writes love poems to Rosalind (much like Lodge to his heroine Rosalynde) while roaming the woods of Arden Forest where Duke Senior (like Sheldon or R.S. at Oxford) is a banished man in the same Forest and "many young gentlemen flock to him every day" (including Orlando) *As You Like It* 1.1.111-112.

The multiple printed connections among Breton, Raleigh, and R.S. suggest that all the various references to R.S. were likely to be the same 'R.S.,' and one who was also likely to be Ralph Sheldon. Raleigh and R.S. collaborated on commendatory verse for Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590), with R.S. contributing one poem. This would, of course, point to R.S.'s acquaintance with Spenser, something borne out later when three poems from the *Nest* were added to Spenser's *Colin Clouts come home againe* (1595), a book dedicated to Raleigh.<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>669</sup> Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford University Press, 2002), 18-9.

<sup>670</sup> See Bullough, II.143, 153.

<sup>671</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, xxviii, xli.

Breton himself published two books referring to ‘R.S.,’ One, *Madde Letters* (1606), recorded personal notes from various people; R.S. wrote a humorously legalistic love note to “Mistresse A.T.” – a reference to Sheldon’s wife Anne Throckmorton? Another note from R.S. was to ‘Lord W.H.’ in a manner of an invitation to eat buck at the wedding of R.S.’s daughter – with a sly allusion to George Buck, the Master of the Revels from 1603? (See Chapter 37.)

But Breton’s other publication noted herein, *The Will of Wit*, includes reference not only to R.S. but also to a poet ‘W.S.’ (see Chapter 6). The second such concurrence of ‘W.S.’ as poet, however, is the poem entitled “A notable description of the World” in the *Nest*, written over twenty years later. This poem by W.S. is very different from the earlier poem: it has two stanzas, one with seven lines written in the rhyme royal scheme *ababb*, the second with nine pentameter lines rhyming *ababcbddd*. The first is a classic rhyme scheme followed by Chaucer and the poets of the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559); the second is a variation on the novel nine-line stanza (*ababbcbcc*) followed by Edmund Spenser in *The Fairie Queen* (1590). The poem itself focuses its first stanza on the elements of the “World”: including “[M]oist aire, hot fire, cold water, earth full drie,” and then, its second stanza, on God’s seven-day creation of the World. While there is little critical commentary on this poem,<sup>672</sup> the poem seems clearly a vivid metaphor with very compact language on the evolution of English poetry, with a salute to the metrical experimentation of poets like Spenser. Although William Smith (or Smyth), the author *Chloris, or the Complaint of the passionate despised Shepheard* (1596) has been offered as the poet W.S., the modern editor of *Chloris*, Lawrence Sasek, offered cogent reasons why it is unlikely that ‘W.S.’ of the *Nest* was Smith (see Chapter 6).<sup>673</sup>

From currently available evidence, it would appear that the writer Shakespeare was most probably working on his sonnets (certainly sonnets 1-60) near to the same time

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<sup>672</sup> The only commentary by Rollins on this poem pointed out the similarity of the fifth line in the first stanza, “Blood, Choler, Flegme, and Melancholie by” to a line in the induction of Ben Jonson’s c. 1600 play, *Every Man out of his Humor*: “The choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood”; see Rollins, *Nest*, 184, note on line 85.21.

<sup>673</sup> Sasek, 4.

R.S. was publishing the *Nest*;<sup>674</sup> three of these sonnets, 44, 45, and 55, seem to bear literary connection with the compilation. The first two sonnets, 44 and 45, both refer to “elements,” with specific mention of earth and water (44) and air and fire (45), much like the W.S.’s poem on the *World*. Line 4 of the poem reads: “Moist aire, hot fire, cold water, earth full drie,” with the word “Elements” in the right margin by the side of the line.<sup>675</sup> According to Muir, Sonnets 44 & 45 “consist of a single poem on the *four* elements, the first dealing with the heavier ones, earth and water, the second with air and fire.”<sup>676</sup> Both include the term “elements” (44.13; 45.5); in sonnet 44, “earth” and “water” have no modifiers (44.11), while sonnet 45 refers to “slight air and purging fire” (45.1). Even though this combination of terms was not uncommon in the era (it was the philosophy of the day), it is argued that the probable concurrence of the poems in time, and the very tight, compact presentation of W.S. within a highly inventive metric scheme, suggest the possibility of a common author, Shakespeare.

If the foregoing parallel seems tentative (but for the time concurrence), the potential connection between Sonnet 55 and the *Nest* is far more direct. Sonnet 55 appears to be a commendation of a compilation of poems written in honor of soldier-poet Philip Sidney, that is, a standard introduction to an elegiac anthology like the *Nest*. It reads as follows:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
 Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rhyme,  
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
 Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.

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<sup>674</sup> Determining the date of the individual sonnets is a fraught issue. In 1951, Rollins wrote that the years 1593-96 “with occasional additions through the years up to 1609” were “as good a guess as any”; see Rollins, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), vi-vii. In his book on *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1979) Kenneth Muir reviews various attempts to date the sonnets; in particular, he notes that efforts to identify the parallels between the sonnets and Shakespeare’s other works indicate that the “largest number of parallels are with works between 1593 and 1595”; see Muir, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), 62-5.

<sup>675</sup> Rollins, *Nest*, 85.20.

<sup>676</sup> Muir, *Sonnets*, 62.

When wasteful war shall statutes overturn,  
 And broils root out the work of masonry,  
 Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn  
 The living record of your memory.  
 'Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity  
 Shall you pace forth, your praise shall find room.  
 Even in the eyes of all posterity  
 That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
 So, till the judgement that yourself arise,  
 You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.<sup>677</sup>

To whom was the sonnet addressed, and for what purpose? As the *Nest* has no prefatory poem introducing its contents, could this have been appended to it by its editor R.S. with its first transmission to readers?

In his article on *Venus & Adonis* and Sidney, John Buxton revisited J.M. Robertson's suggestion in his book *The Problems with the Shakespeare Sonnets* (1926) that Sonnet 55 was a poem "intended to commend a volume of love poems."<sup>678</sup> Sidney scholar Mona Wilson responded to Buxton in 1931 that the sonnet would seem most natural if the subject were a "soldier poet" for whom a "sumptuous memorial" was planned; and, in fact, the States of Zealand proposed a memorial to Sidney "as fair as any Prince in Christendom even though it should cost a half ton of gold."<sup>679</sup> To Buxton, the reference of the sonnet's first line to this Zealand monument proposal is so precise that "it is difficult to deny the sonnet's reference to Sir Philip Sidney and his poems."<sup>680</sup> Buxton corroborates this point by reference to J. Dover Wilson's conclusion that lines 9-10 dealt with a soldier who died a hero,<sup>681</sup> whereas neither of the two generally

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<sup>677</sup> Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, 491.

<sup>678</sup> Buxton, "Venus and Adonis," 107.

<sup>679</sup> Buxton, "Venus and Adonis," 107.

<sup>680</sup> Buxton, "Venus and Adonis," 107.

<sup>681</sup> Buxton, "Venus and Adonis," 107.

understood candidates for the subject of the sonnets, the Earls of Southampton and Pembroke, died in battle.<sup>682</sup>

But if this sonnet was, indeed, a commendation for a volume of poems dedicated to the memory of soldier-poet Sidney, which volume might that be? Mona Wilson proposed Sidney's own volume of poetry, *Astrophel and Stella*, first published in 1591. However, two other volumes match the general profile: the *Nest* (1593) and Spenser's *Astrophel* (1595)<sup>683</sup> with the three poems appended from the *Nest*. Though the answer to this question may remain unknown, it seems fair to conclude that the writer Shakespeare – like R.S. – was actively involved in poetic elegies to Sir Philip Sidney.

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<sup>682</sup> Buxton, "Venus and Adonis," 108.

<sup>683</sup> *Astrophel* is part of Spenser's *Colin Clouts come home againe*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12773>.

### 33. Shakespeare's 'Pupil Pen' – Sonnets 1-17 and 'Venus & Adonis'

At the same time that R.S. is organizing the poetry of other writers in honor of the deeply Protestant Leicester and Sidney, the initial poetic efforts of the writer Shakespeare – the fruits of his “pupil pen” – are dedicated to a noble of strong Catholic heritage, Henry Wriothesley, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). The early poetic works of Shakespeare include both the Sonnets numbered 1-17, and the Ovidian narrative poem *Venus & Adonis* published in 1593. While, as mentioned, the dating of the sonnets is problematic, the traditional view is that these early sonnets advocating marriage and children are echoed in the arguments of Venus to Adonis; and it is argued that both works are tied to the known biography of the young (20 years old in 1593) Southampton. Critics have, in fact, compared the relationship of poet and the young noble (older, wise man advising younger man of higher social status) to the relationship of Falstaff and Prince Hal. Although the conventional biography of the writer (a 29-year-old inexperienced poet with a working class background) is a difficult match to the apparent circumstances, the biography of Ralph Sheldon presents an exact fit for the older wise poet: 56 years of age, married with ten children, of upper middle class status but not aristocratic, who – like Falstaff – spent a lot of time as a provincial Justice of the Peace. Moreover, some of the more puzzling aspects of the sonnets – references to formal legal language, outcast social position, and informants – can be explained by Sheldon's biography.

That the language of the first seventeen sonnets and that of *Venus & Adonis* are closely associated seems the traditional view. Of the convergence of the language of the first seventeen poems and *Venus & Adonis*, Sidney Lee wrote in 1905:

Two leading themes of the sonnets are very closely associated with Shakespeare's poem of *Venus and Adonis* and the plays that were composed about the same date. The first seventeen poems, in which the poet urges a beautiful youth to marry, and to bequeath his beauty to posterity, repeat with somewhat greater exuberance, but with no variation of sentiment, the plea that Venus thrice fervently urges on Adonis in Shakespeare's poem.<sup>684</sup>

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<sup>684</sup> Sidney Lee, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 18, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006671697>.

Bullough, writing in 1961, agrees:

*Venus and Adonis* is indeed closely related to the first seventeen Sonnets in which Shakespeare urges his friend to marry and have children and uses Venus's arguments among others. These sonnets were probably written about the same time as the narrative poem, and if Southampton were the friend in the Sonnets the Dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to him would have special point.<sup>685</sup>

Although the identity of the young man in the Sonnets continues to be debated,<sup>686</sup> the biography of Southampton provides good support for those who argue that the young man is Southampton. He grew up as a ward of Elizabeth, under the care of William Cecil, Lord Burghley; in 1589, Burghley determined that Southampton should marry Burghley's granddaughter, Lady Elizabeth de Vere.<sup>687</sup> Notwithstanding pressure from his own Catholic kin, Southampton resolutely refused to marry Lady Elizabeth. As pointed out by Southampton biographer G.P.V. Akrigg, Southampton's continued refusal to marry subjected not only Southampton himself but also his Catholic kin to substantial reprisal from Lord Burghley.<sup>688</sup>

Near the same time that Burghley embarked on his campaign, Southampton was admitted into Gray's Inn (1588) and finished his studies at Cambridge (1589).<sup>689</sup> Of the young men who studied law at the Inns of the Court, Akrigg asserts: "[these young men] constituted the liveliest, brightest group to be found anywhere in Elizabethan London."<sup>690</sup> Further he writes that they were "especial patrons of the theatre, deeming themselves *cognoscenti* of the stage" and that "[O]ften of an afternoon groups of young Inns of Court men would head for the public playhouses in the London suburbs, where a personal acquaintance with the players helped to distinguish the real bloods among them."<sup>691</sup> Another Southampton biographer, Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, describes Southampton

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<sup>685</sup> Bullough, I.164 (1961).

<sup>686</sup> See Burrow, 100.

<sup>687</sup> G.P.V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton* (Harvard University Press, 1968), 23, 31-2.

<sup>688</sup> Akrigg, 32.

<sup>689</sup> Akrigg, 30-1.

<sup>690</sup> Akrigg, 31.

<sup>691</sup> Akrigg, 31.

himself as an avid follower of theater, claiming that “he went to the theater every day, first to see a play, then to hear a play, and then to study the art of the actor.”<sup>692</sup>

Although the reference in Sonnet 16 to the author’s “pupil pen” implies that these first sonnets were the beginning efforts of the poet, little else is specific about the poet’s identity. From the nature of the subject, however, certain features can be assumed (unless, of course, the poems are considered fictional). To seriously give such advice, the author would be older than the young man, more experienced at life, married, and with children. Moreover, as noted by Kenneth Muir, it might be possible that “the persuasions to marry were written at the request of the young man’s parents or relatives.”<sup>693</sup>

As the poetic marriage-broker for Lord Burghley and his ward Southampton, there could be no better candidate than Ralph Sheldon, as the writer Shakespeare. In 1590, Sheldon was age 53, married since 1557, with 10 children. Sonnet 6 repeatedly praises the merits of ten children, specifically mentioning “ten” five times in three lines with lines such as “[I]f ten of thine ten times refigured thee” (Sonnet 6, line 10).

Although neither a noble nor a courtier, Sheldon had been strongly affiliated with the Queen, the Earl of Leicester, and Lord Burghley for years. And, as attested to by Sir John Harington, Sheldon was viewed as “one of the sufficientest wise men of England, fittest to be made of the Counsell, but for one matter.”<sup>694</sup> That “one matter” – his Catholicism – would have given him more empathy with Southampton’s Catholic relations. But perhaps more than anything, as the writer Shakespeare (or “pleasant Willy,” the comic innovator of the early stage), he would have been perfect Falstaff to the theater-goer Southampton’s Prince Hal.

Harold Bloom, in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) wrote of the Falstaff-Hal relationship: “[I]ts paradigm for Shakespeare, by general consent, is his

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<sup>692</sup> Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *The Life of Henry, third earl of Southampton: Shakespeare’s Patron* (Cambridge University Press, 1922), 5, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/0000769597>.

<sup>693</sup> Muir, *Sonnets*, 46.

<sup>694</sup> Donno, 240.



relationship to the young nobleman of the Sonnets. . .”<sup>695</sup> Muir summarized the connection between Falstaff and Prince Hal and the sonnets as follows:

Several critics have supposed that the relationship between Prince Hal and Falstaff is a dramatization of that between [the young man] and the Poet of the Sonnets. In both relationships there is a marked difference in social status – a Prince and Knight, Aristocrat and Player – a difference in age, and a doubt by the older man whether his affection is wholly reciprocated.

The demographic comparison – between social status and age – would certainly have been the same for Sheldon and Southampton, as for Falstaff and Prince Hal, and for the young man and the poet of the sonnets.

But aside from this sheer demographic suitability, there is other evidence of Ralph Sheldon in Shakespeare’s Sonnets. First, according to both George Keaton and O. Hood Philips, the references to legal procedural issues in the sonnets are striking; these references include very particular issues of property law: leases, tenancy, surety bonds, and mortgages. Keaton remarks specifically on the use of the term “determination” in Sonnet 13: “So should that beauty which you hold in lease/Find no determination” (lines 5-6); of this Keaton says: “In legal parlance, a lease is always *determined*, when it is brought to an end. . . [F]or anyone less great than Shakespeare, “determination would be an awkward word to use in a sonnet.”<sup>696</sup>

Philips discusses two sonnets whose “central imagery” is “entirely legal”: sonnets 46 and 134. According to Philips, in Sonnet 46, the writer’s eye and heart hold his mistress as “joint-tenants” and “have a contest as to how the fair lady is to be divided between them – each moiety then to be held in severalty.”<sup>697</sup> Of Sonnet 134, Philips says the poet “has mortgaged himself to a friend, and as a collateral security has executed a bond with a surety.”<sup>698</sup> Specifically Sonnet 134 reads, in part: “And I myself am mortgaged to thy will, [M]yself I’ll forfeit . . . [T]he statute of thy beauty thou will take, Thou usurer that put’st forth all to use . . .” (Sonnet 134, lines 2-3; 9-10). Compare with the letter from R.S. to ‘Mistresse A.T.’ in Breton’s *Madde Letters* (previously quoted in

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<sup>695</sup> Bloom, 287.

<sup>696</sup> Keaton, 29-30.

<sup>697</sup> Philips, 126.

<sup>698</sup> Philips, 127.

Chapter 6): “my case being my own lawyer, this I plead: your eies have stolne my hearte: now I must either be accessorie to mine own hurte, or accuse you of the felonie . . .”

For his entire life, Ralph Sheldon litigated his property interests, apparently for the most part managing his vast family estate. The U.K. National Archive, and other local repositories, are replete with records of legal suits engaged in by Ralph Sheldon. Although the index records from the National Archive provide little information on the nature of the legal suit, index records of cases held by other repositories, such as the Birmingham Archives, include a short summary of the case issues. Of these cases, most involve fundamental issues of property law: leases and tenancies; conveyances; surety bonds; mortgages.<sup>699</sup>

In addition, another series of references in Shakespeare’s sonnets and *Venus & Adonis* strongly suggest Sheldon’s outcast position in society as a prosecuted Catholic recusant, and his personal distress at this situation. In Sonnet 29, the writer laments: “When in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes/I all alone beweepe my outcast state/And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,/And look upon myself and curse my fate” (lines 1-4). And then again in Sonnet 37, the writer remarks: “So I, made lame by Fortune’s dearest spite” (line 3). The writer’s complaint seems crystalized in the character of Wat, the Hare in *Venus & Adonis*:

By this poor Wat, far off upon a hill,  
Stands on his hinder legs with list’ning ear,  
To hearken if his foes pursue him still.  
Anon their loud alarums he doth hear,  
And now his grief may be compared well

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<sup>699</sup> See, for example, Lease of Land in Beoley [co. Worc.] granted by Ralph Sheldon to Francis Fyld alias Paynter (10 April 1566), Birm. Arch. MS 3061/Acc 1901-003/167927; Bond for the Sum of 1000 pounds by John Palmer to Ralph Sheldon of Beoley [co. Worc.] (28 Oct. 1574), Birm. Arch. MS 3061/Acc 1901-003/167437; Lease of Lands in Bradewaye [Broadway co. Worc.] granted by Ralph Sheldon and William Child to Robert Gybbes and Richard Hickes (20 Oct. 1580), Birm. Arch. MS 3061/Acc 1901-003/167566; Bargain and sale from Ralph Huband and others, to Ralph Sheldon, of lands in Studley (15 Aug. 1602), Birm. Arch. MS 3601/Acc 1901-00/167414.

To one sore sick, that hears the passing bell.

Then shall thou see the dew-bedabbled wretch

Turn, and return, indenting with the way.

Each envious briar his weary legs do scratch.

Each shadow makes him stop, each murmur stay,

For misery is trodden on by many,

And being low, never relieved by any.<sup>700</sup>

While none of the above-quoted lines have been identified with Catholic recusancy, Sonnets 124 and 125 are commonly recognized as dealing with the historic issues of the recusant Catholics.<sup>701</sup> Sonnet 124 plainly comments on the actions of certain Catholic recusants willing to die as martyrs for their political actions against England, concluding “To this I witness call the fools of time,/Which die for goodness who have lived for crime” (lines 13-14). Then, in the next sonnet, the writer returns to his private lament, “Were’t aught to me I bore the canopy” (Sonnet 125, line 1), to conclude with imagery reflecting on the issues with the previous sonnet: “Hence, thou suborned informer! a true soul/When most impeached stands least in thy control” (lines 13-14).

Of all the lines herein quoted, these last two sonnets are perhaps the most specific to the personal situation of Ralph Sheldon: in 1594, he was accused of having been involved in a Catholic plot to kill the Queen and foment rebellion in Wales; the charges appear to have been baseless, and to have been instigated by informants.<sup>702</sup> Thus, Sheldon had found himself innocently classed among recusants attempting political action against the state (that is, among the same “fools of time” he decries in sonnet 124), but ultimately freed of the false claims of the informers (as indicated in sonnet 125).

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<sup>700</sup> Burrow, 212-13.

<sup>701</sup> See, for example, A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 254-60; also see Burrow, 628, note 14.

<sup>702</sup> Turner, “Sheldon conformity,” 575-78, 582.

### 34. ‘Labeo’ and the Backlash

Shakespeare’s *Venus & Adonis* was the writer’s most popular work, with 16 editions before 1640,<sup>703</sup> but its sexual insinuations caused a backlash among the more puritanical scholars. In satires published in 1597, the Puritan poet-critic Joseph Hall (1574-1656) castigates one “Labeo” as a prolific but indecent writer, admonishing him “for shame write cleanly Labeo, or write none.”<sup>704</sup> Latin dictionaries define “Labeo” as a Roman surname,<sup>705</sup> with the first example being “Antistius Labeo,” a lawyer from a prominent wealthy family who, as a Republican sympathizer, fell afoul of the regime of Augustus, and declined later office,<sup>706</sup> instead devoting his time not only to questions of civil law but also to dialectics and grammar, and early literature.<sup>707</sup> This definition is a very close match to the biography of Ralph Sheldon. Hall complains that Labeo avoids the criticism by living like a “craftie Cuttle” – under disguise – and shifting the criticism “to anothers name.”

In his set of six satires *Virgidemiae*, Joseph Hall writes of “Labeo” in three books: II, IV, and VI. Hall introduces satire 1 of Book II with his repeated call to Labeo, “For shame write better Labeo, or write none” (Virg.II.1.1; repeated in general form at Virg.II.1.26; again at Virg.II.1.54; and finally as the last line in satire, Virg.II.1.64). Hall seems to refer to specific work by Labeo:

But who conjur’d this bawdie *Poggies* ghost,  
From out the *stewes* of his lewde home-bred coast  
Or wicked *Rablais* drunken revellings,  
To grace the mis-rule of our Tavernings? (Virg.II.1.55-58).

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<sup>703</sup> Bullough, I.161.

<sup>704</sup> Joseph Hall, *The Poems of Joseph Hall*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool University Press, 1949), lix; Book 2, Satire 1.64.

<sup>705</sup> Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879; [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)); also Charles Anton, *Latin-English and English-Latin Dictionary* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1873), 488.

<sup>706</sup> See [www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Antistius-Labeo](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Antistius-Labeo).

<sup>707</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, ed. John C. Rolfe (Gel.13.10.1) [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu).

As Hall's modern editor Arnold Davenport put it, with these lines Hall seems to refer to "excessive indelicacy in literature."<sup>708</sup> He ends the verse with "For shame write cleanly *Labeo*, or write none."

In Book IV, Hall indicates that his criticism of Labeo has hit his mark, but that Labeo has shrugged off the criticism:

*Labeo* is whip't, but laughs mee in the face:

Why? for I smite and hide the galled place. (Virg.1.37-38)

He goes on to explain that Labeo can shrug off the criticism because he hides his true identity:

Gird but the *Cynicks* Helmet on his head,

Cares hee for the *Talus*, or his flayle of lead?

Long as the craftie *Cuttle* lieth sure

In the blacke *Cloude* of his thicke vomiture;

Who list complaine of wronged faith or fame

When hee may shift it to anothers name? (Virg.IV.1.39-44)

Hall ends his Book IV with satire 7, where he underscores his criticisms of Labeo: "I loathe[s]. . . *Labeos* Poems" (Virg.IV.7.5,7).

In his last set of references to Labeo, Hall seems to relent in his harsh criticism of Labeo:

Tho *Labeo* reaches right: (who can deny?)

The true straynes of *Heroicke* Poesie (Virg.VI.1.245-46)

But he continues on, with added criticism, mixed with begrudging praise:

For he can tell how fury reft his sense

And *Phoebus* fild him with intelligences,

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<sup>708</sup> Davenport, *Hall*, 176, note 55.

He can implore the heathen deities  
 To guide his bold and busie enterprise;  
 Or filch whole Pages at a clap for need  
 From honest *Petrarch* clad in English weed;  
 While bigge *But ohs* ech stanza can begin,  
 Whose trunke and tayle sluttish and hartlesse bin;  
 He knows the grace of that new elegance,  
 Which sweet *Philisides* fetch't of late from *France*,  
 That well beseem's his high-stil'd *Arcady*,  
 Tho others marre it with much liberty,  
 In Epithets to joyne two wordes in one,  
 Forsooth for the Adjectives cannot stand alone;  
 As a great Poet could of *Bacchus* say,  
 That he was *Semele-femori-gena*.  
 Lastly he names the spirit of *Astrophel*:

Now hath not *Labeo* done wonderous well? (Virg. VI.1.247-64)

Thus, while Hall recognizes that Labeo has “reached right” with his “heroicke poesie” – “who can deny?” he asks – Hall also lists specific issues with Labeo’s poetry: his opening “But Ohs”; his plagiarism of Petrarch; his frequent use of two-word epithets.

While orthodox scholars have generally either denied that “Labeo” masks the writer Shakespeare<sup>709</sup> or, as Davenport does in his edition of Hall’s poems, simply not address the possibility,<sup>710</sup> the case for Labeo as Shakespeare is hard to ignore. First, the Labeo described by Hall in Book VI (a writer celebrated by all for his heroic poetry, but with arguable faults such as excessive “But ohs” and plagiarism of Petrarch, along with

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<sup>709</sup> See *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, ed. John Munro (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970; originally printed 1909), 38-9.

<sup>710</sup> Davenport, *Hall*, lix; 259-60.

common use of hyphenated adjectives) is more congruent with Shakespeare<sup>711</sup> than any other known writer of the period.<sup>712</sup>

Second, and perhaps even more conclusive, the poet John Marston referred to “Labeo” in his satires published in 1598, in an introduction entitled “The Authour in prayse of his precedent Poem.”<sup>713</sup> Marston’s “precedent Poem” was *The Metamorphosis of Pygmalion* (1598) a poem heavily influenced by Shakespeare’s *Venus & Adonis*.<sup>714</sup> Marston’s lines are as follow:

So *Labeo* did complaine his love was stone,  
Obdurate, flinty, so relentlesse none[:]<sup>715</sup>

In his notes to the poem, Marston’s modern editor Arnold Davenport (the same Arnold Davenport who edited Hall’s poems 12 years earlier) unreservedly connects Marston’s use of “Labeo” to Hall’s satire on “Labeo.”<sup>716</sup> He also includes the quote from *Venus & Adonis* to which Marston is clearly referring:

Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel?  
Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth.<sup>717</sup>

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<sup>711</sup> See J. Denham Parsons, *Boycotted Shakespeare Facts* (London, 1920), 9-11; Parsons makes this argument as part of his case for Francis Bacon as the writer Shakespeare. While evidence of the “But ohs” in Shakespeare’s poetry are self-evident, as are his frequent use of two-word epithets, his plagiarism of Petrarch is not as obvious: on this last point, Lynne Enterline identifies Shakespeare’s use of Petrarch in his construction of the *Rape of Lucrece*; see Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171-174.

<sup>712</sup> This last has not stopped speculation by orthodox scholars on possible unknown works: for example, a note from Grosart is included in the *Shakspere Allusion-Book*, suggesting that “if the lost works of Thomas Watson ever be recovered, he may prove to be the thief from Petrarch and the utterer of ‘big But ohs’;” see Munro, *Shakspere Allusion*, 39.

<sup>713</sup> John Marston, *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool University Press, 1961), 65.

<sup>714</sup> Marston, 7.

<sup>715</sup> Marston, 65.

<sup>716</sup> Marston, 216, see notes 29 and 34.

<sup>717</sup> Marston, 216.

So, Marston's "Labeo" is presented in lines that are very nearly the same to those written by Shakespeare, in a context where Marston is responding to Hall's satires in which Hall first criticized one "Labeo" for writing licentious poetry (such as *Venus & Adonis*). And, while nonetheless, Davenport determines that "one need not take Labeo as Shakespeare," his conclusion seems hollow in face of the incontrovertible evidence (that Marston's lines are taken directly from Shakespeare, and that Marston was referring to Hall's "Labeo") which he himself presents.<sup>718</sup>

Equally disputed is the source of Hall's (and Marston's) use of "Labeo." The contributors to the *Shaksperere Allusion-Book*, attribute the name to the root meaning of "labeo" from the Latin word "labeon" or "one who has large lips," a definition given by Smith's Latin-English dictionary.<sup>719</sup> However, Latin-English dictionaries (for example, Lewis & Short, as well as Charles Anton) also define "Labeo" as a common Roman cognomen.<sup>720</sup> But, if a surname, to which person does the moniker refer? As noted above, the first Roman identified in the two dictionaries cited is Antistius Labeo, a celebrated Roman lawyer who retired from public life after a disagreement with Augustus. There are other candidates: Attius Labeo, a poet whose translations of Homer's works made him the example of a "bad poet"; and Quintus Fabius Labeo who (some believe) authored the Roman playwright Terence's plays. Davenport favored the "bad poet" theory: he thought Hall was writing of Labeo as the typical bad poet.<sup>721</sup> But Hall's language would seem to argue against the "bad poet" theory: in the lines 245-46 from Book VI, quoted above, Hall writes that Labeo achieved the "true straynes" of heroic poetry, something apparently agreed to by all ("who can deny" he asks); surely he could not write this of a "bad poet."

As it seems unlikely that a poet such as Hall would build his character "Labeo" around solely physical characteristics or that he thought "Labeo" a bad poet, by elimination, the choices are limited to "Antistius" or "Quintus Fabius." However, given

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<sup>718</sup> Marston, 216, note 29-30; Davenport sidesteps the Shakespeare identity issue by reminding his reader that "it is Venus who speaks the lines" and that Venus has never been suggested as a disguise for Shakespeare.

<sup>719</sup> Munro, *Shaksperere Allusion*, 37.

<sup>720</sup> See note 705 above.

<sup>721</sup> Davenport, *Hall*, lix.



the apparent greater prominence of the “Antistius,” he would seem the more likely source for Hall. Proponents for Francis Bacon strongly favor Antistius: Francis Bacon had a disagreement with the Queen and temporarily left public office.<sup>722</sup>

It is argued herein, however, that Ralph Sheldon was far more akin to Antistius Labeo than Francis Bacon. Ralph Sheldon, very much like Antistius, left public office over a deeply-held difference of principal between himself and the Crown; whereas Antistius left the Roman government because he believed strongly in republicanism, Sheldon left English public office because he believed in the Roman Catholic religion and greater religious tolerance. And, unlike Francis Bacon, both Sheldon and Antistius permanently forsook their government positions and public power.

It appears that Shakespeare may, in fact, have taken seriously the threat to his reputation:<sup>723</sup> in 1597, he switched to publisher Andrew Wise – at the sign of the Angel – a man whose other major works were the sermons of Thomas Playfere, a minister famous – like Shakespeare – for the sweetness of his style.<sup>724</sup>

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<sup>722</sup> See Parsons, 13.

<sup>723</sup> This was not the only criticism the writer faced: a Christmas performance of *Comedy of Errors* at Gray’s Inn in 1594/5 was met by derision (most likely by Francis Bacon) as a “Night of Errors” with a “Play of Errors and Confusion”; see Bullough, I.431.

<sup>724</sup> A.G. Hooks, “Wise ventures: Shakespeare and Thomas Playfere at the sign of the angel” [www.researchgate.net/publication/290562270](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/290562270).

### 35. ‘Literary’ Playbooks at the Sign of the Angel

In 1598, the stationer Andrew Wise published the first playbooks identifying their author as William Shakespeare (spelled by Wise as ‘Shake-speare’);<sup>725</sup> these two plays – *Richard II* and *Richard III* – were sold by Wise at his shop in St. Paul’s Churchyard at the sign of the Angel.<sup>726</sup> At least seven other plays acknowledged to be related to the Shakespeare oeuvre had been published before these two books; however, all were published anonymously and none were as close in text to that of the plays eventually published in the 1623 First Folio. Long-held Shakespearean theory considers many of the earlier playbooks to be corrupt derivations (‘bad quartos’) of one original Shakespeare authorial manuscript – the text of which was printed in the Folio. Lukas Erne, in his 2003 study *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, upended this theory by proposing that the later playbooks (such as those published by Wise) were revisions by the writer Shakespeare of earlier stage manuscripts into longer, more literary versions of his plays. This study follows Erne, contending that with his publications at the sign of the Angel, the writer Shakespeare signaled new attention both to a ‘brand’ that had been tarnished by the allegations of lewdness discussed in the previous section, and to the posterity of his work as part of a superior ‘literary’ genre. One of the major critics of ‘sub-literary’ English playbooks was Thomas Bodley, founder of the Bodleian Library,<sup>727</sup> a venture substantially contributed to by Ralph Sheldon.

Beginning in 1591, publications emerged of playbooks connected to the early Shakespeare work, all without authorial acknowledgement:

- (1) *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (1591)
- (2) *Titus Andronicus* (1594)
- (3) *The Taming of A Shrew* (1594)
- (4) *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (1594)

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<sup>725</sup> Erne, 57.

<sup>726</sup> Erne, 88.

<sup>727</sup> Erne, 11.

- (5) *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of York and Lancaster* (1594)
- (6) *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (1595)
- (7) *Romeo & Juliet* (1597)
- (8) *Richard II* (1597)

Then, in 1598, Andrew Wise published the first playbooks acknowledging the writer by name (William Shake-speare), *Richard II* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)<sup>728</sup> and *Richard III* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).<sup>729</sup> Subsequently, Wise published three other Shakespeare plays, all of which were published with the author's name: *I Henry IV* (1599, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition); *2 Henry IV* (1600); and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600).<sup>730</sup>

To a greater or lesser degree, Shakespearean scholarship has traditionally defined the 'authenticity' of a published playbook by its literary proximity to the First Folio – the ultimate 'authorial manuscript'.<sup>731</sup> So, certain of the early plays – such as *The Troublesome Raigne*, (generally) *The Taming of A Shrew* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III* – are so different in style (but not necessarily in structure or substance) that the early play is viewed as written by another (unknown) author and used by Shakespeare as a primary 'source' for the later play as set forth in the First Folio.<sup>732</sup> Other plays, though, are viewed as bad abridgements of the 'authorial manuscript' (or 'bad quartos') by means of piracy or reconstruction of the play by actor memorization ('memorial reconstruction').<sup>733</sup> Thus, the *Contention* and *True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, as well as *Romeo & Juliet*, are all viewed (generally), as 'bad quartos' created by 'memorial reconstruction' of Parts 2 & 3 of *Henry VI* in the First Folio<sup>734</sup> and *Romeo & Juliet* in

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<sup>728</sup> Erne, 60.

<sup>729</sup> Erne, 62.

<sup>730</sup> Erne, 58, 63.

<sup>731</sup> Erne, 197.

<sup>732</sup> For the view of *Troublesome Raigne*, see Bullough, IV.4-5; for *Taming of A Shrew*, see Bullough, I.57 and Erne, 199; for the *True Tragedy of Richard III*, see Bullough, III.222.

<sup>733</sup> See Erne, 200-201, emphasizing that the 'memorial reconstruction' theory concluded that these bad quartos were derived from (or a bad abridgement of) the authorial manuscript; these quartos are not, therefore, as considered by a previous historic view, 'early drafts.'

<sup>734</sup> For *2 Henry IV*, see Bullough, III.89; for *3 Henry VI*, III.157. Also see Erne, 199.

Quarto 2 (1599).<sup>735</sup> The 1594 *Titus Andronicus* has been viewed variously as a source play or as an early collaboration by Shakespeare with other author(s).<sup>736</sup>

By comparison, the five plays published by Wise – with the possible exception of *Richard III* – have all been generally viewed as ‘good quartos’ having been apparently derived from an authorial manuscript (or a ‘faithful’ transcript of such a manuscript).<sup>737</sup> While some have argued that *Richard III* was a derivation (a ‘memorial reconstruction’) of the authorial manuscript, Erne points out that this view was not accepted by Chambers, and Erne believes that it was likely a revised play because its long length (3389 lines)<sup>738</sup> “powerfully militates” against the possibility that it was ever fully performed, and therefore, with no opportunity for ‘memorial reconstruction.’<sup>739</sup>

As suggested, Erne offers a very different theory to explain the difference between the ‘bad’ and ‘good’ quartos: the shorter ‘bad’ quartos are manuscripts used in stage presentation, while the longer ‘good’ quartos (or the longer Folio versions) are plays Shakespeare revised to improve on the ‘literariness’ of the playbooks. Thus, for example, Erne compares similar passages in the ‘bad’ (Q1, 1597) and good (Q2, 1599) quartos of *Romeo & Juliet*, finding that the passages in Q1 are considerably shorter than in Q2; but he also finds that simple stage abridgement does not account for the textual differences, rather the writer seems to be deliberately revising the earlier (Q1) text.<sup>740</sup> Similarly, he argues that the shorter *Henry V* ‘bad’ quarto (Q1, 1600) is not only much shorter than the Folio play (Q1 has 1629 lines, while the Folio has nearly twice as many lines, 3253)<sup>741</sup>, but also that it is “substantially different text” from that in the Folio.<sup>742</sup> Likewise, the *Hamlet* ‘bad’ quarto (Q1, 1603) is “less than 60 percent” as long as the Folio (3537 lines) or Q2 (1604/5, 3668 lines),<sup>743</sup> but also is far less “multi-layered and

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<sup>735</sup> See Bullough, I.269.

<sup>736</sup> See Bullough, VI.4.

<sup>737</sup> Erne, 83, 89.

<sup>738</sup> Erne, 139.

<sup>739</sup> Erne, 187-89.

<sup>740</sup> Erne, 212.

<sup>741</sup> Erne, 207.

<sup>742</sup> Erne, 230.

<sup>743</sup> Erne, 207, 141.

complex” than the longer texts.<sup>744</sup> In making these arguments, Erne rejects the idea that the shorter ‘bad’ quartos are ‘derived’ from the longer, more literary texts (such as in the Folio), instead he concludes that the later ‘good’ quartos and the Folio plays were deliberately revised to improve the literary qualities of the earlier stage productions.

Following Erne, this study would expand on Erne’s theory to reflect the lifespan of Ralph Sheldon: beginning around 1597/8 – with his publications at the sign of the Angel – the writer Shakespeare started publishing revised versions of his much earlier stage triumphs, updating them to increase the literary value of the playbooks. This he continued to do, publishing some revisions within his life (e.g., *Richard II* and *Richard III* in 1597/8; Q2 of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1599; Q2 of *Hamlet* in 1604/5), while some revisions, such as *King John*, were not published until the First Folio.

Although the writer was, no doubt, intent on improving the texts for a long-term literary legacy, that he was also concerned about his reputation as the ‘sweet and gentle Willy’ (and rescuing his name from the possible stench of lewdness) seems evident from his choice of publisher for his first newly revised playbooks. Andrew Wise had his bookshop at the sign of the Angel since 1592, and aside from Shake-speare, published only one other major writer, the widely-renowned Protestant preacher Thomas Playfere.<sup>745</sup> At the time of Wise’s publications, Shake-speare and Playfere had two significant things in common: both were described in “mellifluous” terms, each with a strong public reputation for ‘stylistic sweetness’; and neither had been published in their major genres (Shake-speare as a writer of blockbuster history plays, and Playfere for his highly popular sermons).<sup>746</sup> Wise played a significant role in the careers of both the playwright and the preacher. In the case of the playwright, Wise published Shakespeare’s three most popular plays (*Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *I Henry IV*), all of which went on to multiple editions and were three of the best-selling playbooks of the era.<sup>747</sup> Thus, when the writer chose to publish his first plays under his name of ‘Shake-speare’ he chose

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<sup>744</sup> Erne, 239-40.

<sup>745</sup> Erne, 88.

<sup>746</sup> Hooks, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290562270>.

<sup>747</sup> Hooks, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290562270>.

someone (Wise) who not only sold at the Angel, but also associated the beloved playwright with a beloved preacher (Playfere).

But if the playwright was concerned with his own personal reputation, he was most likely even more concerned about the general reputation of playbooks as ‘sub-literary’ publications. In his introduction to his work, Erne points out that Thomas Bodley ruled out the inclusion of “riff raff Books” – such as “Almanacks, Plays, and an infinite Number, that are daily Printed, of very unworthy matters” – in his new Bodleian Library, a venture began in 1598.<sup>748</sup> Ralph Sheldon would have known of Bodley’s view: Sheldon was actively involved with Thomas Bodley in the formation of this new library, not only contributing the significant sum of 50 pounds (roughly 100,000 pounds in today’s currency) but also providing his own ‘cheine man’ – that is, someone who chained books together on a library shelf – for the construction of the library premises.<sup>749</sup>

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<sup>748</sup> Erne, 11.

<sup>749</sup> Alan Davidson, “Roman Catholicism in Oxfordshire from the late Elizabethan period to the Civil War (1580-1640),” Ph.D. Diss., (University of Bristol, 1970), 694, [research-information.bris.ac.uk/portafiles/portal/34506097/533572.pdf](http://research-information.bris.ac.uk/portafiles/portal/34506097/533572.pdf): from G.W. Wheeler, *Letters of Sir Thomas Bodley to Thomas James* (1926), 23.

**G. 1598–1613: SHELDON, THE  
GLOBE, LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S  
MEN, & THE FINAL PLAYS**

### 36. *Who Funded the Globe (1598-99)?*

One of the more enduring, but least acknowledged, mysteries of the writer Shakespeare is who paid to build the Globe; on the subject, E.K. Chambers writes flatly: “[T]here is nothing to show how the funds for the building were found.”<sup>750</sup> Ultimately, the ownership (and profits) of the Globe were divided into two equal shares, one held by the brothers Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, and the other by five members of the acting troupe then known as Chamberlain’s Men. While it is clear that the Burbages contributed funds (and woodwork) toward the erection of the new playhouse, it seems equally clear that the others (the members of the troupe), did not. So, who paid for the other half of the Globe, and why did they not take an ownership share, instead giving their share to the members of the acting troupe? It is argued herein that Ralph Sheldon personally paid for the construction, most probably out of funds loaned to him by his long-term acquaintance Thomas Horde. This argument is supported by three main points: (1) the arrangement apparently made between Sheldon and the acting troupe mirrored the earlier arrangement Sheldon and his father made with tapestry weavers to set up tapestry operations; (2) Sheldon had a massive loan from Thomas Horde – at one point up to the equivalent of over 82 million pounds in today’s currency – for which there was no known purpose, but which came due suddenly in 1603, and nearly bankrupted his entire fortune; and (3) Sheldon’s near bankruptcy has striking parallels with the story of Timon, as retold by Shakespeare in *Timon of Athens*.

With prolonged playhouse closures due to recurring outbreaks of plague, as well as persistent complaints alleging disorder and lewdness, acting troupes faced difficult times in the 1590s. After protracted wrangling between municipal and Court authorities, the Privy Council granted in 1598 two companies, the Lord Admiral’s Men

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<sup>750</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.417.



and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, monopolies for stage performance.<sup>751</sup> With such notice, the Lord Chamberlain's Men commenced plans for a new playhouse.

The construction of the Globe began with an "audacious proceeding." Around the end of December 1598, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage and others pulled down the wood and timber from the old Theatre north of London city in Middlesex, carried it to the south bank of the Thames, and used it to erect a new playhouse, the Globe.<sup>752</sup> The playhouse probably took around 7 months to complete, and was, according to Chambers, "doubtless ready" for the beginning of the autumn season of 1599.<sup>753</sup> At the same time, a lease was granted by the land's freeholder, Nicholas Brend of West Molesley, for a term of thirty-one years from Christmas 1598 to Christmas 1629. The lease conveyed the property in two equal shares ("moieties"),<sup>754</sup> one to the Burbage brothers and the other to members of the acting company: William Shakspeare, Augustine Philips, Thomas Pope, John Heminges, and William Kempe.<sup>755</sup> As leaseholders, all members of this "syndicate" were considered "housekeepers," or as the Burbages explained in 1635, "partners in the profittes of that they call the House."<sup>756</sup>

Although the actors holding the second share of the syndicate received ownership shares – and full profits in the receipts of the playhouse – there is no evidence that they provided any funds for the construction of the Globe.<sup>757</sup> Of this, the Burbages

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<sup>751</sup> See Privy Council Minute, dated 19 February 1598: A letter to the Master of the Revelles and Justice of Peace of Middlesex and Surrey; Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.325, document cxiv.

<sup>752</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.415.

<sup>753</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II. 415.

<sup>754</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II. 415, 417.

<sup>755</sup> Subsequently, the five members of the acting troupe holding the second share established a "joynt tenancie" among themselves, with the share divided into five parts to be held as "tenants in common." This was done, apparently, to avoid the break-up of the syndicate; as tenants in common, each part passed, upon death of the partner, to the surviving partners, and did not allow the parts to be passed through inheritance. Unfortunately, this legal strategy did not hold up, and the parts did, in fact, descend to heirs in later years, with much litigation ensuing; Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.417-18.

<sup>756</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.417.

<sup>757</sup> This contrasts strongly with the situation after the first Globe was destroyed by fire in 1613; when it was rebuilt, the costs of rebuilding fell upon all the shareholders who, as

commented, “Wee at like expense built the Globe, with more summes of money taken at interest, which lay heavy on us many yeeres; and to ourselves wee joined those deserving men, Shakspeare, Hemings, Condall, Philips, and others . . .”<sup>758</sup> They contrasted this arrangement with that of their father, James Burbage, who built the Theatre with “many hundred poundes taken up at interest” and the players received only the profits from the “doors,” not the galleries, which were paid to the “housekeepers.”<sup>759</sup> According to stage historian Bernard Beckermann, the agreement to pay the Globe players the housekeeping portion was a novel financial arrangement because, in effect, the company rented the theater from some of its own players.<sup>760</sup> This differed from the financial arrangements of the other major theater of the era, the Fortune, where the builders of the theater, Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn, did not share profits of the galleries with their acting company.<sup>761</sup>

The unique, and apparently benevolent, financial arrangement to share profits of the Globe with certain of the players is closely reminiscent of a financial scheme set up by Ralph Sheldon’s father, William, to establish a tapestry weaving industry in Warwickshire. The arrangement, publicly praised by the Earl of Leicester as a profitable “meanes to keep [the] poore from Idelnes,”<sup>762</sup> was established under William Sheldon’s 1570 will. By the terms of Sheldon’s will, the profits from a 51-year lease on the tolls and customs of the market fairs at Bishop’s Castle, Shropshire were to be made available to any man (English or foreign) willing to “use the art of making of tapestry and arras” in Worcestershire and Warwickshire.<sup>763</sup> The money was provided in the form of a loan without interest, to be repaid in 10 years;<sup>764</sup> the arrangement expired when Sheldon’s

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“housekeepers,” were responsible under the lease for the maintenance and repair of the premises; see Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.423-24.

<sup>758</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.417.

<sup>759</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II.384.

<sup>760</sup> Bernard Beckermann, *Shakespeare at the Globe* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 4.

<sup>761</sup> Beckermann, *The Theatrical Manager in England and America* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 48-51.

<sup>762</sup> *The Black Book of Warwick*, 48.

<sup>763</sup> TNA PROB 11/53, f.58-64; also Turner, “Finding the Sheldon weavers: Richard Hyckes and the Barcheston tapestry works reconsidered.”

<sup>764</sup> Curd, 95, note 40.

grandson was 24, around 1587.<sup>765</sup> Thus, profits from a long-term lease were used to finance weavers employed in the local tapestry industry, much the same as profits from the long-term lease of the Globe property were used to recompense certain actors of the Globe company. There was, of course, a major difference between the two arrangements: by the terms of the Globe lease, the players were legally entitled to the profits as part of their ownership of the lease, with no obligation to repay. William Sheldon paid money to obtain the tolls and customs of the market fairs, thereby gaining profits of the market fair operations; who paid money to build the playhouse from which the profits of the Globe lease were drawn?

According to Sheldon biographer E.A.B. Barnard, in 1603 Ralph Sheldon acknowledged an “immense” debt of 24,000 pounds (equivalent to about 48 million pounds today)<sup>766</sup> to Thomas “Hoerde” (variously spelled as Hord, Horde, Hoorde) of London;<sup>767</sup> scholar Alan Davidson found that, by the time Horde had died (sometime after 1605), Sheldon’s debt had risen to the “astronomical” sum of 41,000 pounds (about 82 million pounds today).<sup>768</sup> Both Barnard and Davidson remark on the absence of evidence to explain for what purpose the debt was incurred. Hilary Turner has also extensively examined the debt, finding that Sheldon took out a series of eight loans over a period of 14 years from Horde. Like Barnard and Davidson, Turner provides no explanation of the purpose for the transactions.<sup>769</sup> Sheldon and Horde appear to have been long-term friends,<sup>770</sup> and according to Turner, Sheldon “sheltered Horde at Weston [Sheldon’s home] for 12 years from 1588/89.”

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<sup>765</sup> Turner, “Sheldon weavers.”

<sup>766</sup> This calculation based on the rough equivalence of 1 pound in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 2,000 pounds in modern currency. The calculation is derived from comparative costs, such as that in the Elizabethan period the average yeoman’s salary was between 2 – 4 pounds per year, and that a small farm residence would lease for around 4 pounds annually.

<sup>767</sup> Barnard, 37-8.

<sup>768</sup> Davidson, *Roman Catholicism*, 257-58.

<sup>769</sup> Turner, “Biography & Epitaph of Ralph Sheldon c. 1537, d.1613; “An Early Map of Brailes: Fit Symbolographie?, *Warwickshire History*, vol. 5 (Summer 2001) 186-87.

<sup>770</sup> In a will dated 2 February 1572, Inner Temple lawyer William Grey (1521-74) left “a horse each” to Thomas “Hoord” and Ralph Sheldon; see Grey, William of Enville, Staffs, and the Inner Temple, London, *History of Parliament Online*

Notwithstanding his friendship with Sheldon, around 1599 Horde declared the loans forfeit, and much litigation ensued.<sup>771</sup> In 1605, Sheldon negotiated a repayment plan for 24,000 pounds;<sup>772</sup> subsequently, however, the Crown declared Sheldon's debts were forfeit to the Crown because the Catholic Horde had failed to pay his recusancy fines. Under this arrangement, most of Sheldon's lands were claimed by the Crown as security for payment of the debt, leaving him a far less wealthy man.<sup>773</sup> In his will dated 20 November 1612, Sheldon bitterly noted "the wilful and hard dealing of Mr. Thomas Hoord."<sup>774</sup>

*Timon* was not published until 1623, in the First Folio, but stylistic similarities with *Coriolanus* suggest that Shakespeare wrote *Timon of Athens* around 1607, near the same time Sheldon lost much of his land and wealth to Horde's claim for debt.<sup>775</sup> As remarked by Kenneth Muir, there remain a "large number of unsolved problems" with regard to Shakespeare's *Timon*, including its source.<sup>776</sup> For most of the early writers, such as Plutarch, Timon of Athens was the "personification of surliness,"<sup>777</sup> very unlike the prodigiously generous Timon of Shakespeare. Rather than rely solely on such classical writers, Shakespeare seems to have followed an earlier anonymous Elizabethan play, *Timon* (an academic play thought to have been written between 1581 and 1590),<sup>778</sup> in its emphasis on Timon's prosperity and generosity.<sup>779</sup>

However, in following loosely the plot of the anonymous *Timon*, Shakespeare made a major alteration: while in the earlier play Timon loses his fortune when his ships

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([www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/grey-william-i-1521-74](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/grey-william-i-1521-74)).

<sup>771</sup> See *Sheldon v. Horde*, TNA C2/JasI/S22/51 (1603-1625).

<sup>772</sup> See *Agreement between Ralph Sheldon of Beoley [co. Worc] and Thomas Hord of London concerning money matters* (25 March 1605), Birmingham Archives, MS 3601/Acc 1901-003/167897.

<sup>773</sup> Turner, *Ralph Sheldon Biography, Tapestries Called Sheldon*.

<sup>774</sup> TNA PROB 11/121/345.

<sup>775</sup> See Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, III.488.

<sup>776</sup> Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 218.

<sup>777</sup> Bullough, VI.227.

<sup>778</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.49.

<sup>779</sup> See Muir, *Sources of Shakespeare*, 218-19; Bullough, VI.232-33.

are sunk at sea,<sup>780</sup> Shakespeare writes of a man who is besieged by friends who suddenly turn into creditors, demanding immediate repayment of their loans, in spite of his former monumental generosity towards them.<sup>781</sup> With this plot twist, Shakespeare's *Timon* retells the story of Ralph Sheldon and Thomas Horde. Like Timon, Sheldon was a very wealthy man, known for his generosity and hospitality. Then, suddenly, as in *Timon*, Sheldon's close friend Thomas Horde decided to call in a very large debt, seemingly without any show of gratitude for Sheldon's prior generosity to him. And, as in *Timon*, the results were catastrophic for Sheldon, as he (like Timon) was unable to pay the huge debt, thereby losing his personal fortune to "hard dealing." It also can be noted that Sheldon – once again like Timon – did not face debtor prison for his inability to pay his debts.

In its bitter tone, Shakespeare's *Timon* seems an exceedingly personal work.

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<sup>780</sup> See Bullough, VI.232.

<sup>781</sup> Bullough, VI.244.

### 37. Sheldon, R.S., Lord W.H., & Shakespeare (1603)

On 17 May 1603, within a week after his arrival in London, the newly proclaimed King James I of England signed a patent naming Shakespeare's company the King's Servants (also known as the King's Men), and allowing them to perform throughout the kingdom.<sup>782</sup> By contrast, the company's major competitor, the Lord Admiral's servants headed by Edward Alleyn did not receive their patent until nearly three years later.<sup>783</sup> The circumstances by which the company so quickly gained the favor of King James are unclear, especially as in the month prior to its issuance they had effectively lost their privileged status of the Lord Chamberlain's Men: since 1600, the Lord Chamberlain Hunsdon had been ill, and unable to perform his duties; on 6 April 1603, King James replaced Hunsdon as Lord Chamberlain with Baron Howard.<sup>784</sup>

So, in the absence of Lord Hunsdon, who was the influential patron of the newly appointed King's Servants? Leeds Barroll, in his 1991 study on the subject, shows that this new patron of the company was likely William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke, and the son of the Countess of Pembroke.<sup>785</sup> As support, Barroll cites both Pembroke's interest in the arts, as well as his close friendship with King James, evident from the very start of the reign.<sup>786</sup> Ultimately, of course, it was Pembroke who sponsored the publication of Shakespeare's First Folio in 1523.

As mentioned earlier in this study, Nicholas Breton's *A poste with a packet of madde letters* (1606), includes a short note from R.S. to 'Lord W.H.'; this note is offered as confirmation of Barroll's theory. Although the identification of R.S. is unknown from the face of the letter, the identification of 'Lord W.H.' is never in doubt: this letter was part of a series of letters apparently collected by Breton from among his friends; Lord

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<sup>782</sup> Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater* (Cornell University, 1991), 32-3.

<sup>783</sup> Barroll, 35.

<sup>784</sup> Barroll, 33-4.

<sup>785</sup> Erne, 111.

<sup>786</sup> Barroll, 38-40.

William Herbert's mother, the Countess of Pembroke, was a close friend.<sup>787</sup> From what can be deduced, as discussed below, the events behind the letter came about shortly after Shakespeare's company were appointed as the King's Servants.

The letter is from R.S., inviting "his very good lord, the Lord. W.H." to the wedding of his daughter to a "gentleman of some worth" where a "Pa\*\*y of Venison" will be served. The writer makes it clear that this is an invitation to a nobleman to whom he is indebted: "your noblenesse never ceasing to binde my service to your kindnesse . . . [and if the nobleman will attend] my love so farre assured, as wherein I maye deserve, that I cannot requite, I will faile of my hope, but I will discharge some parte of my debte." R.S. ends with: "And so not doubting your honourable favoure to this my sute for a Bucke, beseeching God to adde happiness to your good health, I humbly take my leave" (emphasis added). Making the post noteworthy as a "madde letter," the invitation for "Pa\*\*y of Venison" sets up an obvious pun in the ending sentence, that the Lord will favor "my sute for a Bucke."

Although the letter is undated, events in the lives of both Pembroke and Ralph Sheldon narrow the date to around June 1603. As Pembroke was not 'Lord W.H.' until the death of his father in January 1601, the letter was not written until after this date. On 23 July 1603, Sheldon's youngest daughter Philippa (c. 1575-?) married Sir John Sulyard (1572-1626),<sup>788</sup> suggesting a likely date for an invitation to the wedding in the month or so prior to the occasion. At the same time, Pembroke had gained the favor of the newly proclaimed King James I of England: he first paid homage to the new King on 24 April, 1603<sup>789</sup> then, according to accounts of Italian diplomats, he was "always with the

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<sup>787</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900/Breton, Nicholas; see <https://en.wikisource.org>. This biography suggests the Countess was not only Breton's literary patron but also his lover.

<sup>788</sup> See Last Will & Testament, Ralph Sheldon, The National Archives Prob. 11/121/345; also [ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LW6G-8G2/Philippa-sheldon-1575](https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LW6G-8G2/Philippa-sheldon-1575).

<sup>789</sup> Brian O'Farrell, *Shakespeare's Patron* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 39.

King”<sup>790</sup> and hosted the King and his court at his estate of Wilton in Wiltshire in December 1603 in the time of plague.<sup>791</sup>

However, the key to the letter’s pun on the “sute for a Bucke” comes from circumstances surrounding George Buck, effectively confirmed by King James as the acting Master of the Revels in June 1603. On 23 June 1603, Buck received a grant of the reversionary interest in the title, then held by Buck’s uncle Edmund Tilney. The commission for the Office was issued the same day, with Buck’s name replacing Tilney’s, inferring that Buck was now the acting Master; subsequently, on 23 July 1603 (the same day as the Sheldon wedding), Buck was knighted.<sup>792</sup>

As Master of the Revels, Buck was responsible not only for the court entertainments, but also for censorship of plays for stage performances.<sup>793</sup> Thus, R.S. was writing to his major patron, anticipating his need for help from the wealthy and prominent Lord W.H. in making “sute” (using, as the writer Shakespeare was wont to do, the primarily legal term, “sute”) to the now confirmed Master of the Revels Buck. The letter expresses R.S.’s gratitude for such assistance.

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<sup>790</sup> Calendar of State Papers, Venetian, vol. 10 (1603-1607) (London, 1900), 77 (No. 105, 6 August 1603), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102575022>, (Hathitrust #161).

<sup>791</sup> Calendar of State Papers, Venetian, vol. 10, 116 (No. 164, 1 December 1603), (Hathitrust #200).

<sup>792</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, I.99.

<sup>793</sup> Arthur Kincaid, “Buck [Buc], Sir George,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/3821>.



### 38. *Finale: The Unfinished ‘Two Noble Kinsmen’ (1613/4)?*

Mysteries abound with *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, widely acknowledged to be Shakespeare’s last play. First written and performed in 1613/4, it is generally believed to be a collaboration with John Fletcher (1579-1625), successor to Shakespeare as the house playwright for the King’s Men. But unlike the play that immediately preceded it, *Henry VIII* – also thought to be collaboration with Fletcher – TNK was not included in the 1623 First Folio. Instead, it was first printed in 1634, with Fletcher listed as first author, followed by ‘Mr. William Shakespeare.’ As Harold Bloom explains it, the editors of the First Folio (members of the King’s Men, whose resident playwright in 1623 was Fletcher) most likely simply “conceded” the play to Fletcher as part of his oeuvre, not Shakespeare’s.<sup>794</sup> But the larger question remains: why did the company’s senior playwright (Shakespeare) receive second billing to his junior writer on a play considered to be the last effort of an eminent career?

This mystery is compounded by another: the Prologue to the play refers to only one “writer” (line 19) when clearly there were two. The Prologue appears to have been written by Fletcher and presented at the opening night at Blackfriars – possibly the first play performed in London by the King’s Men after the Globe Theatre burned down in June 1613, a performance marked by “great applause.” This leaves the question: why would Fletcher specify only one writer, especially when the second writer was the senior playwright Shakespeare at the opening night of Shakespeare’s last production? While the conventional answer dismisses the mystery, concluding that the usage was only due to the expediency of the rhyme, both the gravity of the performance and the traditions of the era would argue otherwise.

As with the other anomalies discussed in this book, the solution for these mysteries can be found in the biography of Ralph Sheldon. His death in March 1613 suggests the possibility that when he died he had completed his collaboration on *Henry VIII* but left behind an unfinished shell (the first and fifth acts) of TNK, a shell later filled

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<sup>794</sup> Bloom, 694.

in by Fletcher. Fletcher's Prologue to TNK supports this theory: it reads as a eulogy to a dead poet who is celebrated as the "noble breeder" of the play (line 10), a poet whose works are so great that the (one) writer (Fletcher) fears it is "too ambitious" to even "aspire to him" (line 23). In a very unusual note the Prologue explicitly recognizes Chaucer as the play's source (line 13), allowing the conventional conclusion that the eulogy refers to the ancient poet. However, the question why this play (and presumably Shakespeare) should in his last play invoke the shadow of its source (Chaucer) – against the general traditions of the era – as a cause for fear and trepidation remains unanswered. A more likely reason for the play's radical frankness of its source would be to obfuscate – as was routinely done – the veiled identity of the true playwright. Further evidence that the eulogy is connected to a recent death (and not that of an ancient poet) can be found in the Prologue's last line mourning "our losses." While this line may refer to the loss of the Globe, the plural "losses" would support the loss of both the Globe and its illustrious playwright. As it happens, Sheldon's first official production for Leicester was Richard Edwards's play *Palamon and Arcite* at Oxford in 1566; can it be coincidental that Shakespeare's final play was his original reprise of the same play?<sup>795</sup>

Although TNK was not printed until 1634, a firm consensus agrees that the first performance of the play was probably in late 1613 or early 1614.<sup>796</sup> When the play was listed on the Stationers' Register in 1634, it was entered as a "TragiComedy," a term that had not been used on the Register for almost 20 years, since about 1614.<sup>797</sup> The probable date of the first performance is bookended by two events: (1) the presentation of a morris dance at Whitehall on 20 February 1613 in a masque created by Fletcher's collaborator Francis Beaumont; critics agree that this morris dance was borrowed by TNK at Act 3.5;

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<sup>795</sup> Both Edwards's play and TNK were based on the same source, Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. Although Edwards's play is lost, W.Y. Durand reconstructed Edwards's play from contemporary accounts and determined that Shakespeare did not use Edwards's script as a basis for his play; rather, he created a unique version of the same Chaucer tale. See W.Y. Durand, "Notes on Richard Edwards," *The Journal of Germanic Philology*, 4, no. 3 (1902), 356-69; [www.jstor.org/stable/27699182](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27699182)).

<sup>796</sup> See William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. Eugene M. Waith, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford University Press, 1989, reissued 2008), 1; TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 288, note 2.

<sup>797</sup> TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 288, note 2.

and (2) an allusion to the “play, *Palamon*” in Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (4.3.63-5), first performed 31 October 1614; Palamon is the hero of TNK.<sup>798</sup> While the exact date is unknown, Paul Bertram in “The Date of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*” (1961) suggests that the first performance may have been the King’s Men first performance in London after the Globe fire on 29 June 1613, at Blackfriars in November 1613, thereby making the Prologue’s reference to “our losses” particularly “apposite to the occasion.”<sup>799</sup> Court records show that the play remained in the company’s repertory, with a revival in 1619 at Court and possibly another revival after November 1625.<sup>800</sup>

Scholars have debated the possible collaboration between Shakespeare and Fletcher in TNK and *Henry VIII* since the early 19th century.<sup>801</sup> In both cases the debate has proceeded similarly: early scholars identified scenes attributable to each dramatist, and modern scholars have used sophisticated analytical tools to confirm the proposed divisions.<sup>802</sup> In both plays, the proportion of the proposed distribution is roughly the same, with about 40 percent of the lines attributed to Shakespeare and about 60 percent to Fletcher.<sup>803</sup>

Of the two debates, the conclusion on *Henry VIII* is less settled; while Gordon McMullan ascribes the play to both authors on the title page of his 2000 edition of the Arden Shakespeare,<sup>804</sup> the Folger Library’s 2007 edition of the play does not, stating that there is no consensus on the issue although the “belief in collaborative authorship [is]

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<sup>798</sup> See TNK, ed. Waith, 1-3; for more details, see Paul Bertram, “The Date of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*,” *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, 12, no. 1 (Winter, 1961): 21-4, [www.jstor.org/stable/2867268](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2867268).

<sup>799</sup> Bertram, “Date of TNK,” 29-30.

<sup>800</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 3.

<sup>801</sup> Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 401 (serious debate over TNK started with Henry Weber in an 1812 edition of TNK); 336 (James Spedding argued in 1850 for the collaboration in *Henry VIII*).

<sup>802</sup> Vickers, 333.

<sup>803</sup> See Vickers, 361 (Table 6.11 shows *Henry VIII* line divisions calculated by R.A. Law in 1959: 1154 to Shakespeare; 1512 to Fletcher); 414 (Table 6.28 shows TNK line divisions calculated by Harold Littledale in 1885: 1089 to Shakespeare; 1458 to Fletcher).

<sup>804</sup> Vickers, 397.

currently in the ascendent.”<sup>805</sup> As regards TNK, however, the Folger Library’s 2010 edition includes Shakespeare and Fletcher as co-authors on the title page (Shakespeare listed first), and notes that “most modern scholars” agree that the play was the “product of collaboration” with “almost unanimous agreement” on the relative shares of the two dramatists.<sup>806</sup>

Notwithstanding the similar proportion of lines of the proposed division between the two authors in both plays, two notable differences in the construction of the plays might justify why *Henry VIII* was included in the Shakespeare Folio, and TNK was not. First, in *Henry VIII* lines written by the two authors are roughly integrated across the entire play, with Shakespeare having substantial number of lines in Acts 1, 2, 3, and 5, fairly balanced with Fletcher’s lines in the same acts;<sup>807</sup> by contrast, in TNK, Shakespeare’s lines are almost solely found in Acts 1 and 5, with Fletcher filling in the Acts 2, 3, and 4, and adding little to the Acts 1 and 5.<sup>808</sup> Second, whereas there is little, if any, reference in the studies of *Henry VIII* of evidence that Fletcher revised the Shakespeare lines,<sup>809</sup> various studies of TNK note possible instances of Fletcher’s “retouching” and “intervention” in Shakespeare’s lines.<sup>810</sup>

These differences would seem to indicate that Fletcher took a far more active role in TNK than he did in the earlier *Henry VIII*, thereby possibly explaining why the company ultimately attributed the play to Fletcher with Shakespeare as a second author. The construction differences also appear to have resulted in a much more uneven quality in the two plays, as confirmed by various critics. While critics of both plays have recognized the comparative weakness of the Fletcher portions, the criticism is far more pronounced concerning TNK. Thus, of *Henry VIII*, E.K. Chambers wrote: “I should agree

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<sup>805</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 251.

<sup>806</sup> TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 273. See also TNK, ed. Waith, 7: “Fletcher’s participation is usually, but not universally, accepted today, the conspicuous dissenter from the consensus being Paul Bertram, who believes that Shakespeare wrote the entire play.”

<sup>807</sup> See Vickers, Table 6.11.

<sup>808</sup> See Vickers, Table 6.28.

<sup>809</sup> See Vickers, 333-402.

<sup>810</sup> See Vickers, 416, 428-29, 431; see also TNK, ed. Waith, 23.

that *Henry VIII* is not very characteristic Fletcher, and should add that it is not very characteristic Shakespeare either. Shakespeare must have been writing in a tired vein and with some loss of concentration.”<sup>811</sup> But compare Harold Bloom’s comments on the construction of TNK: “Pageant, ritual, ceremony, whatever one choses to call it, Shakespeare’s share in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is poetry astonishing even for him, but very difficult poetry, hardly suitable for the theater. It contrasts oddly with the rest of the play, written by John Fletcher . . .”<sup>812</sup> And whereas the collaboration in *Henry VIII* may have adversely affected the tone of the play, in TNK, the collaboration was awkward on a fundamental level; Dieter Mehl, commenting in the Folger TNK, describes the problem: “It was evidently the dramatic and moral dilemma posed by the story’s action that intrigued the two dramatists; but it appears from the text of the play that they did not wholly agree on details of character and dramatic method.”<sup>813</sup>

Especially as compared to the proposed collaboration in *Henry VIII*, the role of the senior playwright Shakespeare in the construction of TNK seems markedly diminished; the question becomes: “Where was Shakespeare”? The conventional theory is that “Shakespeare” retired “in ease” to Stratford where he spent “some years” until his death in 1616.<sup>814</sup> But as Harold Bloom wrote, if so, “Shakespeare’s abandonment of his art is virtually unique in the annals of Western literature”; Bloom knew of “no major composer or painter who made a similar retreat.”<sup>815</sup>

So, did Shakespeare merely abandon his copy to his junior writer Fletcher? Or is it more likely that Shakespeare’s death prevented a full collaboration with Fletcher? Ralph Sheldon died in March 1613, just 3 months before the Globe burned down in a presentation of *Henry VIII*. From this, it seems possible that there was, in fact, no actual ‘collaboration’ between Shakespeare and Fletcher on the details of the play, with

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<sup>811</sup> Vickers, 347.

<sup>812</sup> Bloom, 694.

<sup>813</sup> TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 278. See also TNK, ed. Waith, 18-9: the “strongest case for dividing the authorship between Fletcher and Shakespeare” can be made by comparing the abrupt changes in parallel scenes over the course of the play.

<sup>814</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 5. The precise date of his “retirement” is not known. See also Chambers, *Shakespeare*, I.87-9, on Shakspeare’s last years.

<sup>815</sup> Bloom, 695.

Shakespeare (Sheldon) dead, leaving only a skeleton version of the play, the beginning and the end. It is argued that the Prologue to the play – in form a eulogy by one writer to the dead poet who is the “noble breeder” (line 10) of the play – confirms this theory.

Generally, the Prologue has been attributed to Fletcher, with Oxford Shakespeare editor Eugene Waith pointing out that the repeated use of “ye,” along with the “somewhat salacious tone” of the Prologue, and its similarity to an epilogue written by Fletcher in another play, *Valentinus* (1614), suggests Fletcher.<sup>816</sup> The Prologue is also widely credited with linking the play’s performance to the opening performance, rather than a subsequent revival. Of line 16, “And the first sound this child hear be a hiss,” Waith writes: “This comparison of the play to a new-born babe implies that it is being performed for the first time and hence that the prologue (and epilogue) were written for that occasion.”<sup>817</sup>

In his work on the play, Bertram raises a significant point: line 19, “From me the witless chaff of such a writer,” refers to a single writer in a play where two writers are listed as co-authors. However, neither the Waith edition of TNK nor the Folger edition makes any note of the point. In his book on TNK, Bertram mentions that this is a point that “scholars have regularly refused to consider.”<sup>818</sup> As Bertram explains, “for those who assume dual authorship” the issue is treated as a “trifling puzzle” because the word “writer” appears in a rhyme position, which [for them] “will no doubt suffice to resolve” the question.<sup>819</sup> Underlying this position seems to be the assumption that a writer would not deliberately use a term that would mislead the audience as to the play’s authorship; but this assumption ignores the converse: would the simple expediency of a rhyme ever justify the appearance that one writer – in this case, the acclaimed senior playwright Shakespeare in his final stage play – was failing to be credited for his work on the play?

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<sup>816</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 23; see TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 289, accepting without discussion the attribution of the Prologue to Fletcher.

<sup>817</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 80. Bertram agrees; see Bertram, “Dating of TNK,” 25.

<sup>818</sup> Bertram, *Shakespeare and ‘The Two Noble Kinsmen’* (Rutgers University Press, 1965), 260.

<sup>819</sup> Bertram, “Date of TNK,” 31.

For Bertram, the question is far from trivial; he suggests that both the importance of the play's opening performance and the contemporary traditions on identifying collaboration would strongly argue for a literal interpretation of the line rather than a view of it as an inadvertent rhyme. Of the play's significance at the time, he notes that it was "a most expensive and lavish production," one that "calls for a very large cast." For such a marquee production, Bertram implies that it would be "patently absurd" that the matter of authorship would not be properly conveyed to the audience.<sup>820</sup> On the importance of the Prologue to introduce authorship, Bertram writes:

Such speeches, especially in plays written for the King's company after the acquisition of Blackfriars, were frequently used to acknowledge collaboration or revision, and the authorship of plays by established dramatists was ordinarily known to the audience – perhaps through the announcements made from the stage at the end of the performances or through the playbills circularized and posted about London – so that a reference to a single writer in a prologue to a play of dual authorship (particularly a King's play of so late a date) would appear to be a puzzling piece of deception, unlikely to be attempted and unlikely if attempted to succeed.<sup>821</sup>

In making his case, Bertram cites the commentary of "distinguished stage historian" W.J. Lawrence whose "familiarity with the customary ways in which Jacobean and Caroline playwrights addressed audiences at Blackfriars in their prologues and epilogues constrained him to interpret the word 'writer' quite literally."<sup>822</sup> In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1921, Lawrence had written extensively on the question:

What we have to determine here is whether we should be justified in taking the references to the "wrighter" literally. Assuming that Shakespeare and Fletcher collaborated on the play, could the mere exigency of rhyme have warranted such a misleading use of the singular number? . . . In the circumstances, had Shakespeare collaborated with Fletcher on *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, nothing could have justified a reference to "the writer" in the prologue.<sup>823</sup>

Lawrence continues on, illustrating the "absurdity" of the use of a singular "writer" in the Prologue to a collaboration by comparing the prologue of another play in which Fletcher

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<sup>820</sup> Bertram, "Date of TNK," 31.

<sup>821</sup> Bertram, *Shakespeare and TNK*, 259-60.

<sup>822</sup> Bertram, "Date of TNK," 31-2.

<sup>823</sup> W.J. Lawrence, *Times Literary Supplement*, XX (July 14, 1921), 450.

collaborated with Francis Beaumont, *The Little French Lawyer* (1619?), where the prologue refers to “writers” and the epilogue to “our poets.”<sup>824</sup>

Obviously constrained by the belief that “Shakespeare” was alive and well in 1613/4, and did not die until 1616, both Bertram and Lawrence – taking the Prologue’s reference to one writer literally – concluded that TNK was not a collaboration but was the work of a single writer (Bertram theorized the writer was Shakespeare, and Lawrence that the writer was Fletcher). But what if Shakespeare was Ralph Sheldon and he had died in 1613?

Following the “somewhat salacious” (according to Waith, 23) opening gambit comparing “new plays and maidenheads” (lines 1-9), the Prologue begins an extended eulogy to its dead “noble breeder” (line 10), going on to apologize that the Prologue fears that the “witless chaff” of the “writer” (line 19) will damage the dead poet’s legacy. Ostensibly, the Prologue’s eulogy is directed to Chaucer, whose work *The Knight’s Tale* is the source of the play; however, like the Prologue’s reference to the single “writer,” the reference to Chaucer (line 13, “Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives”) is exceedingly odd. Waith notes that its “indebtedness to Chaucer” is acknowledged with a “frankness unusual in the drama of the period.”<sup>825</sup> The Folger TNK edition states that “[N]o other play in the canon acknowledges its ancestry so openly.”<sup>826</sup> However, one other Shakespeare play does openly announce its source: in *Pericles*, the Prologue is named as the source, John Gower, and as the Prologue, Gower explains the drama to the audience. But whereas Gower as Prologue serves as a plot device, the TNK reference to Chaucer shows no similar dramatic purpose.

Why, at the end of his illustrious career, would a playwright of the rank of Shakespeare make the first indication of insecurity in the shadow of an ancient source, and do so in such a groveling manner, saying that it is “too ambitious to aspire to him [the dead poet]” (line 23)? As inappropriate as this apology might seem between Shakespeare and Chaucer (after all, Shakespeare had previously used Chaucer as a source

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<sup>824</sup> Lawrence, TLS, 450.

<sup>825</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 26.

<sup>826</sup> TNK, eds. Mowat and Werstine, 273.



in numbers of his plays), such an abject apology would not have been inappropriate if it were to have been made by the junior playwright Fletcher to the master Shakespeare, on the occasion of the remembrance of the recent death of the great poet.

But if that were the case – if the Prologue is the farewell eulogy to its master playwright Shakespeare by the company under the direction of its new playwright Fletcher – why would the name of Chaucer be invoked? Throughout his career, Ralph Sheldon had been forced into anonymity because of the political implications of his Catholic recusancy. If anything the dangers of this position had only increased in the last years of his life and career: the notorious Gunpowder Plot – an attempt by militant Catholics to blow up the Parliament building in 1605 – was led by people related to the family of Sheldon’s late wife, Anne Throckmorton. Thus, as the members of the company did when they published the First Folio in 1623 including a false likeness of the poet, the same company attempted to preserve the anonymity of its politically incorrect playwright in 1613 by inserting two lines concerning another master poet, Chaucer.

The final line in the Prologue mourns that “[O]ur losses fall so thick that we must needs leave.” In his study on the date of TNK, Bertram considered the implications of such a reference – “given the verbal context, and given the common theatrical conventions of address between the speaker and audience in a prologue” – and concluded that it was “an allusion to some public misfortune that befell the acting company.”<sup>827</sup> After reviewing the evidence for various possibilities, he turns to the play’s epilogue to determine that the reference was most likely to the recent destruction of the Globe:

The promise of “many a better [play], to prolong Your old loves to us” [lines 15-6] sounds like precisely the right note to strike at a resumption of London performances after the Globe fire brought them to a halt; the curtailed activity would be part of the point of the reference, and a London re-opening before a familiar audience would be the fitting occasion for the reassurance that “we, and all our might, Rest at your service . . . .”<sup>828</sup>

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<sup>827</sup> Bertram, “Date of TNK,” 25.

<sup>828</sup> Bertram, “Date of TNK,” 30.

The Waith edition of TNK allows that the reference “[M]ay refer to the destruction of the Globe Theatre to fire on 29 June 1613.”<sup>829</sup> Certainly the death of the revered Shakespeare would have added immeasurably to the poignancy of the Prologue’s final line.

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<sup>829</sup> TNK, ed. Waith, 80: see note for line 32. The Folger TNK edition does not interpret the reference to “our losses.”

## **PART IV: CONCLUSION – WHY SHELDON WAS SHAKESPEARE**

As noted by Harold Love in his survey of the methodology of the attribution study, “[E]rudite disputes over the identity of the creators of texts are probably as old as writing, and may well predate it.”<sup>830</sup> But how does one assess the persuasiveness of such arguments? Professor Love offers a test for an “assured attribution”: a case that is “genuinely beyond reasonable doubt [which] can be supported by strong evidence of several kinds, including the stylometric, and for which there is no reasonable alternative.”<sup>831</sup>

The case for Ralph Sheldon as author of the plays and poetry cumulatively known as the Shakespeare works follows. The argument proceeds in two segments: (i) Profile of the Writer – as advocated by Professor Love, a profile of the author of the Shakespeare works is constructed using various well-accepted aspects of the Shakespeare texts, allowing a broad comparison between Sheldon and the other claimants; (ii) Why Sheldon Was Shakespeare – the various types of evidence (both external and internal) that are documented in the previous chapters are reconfigured to connect, in chronological order, the rare aspects of the Shakespeare literary output to Sheldon’s life, thereby making the case of Sheldon as Shakespeare.

Two premises underlie the Sheldon case for attribution. First, although the works are traditionally ascribed to the actor William Shakspeare, there is some external evidence of his authorship but little, if any, internal or other kind of evidence. Thus, under Love’s definition of an “assured attribution,” the authorship of the works falls far short, and is more appropriately classified as “unknown.”<sup>832</sup> Second, under the traditional

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<sup>830</sup> Love, 14.

<sup>831</sup> Love, 216.

<sup>832</sup> Love himself was a confirmed Stratfordian. In the penultimate chapter of his book, “Shakespeare and Co.,” Love discusses the Shakespeare authorship controversy and some of the alternative candidates. While Love does not conclude – as this author does – that the Shakspeare claim is lacking elements of Love’s own definition, he also does not present documentation of any type of evidence other than the external evidence related to the publication of the various works to support the attribution of the works to the Stratfordian man. Rather, in the absence of normally expected evidence, he merely speculates on possible explanations for the absence thereof. So, for example, he indicates that because the Shakespeare oeuvre reveals “profound” knowledge of some professions and crafts, it “needs to be explained how this knowledge was acquired”; however, he fails to present any type of evidence that would support the acquisition of such knowledge.

view the Shakespeare works commence around the end of the 1580s, notwithstanding considerable strong evidence that the Shakespeare plays began circa 1560 with the first stage performance of *Romeo & Juliet*, continuing with various plays collectively identified as ‘source-plays.’ The current theory is that the writer Shakespeare took these original plays – structure, characters, and all – and rewrote them as later published poetic masterpieces. The theory of Sheldon as Shakespeare avoids the unpleasant (and unlikely) implication that the tremendously gifted writer Shakespeare was a plagiarist: Sheldon’s life history would identify all the so-called ‘source-plays’ as early versions of the recognized Shakespeare oeuvre, later reworked by Sheldon into the literary masterpieces published in the First Folio.

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Instead, he simply proposes – without citing any evidence – an explanation for such acquisition. Thus, in the case of the highly detailed legal knowledge in the texts, he opines that “it would be easy to imagine [the actor Shakspeare] socialising with Inns-of-Court students in the Devil’s Tavern in order to clarify legal issues arising from his plays.” See Love 202.

**(i) Profile of the Writer: Sheldon vs. the other Claimants**

In his notes, Professor Love writes that to establish an attribution, “profiles will be necessary for both the author of the [pseudonymous] work and the principal suspect or suspects.”<sup>833</sup> From available, well-accepted research, it is proposed that one could build a profile of the writer Shakespeare as follows:

- (1) Writer closely associated with the drama company known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, later called King’s Men.
- (2) Writer with great skill and virtuosity.
- (3) Writer created a substantial corpus of work, with pronounced stylometric uniformity among his main works.
- (4) Writer with substantial and detailed legal knowledge, particularly in property and court procedure.
- (5) Writer with first-hand (or access thereto) knowledge of contemporary northern Italian geography, drama, and culture, specifically of Verona, Mantua, Milan, Venice, and Padua.
- (6) Writer with hands-on, personal experience raising hawks and the sport of falconry.
- (7) Writer most likely with Warwickshire roots.
- (8) Writer with significant experience dealing with daughters and marriage.
- (9) Writer with ability to produce new plays until around 1613/4, and thereafter, reason not to produce new plays.
- (10) If the writer’s name is not Shakespeare (or Shakspeare), then the writer had a serious need to withhold his identity from the public, continuing for centuries thereafter.

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<sup>833</sup> Love, 87; he goes on to say that “[I]deally [the profiles] of the author and those of the suspects should be compiled by different researchers so as to remove the temptation to cook the books.” In this case, of course, the researcher who is compiling the profile of the writer Shakespeare is also presenting the case for the candidate Sheldon; to avoid the appearance of ‘cooked books’ this author has created the list for her profile of the writer Shakespeare by using the research of other people into Shakespeare’s texts. However, inevitably, there will be serious disagreements as to what should – and should not – be included on such a list. The author of this work looks at this list as a preliminary attempt to create an objective list based on the consensus of Shakespeare research.

Unlike other candidates, including the actor Shakspere, known facts concerning Sheldon can support all but one of the listed characteristics – the missing one being the stylometric testing of item #3, for which none has been done for Sheldon’s writing. By contrast, of the 21 individuals who have been considered “full” candidates,<sup>834</sup> all seem, as discussed below, at least partially ruled out by the absence of matches to items #9 and #10. Additionally, 15 of the same claimants had writings which have been compared to the Shakespeare works, and all were also apparently eliminated by failure to match item #3, on stylometric similarities.<sup>835</sup>

Regarding item #9 (the dating of the end of the Shakespeare works around 1613/4) Sheldon died in March 1613 -- just before the first production of *Henry VIII*. By contrast, none of the 21 full claimants died anywhere near this date. Ten of the 21 died substantially before 1613/4, with the earliest Christopher Marlowe (1593) and the latest Edward Dyer (1607). The remaining died years after 1613/4, with all but one claimant (Walter Raleigh, 1618) dying at least 8 years later.<sup>836</sup>

Concerning item #10 (the serious need for a pseudonym), Sheldon has a strong excuse for a solid pseudonym – he was a recusant Catholic, married to a Throckmorton of the militant Catholic branch; his recusancy and his association with radical Catholic militants would endanger not only his Protestant sponsors but also the actual legacy of his entire oeuvre. In comparison, none of the other claimants (those not named Shakspere) provide straightforward evidence of a similarly strong excuse.

In his book, Professor Love quoted an expert opinion on the common motives behind pseudonymous books: “Generally the motive is some form of timidity, such as (a) diffidence; (b) fear of consequences, and (c) shame.”<sup>837</sup> The circumstances of the Shakespeare plays would seem to eliminate the probability that a pseudonym was used

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<sup>834</sup> Ward E.Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza, “And Then There Were None: Winnowing the Shakespeare Claimants,” *Computers and the Humanities* 30, no. 3 (1996), 191-245; the study looked at the stylometric similarities between 15 claimants and the Shakespeare oeuvre. In doing so, it identified 21 “full” claimants, of which 15 had sufficient writings to be included in the computer tests; see 193.

<sup>835</sup> Elliott and Valenza, 206-07.

<sup>836</sup> Elliott and Valenza, 193.

<sup>837</sup> Love, 31.

for mere “diffidence” or some sort of “shame.” The Shakespeare plays were popular among all classes of Elizabethan England, and were strongly supported by the highest aristocracy, especially the Queen. The elaborate and extended ruse by which the author’s identity was masked under the pseudonym would require far more effort than would seem justified by “diffidence,” particularly given the success of the work. And “shame” seems wholly unlikely with the great sponsorship of the Court. This leaves “fear of consequences” as the most likely motive in this case. As many of the full claimants either were writers or dramatists with other published works under their own names, or were aristocrats known to actively support various acting troupes, there seems little, if any, evidence that any of the other claimants had serious concerns about the consequences of publishing the highly regarded works of Shakespeare.

Concerning the remaining eight listed items, Sheldon’s profile is as follows:

- (1) The official record on Sheldon’s working with drama troupes is scant, but it is irrefutable that Leicester procured a 60-year lease at Oriel College for Sheldon, where he immediately helped produce Richard Edwards’s play *Palamon and Arcite* for the Queen. External and internal evidence support Sheldon’s work with the child actors of the Court in the 1560s through 1570s; his annotation of Hall’s Chronicle and close association with the legal theorist behind the early history plays, Edmund Plowden, along with other external and internal evidence, indicate his work as house dramatist for Leicester’s Men from the 1570s through the 1580s. Both external and internal (*Timon*) evidence indicate that Sheldon financed the Globe in 1599, providing his share of the profits to the Lord Chamberlain’s Men players, in a similar manner to how the Sheldon family financed the Sheldon tapestry workers. A note written by R.S. (also known as Sheldon, see #2 below) which can be dated circa 1603 strongly links Sheldon to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, patron to the King’s Men, and the Queen’s Master of the Revels, George Buck. See Appendix II for a list of evidence connecting Sheldon directly to the Shakespeare plays.
- (2) Aside from antiquarian Habington’s praise of Sheldon as having a “preeminent penne,” the official Sheldon biography is silent on Sheldon as a literary writer. However, Sheldon as author/editor R.S. offers convincing support: the two major



R.S. works – the Belleforest translations and the *Phoenix Nest* – are unique literary accomplishments and each parallels similar known Shakespeare work. Proof of Sheldon as R.S. includes three points. **First**, the social connections between Sheldon and R.S. are extensive: Sheldon’s residence at Oriel College fully overlaps with Nicholas Breton and Walter Raleigh (married to Sheldon’s wife’s first cousin), both major contributors to *Phoenix Nest* and published collaborators with R.S.; in particular, both Breton and Raleigh were members of the literary circle of the Countess of Pembroke whose family physician Thomas Moffett wrote the manuscript on silkworm advocacy used as a source in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Moreover, both Sheldon and R.S. were demonstrably strong supporters of Leicester when others had abandoned him: Sheldon celebrated Leicester’s Kenilworth in his Warwickshire tapestry map circa 1590, and R.S. wrote the first published defense of him in 1593 in the *Phoenix Nest*. **Second**, both Sheldon and R.S. have connections with the Shakespeare works that parallel each other: (1) around the same time Sheldon would have been working with his brother-in-law Plowden on the legal twists in the *Hamlet* plot, R.S. published his translations of Belleforest (1577); a Belleforest novella is the central source of the *Hamlet* story; (2) while R.S. published his anthology of Oxford poets (1593) with Breton and Raleigh, featuring the *Venus & Adonis* stanza and Thomas Lodge, Sheldon had a residence at Oriel College from whence he knew Breton and Raleigh; at the same time Shakespeare published his *Venus & Adonis*, and was working on *As You Like It* based on the work of Thomas Lodge. **Third**, there is consistent evidence that the authorship of both major R.S. works was deliberately obscured: the Belleforest translation offers a comic suggestion of the author’s early demise by a writer T.N. who has been identified as future Shakespeare collaborator Thomas North; the *Phoenix Nest*’s reference to the author as a member of the Inner Temple has never been proved despite extensive research. See Appendix I, on the life of Sheldon as R.S. and Shakespeare.

- (4) English archives are replete with records of Ralph Sheldon’s litigation case concerning family lands and property. Moreover, four of the plays, *King John*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *Merchant of Venice* have plots derived in significant part from the esoteric legal writings of Edmund Plowden, writings published only in the

French dialect used in the English courts; Plowden was Sheldon's brother-in-law and the co-executor of the estate of Sheldon's father in the early 1570s. Until he left to publish his writings in 1570, Plowden was a high official of the Middle Temple, of which Sheldon was also a member.

- (5) Immediately prior to his admittance to the Middle Temple in November 1556, Sheldon had traveled extensively in northern Italy, entering into Mantua in January 1555. The trip was undertaken in the entourage of the tragic and romantic Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, Catholic heir to the throne, and one-time suitor to both Mary and Elizabeth. Sheldon's father was interested in establishing a luxury tapestry industry in England, and for this, imported silk would be essential: the main cities for such export were Verona and Venice. Courtenay's entourage also visited Milan and Padua, where Courtenay died suddenly in September 1556. These Italian cities are the same as those recognized by Italian scholars as cities for which allusions and details in Shakespeare plays require first-hand knowledge.
- (6) Sheldon's maintenance of hawks is documented in English state papers. As part of an allegation of traitorous activity, the state papers record that Sheldon sent a manservant to Ireland "under the color of buying hawks."
- (7) Sheldon's family home in Beoley, Worcestershire, was on the western edge of the Forest of Arden. Subsequently Sheldon built a manor house at Long Compton in Warwickshire, with the closest village to the west of the manor house Barton-on-the-Heath, thought to have been the actual location of "Burton-heath," named as the home of Christopher Sly in *Taming of the Shrew*. Falstaff's identification as "Puff of Barson" is believed to have come from a funerary monument in Barcheston, Warwickshire, for William Willington, a maternal ancestor of Ralph Sheldon who died in 1455 (roughly in the time of Falstaff).
- (8) Sheldon had ten children, nine of whom were daughters. All his children were married during his lifetime.

(ii) **Why Sheldon Was Shakespeare**

Ultimately, an attribution study for the Shakespeare oeuvre must convince its readers that the biography of the proposed claimant has a rationale and unique relationship to the Shakespeare literary output.<sup>838</sup> The preceding chapters have presented detailed external and internal evidence that connects Sheldon with the writer Shakespeare; in this section, the evidence is reconfigured to follow the exact chronology of the Shakespeare oeuvre. Relying on a combination of various types of evidence, the study attempts to confirm that Ralph Sheldon was uniquely positioned to write the plays and poems, with both the means and motivation to create the entire Shakespeare oeuvre. [Note: while this section does not footnote documentation for evidence alluded to, such documentation can be found in the text by reference to the Index at the end of this book.]

Indisputable external evidence records that the first stage version of *Romeo & Juliet* was produced in London around 1560; this would be the first performance of any play associated with the writer Shakespeare. External evidence provides proof that Sheldon was also in London around 1560, admitted to Middle Temple in 1556, and occupying a Middle Temple chamber until at least May 1560. During this period, his brother-in-law Edmund Plowden was the Middle Temple official in charge of feast and entertainments, and his chamber mate was Matthew Smith, who acted as Master of the Revels for the Temple in 1557. The Middle Temple shared premises with the Inner Temple, where Robert Dudley presided over an entertainment that included production of the first five-act native English drama, *Gorboduc*, in 1561.

While this would have provided Sheldon the connections to put together a production of the play, it is his experience in northern Italy, and specifically in Verona, immediately prior to his entry into Middle Temple that would have provided the inspiration for the play. *Romeo & Juliet* is a play derived directly from an Italian novella about two Veronese families who feud, ending in the tragic death of the two lovers, including the death by poison of Romeo Montague. Diplomatic records show that in 1556, Sheldon accompanied the English lord, Edward Courtenay, into Italy; Courtenay

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<sup>838</sup> See Diana Price, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (London: Shakespeare-authorship.com, 2012), 307.

was the last Catholic heir to the English throne and had been a suitor to the Protestant Princess Elizabeth. Courtenay died suddenly, possibly of poison, in Padua in September 1556, at age 29. Sheldon was in Italy to expand his family's tapestry business; Verona was the chief exporter of Italian tapestry-grade silk.

Internal evidence that *Romeo & Juliet* was produced in Shakespeare's most early years includes the rustic playlet in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of *Pyramus & Thisbe* – a source-tale for *Romeo & Juliet* – performed by “rude mechanicals” rather than professional actors. AMND was produced around 1592, over 30 years after the first *Romeo & Juliet*. The playlet used in AMND was derived from a rare manuscript written to advocate silkworm production in England, an esoteric topic but one of interest to someone – like Sheldon – involved in the English luxury tapestry business. Of the major candidates for the Shakespeare works, only one, Thomas North (1535-1604), was of sufficient age for production of *Romeo & Juliet*;<sup>839</sup> there is, however, nothing in North's background which would suggest him as the author of a romantic tragedy, with strong comic touches.

Oxford University records show that Sheldon became officially involved with the production of plays for the Earl of Leicester and the Court in April 1566, when Leicester – then Chancellor of the University – effectively evicted the brother of the provost of Oriel College from a residence so that Oriel College could enter into a 60-year lease for the residence with Sheldon. The residence was subsequently used to produce the play *Palamon & Arcite* for the first formal visit of the Queen to Oxford in August 1566. The author of the play was the highly regarded Court dramatist 41-year-old Richard Edwards, who came to Oxford to help produce the play; the play was a great success but Edwards died suddenly shortly thereafter, in October 1566.

The death of playwright Edwards left a considerable vacuum in the Court entertainments. Two boy troupes, the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel Royal, were the principal entertainment for the Queen during the 1560s; Edwards had

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<sup>839</sup> Edward de Vere (1550-1604) was 10 years old; William Shakspeare (1564-1616), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), William Stanley (Earl of Derby) (1561-1642), Roger Manners (Earl of Rutland) (1576-1621) were not yet born.

been the Master of the Children of the Chapel since 1561 and was the acknowledged Court dramatist. With the death of Edwards, William Hunnis was appointed to the position of Master of the Children of the Chapel. Hunnis was a stalwart Protestant and since 1562 had been the Keeper of Queen's Gardens at Greenwich, continuing as the Queen's gardener even after his appointment to the Master of the Children Royal. There is, however, no record of any line of any play written by him. Nonetheless, Court records for the Christmas season in the year following Edwards's death show seven new plays, including the ground-breaking *Wit and Will*, as well as "a Tragedie of the Kinge of Scottes."<sup>840</sup> While new Court entertainment was consistently produced by talented musicians Sebastian Westcott and Richard Farrant over the next 14 years until the end of 1581, there is no record of any playwright working with either of the two premier boy troupes after the death of Richard Edwards.

Despite the absence of any named playwright, there is internal evidence in records of the plays that some of the plays were early works of the writer Shakespeare. First, the play *Wit and Will* is a remarkable advance from the early morality plays from which it descends, not only because of its iconic comic page boy Will but also because it is the first morality play with a five-act structure – a trademark feature of the writer Shakespeare. Also, its general theme of 'wit and will' is pronounced in other early Shakespeare plays, such as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Taming of A Shrew*, all of which abound with impudent comic page boys. Second, there is the unaccountably odd coincidence that the Children of Paul's presented *The Historie of Error* in 1577 on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another Court performance (likely Paul's first) of the Latin play Plautus's *Menaechmi*; Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is an English version of Plautus's *Menaechmi*.

Finally, the three plays listed above are accepted as early plays, and they are also likely to have been plays initially acted by boys, not adult men. These two criteria would require that these Shakespeare plays were written during the period between 1566 and 1581. Both premier boy troupes, the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel, effectively stopped operating after the early 1580s; Paul's had a few performances in the

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<sup>840</sup> E.K. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.144.

late 1580s, but none in the 1590s; the Children of the Chapel had not had a performance at Court until the Blackfriars Theatre reopened in 1600. Thus, for example, there is much internal and external evidence that *Love's Labour's Lost* was intended to be performed by a boy troupe, and that its likely first performance was 1578/79. Part of the dilemma for those who argue otherwise is that there is no other feasible performance date.

So, was Ralph Sheldon the talented playwright who continued upon Edwards's death to entertain the Court? Once again, much like the first performance of *Romeo & Juliet*, the external evidence cited above strongly supports that he was very much part of the relevant scene: working with Edwards just before he died, familiar with Edwards and his work. One other piece of external evidence also supports Sheldon as the playwright. An anonymous pamphlet *Children of the Chapel Script and Whipt* published in 1569 protested strenuously against "papist" influences in the rehearsals of Court plays by the boy actors; it blamed the Queen's "unfledged minions" for the papist practices in "devil's garments." Sheldon, of course, was a recusant Catholic; the other major producer of the Court plays with the boy troupes was the openly recusant Catholic Sebastian Westcott. Obviously, any influence by the staunch known Protestant Hunnis was publicly discounted. This vicious attack on the Queen's performers would explain why, if Sheldon were the principal playwright for the Queen, his name would be withheld and his identity masked.

There is internal evidence that connects Sheldon with these early plays. First, the Italian influence is, as with *Romeo & Juliet*, is again pronounced. Certain Italian references, such as to the sailmaker in Bergamo (*Taming of the Shrew*, 5.1.70-71) and to the waterway between Verona and Milan (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.3.41-43), have long been admitted as evidence that Shakespeare – like Sheldon – visited northern Italy. Moreover, the two cited instances are strong examples of Sheldon's own personal business interests. Also, the first Quarto of the *Love's Labour's Lost* shows the explicit influence of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* with characters initially given generic names such as 'pendant,' 'curate,' and 'wench' rather than proper names. Sheldon's entry into Italy through Mantua at the Christmas season in 1556 – a time at which Mantua would have been the center of the newly invented drama style – provided a clear source for the writer's knowledge of the oral tradition of the unique Italian style. Additionally, the

opening Induction of Sly in the *Taming of the Shrew* (and the *Taming of a Shrew*) tie Edwards and Sheldon together: the source of the Induction tale is a short story by Edwards, and home of Sly is “Burton-heath,” commonly thought to be taken from Barton-on-the-Heath, the closest village to Sheldon’s manor house in Long Compton.

An exceedingly rare book – a copy of the 1550 fourth edition of Edward Hall’s Chronicle, *The Union of the Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* – has annotations that appear to track the plot of the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, and these annotations are in the handwriting that bears the imprint of Ralph Sheldon. Overall, the handwriting matches the known signature of Sheldon, but while such a match would not usually be conclusive, in this case two features make the match far more compelling: both scripts include a unique formation of the upper-case ‘R’ as well as a rare version of the lower-case ‘n’ with a downstroke curling left. In particular, the upper-case ‘R’ is significant. Its base includes a sharp triangle where generally a rectangle is found; although the two samples match each other, they match no other known example of the same letter. While the possibility that some other Englishman of the same period had the same quirks in his handwriting can never be ruled out, the probability – given the other connections of Sheldon to the plays of the period – that this match is simply a random fluke seems highly unlikely.

Although the annotations are undated, the last identified owner of the book was a member of a leading family of Shropshire who died in 1570. Edmund Plowden (also of Shropshire) and the man’s father-in-law were both prominent jurists who worked together in the 1550s. Plowden and Sheldon had begun to work jointly as executors of the estate of William Sheldon (Ralph’s father) after the death of William in 1570.

In the history of English drama, *Famous Victories* is viewed as the first of the English vernacular chronicle plays, interspersing historic and comic scenes. It has been proposed that the play was first performed in 1574, derived from an ambush incident involving the young Earl of Oxford on Gad’s Hill reported upon in a letter to Lord

Burghley in May 1573.<sup>841</sup> The historical facts in the play were drawn exclusively from Hall's Chronicle, with only one reference in the play to the later published Holinshed's Chronicles (1577, 1587). As determined by modern scholars, the early Shakespeare Histories similarly followed Hall's Chronicle, focusing on the specific narrow period of history (and its attitude of the 'Tudor Myth') rather than the wider expanse of history covered by Holinshed.

At around time that the play would have been first performed, Leicester's Men were awarded the first (and only) patent from Elizabeth in 1574, granting the troupe a license to perform throughout England. The troop had been absent from London for about a decade before 1571; in 1572 they once again performed at Court, and performed at Court every year until 1583, when they were subsumed by the Queen's Men under Francis Walsingham. In addition to their Court appearances, they also performed at public venues, and in 1576, organized their own stage, the first purpose-built theater of the era. Notwithstanding their prominence and fame, there is very little record of the plays that they performed. Court records give some indication of the title of plays performed by the troupe, with some indication that a Shakespeare play may have been performed (see, for example, "Panecia" in February 1575, possibly an early version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which involved a tale about "Fenicia"). Of the public shows, there is no record of what the troupe performed. And for both the Court and public shows, there is no record of the identity of any dramatist.

There is, however, strong evidence that Sheldon was writing early Shakespeare plays in the 1570s, and as noted, Sheldon had begun to work with Leicester in 1566. These plays include not only *Famous Victories*, but also the *Troublesome Reign of King John*, and the precursors of *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. All these plays are considered "source-plays" of later published plays, according to the traditional academic view. The evidence for Sheldon's writing is four-fold: the unambiguous influence of the esoteric legal writings of his brother-in-law Plowden; the concurrent

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<sup>841</sup> Proponents for the Earl of Oxford as Shakespeare have put this forward as evidence for their proposition; given the nature of the incident it seems improbable that someone involved would have written about it so publicly and with such comic relish.



translations of the French novellas of Belleforest for the Shakespeare plays and for publication as R.S.; the intricacies of the international wool trade commercial law in the plot of *Merchant of Venice*; the dating of the histories to the political controversies of the early 1570s.

Four of the five plays owe an indisputable debt to the legal theories of Plowden; however, although Plowden was a preeminent English jurist, his legal writings were difficult (and sometimes, impossible) to obtain. The plot in the *Troublesome Reign* turns on legal points first offered by Plowden in an anonymous manuscript written in 1566 on the succession debate. *Richard II* focuses on Plowden's theory of the "King's Two Bodies," a theory expounded on both the 1566 succession tract and in subsequent court cases reported by Plowden. *Hamlet* includes unmistakable references to Plowden: in the fourth act, to the theory of the "King's Two Bodies," and in the fifth act, to two cases reported by Plowden in 1561 and 1572. The *Merchant of Venice* presents the concept of equity as a modification to common law; the leading case for such modifications was a case reported on by Plowden in 1574. None of these sources were readily available: as noted the succession tract was an anonymous manuscript written in 1566; the case reports were originally personal records that he eventually published in untranslated Norman French, the language of the judicial courts, in 1571 and then a second series in 1578/9. Plowden's case reports were not translated into English until 1761.

The early Shakespeare plays have yet another highly esoteric source: both *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* are based on French novellas by Francois de Belleforest published in 1576 and 1574, respectively. As there were no English translations of either story until 1608 (when a translation of the *Hamlet* novella was published), the author must have been the translator. As it happens, English versions of other, earlier Belleforest novellas were published in 1577, translated by 'R.S.' Given the overlap with the writing of *Hamlet*, that there were two separate people – both with the initials 'R.S.' – working simultaneously on English translations of Belleforest novellas seems, once again, a highly unlikely coincidence. The publication of the R.S. translations shows evidence of obfuscation; in view of the wholesale anonymity of Sheldon's work, deliberate masking only adds support for R.S. as Ralph Sheldon.

In addition to the allusions to the legal writings of Plowden, the *Merchant of Venice* presents two other rare references central to the plot, both of which can be explained uniquely by Sheldon's life: the descriptions related to Jewish culture and commercial practices in Venice; and legal references to the relatively obscure 'Law Merchant' commercial legal procedures. Despite that Jews were not generally allowed in England during the Elizabethan era, the writer shows specific local knowledge of Jewish culture in Venice. Sheldon's 1556 trip to Italy would not only have included Venice, but it also would have entailed interaction with Jewish merchants: expansion of the Sheldon family tapestry works would need a source of raw silk; Venice was the center of importation of raw silk into Italy, a trade that was principally handled by Levantine Jews living in ghettos in Venice.

There is a legal oddity in the *Merchant of Venice*: while the English common law courts allowed recourse to equity courts for relief from enforcement of unreasonable penal bonds, Portia never asked for such relief. Was this an error on the part of the author? No, the alternative basis for the trial was under the procedure of Law Merchant – a pragmatic procedure used internationally to resolve trade disputes quickly. Under Law Merchant, there was no recourse to the chancery courts for equitable relief. As a legally-trained businessman whose family had engaged in the international wool trade for decades, Sheldon would have been especially aware of the nuanced differences between the common law courts and the Law Merchant.

Three points would seem to establish the time period of these early plays: first, the earliest date for these plays would be after 1570, when Plowden left the Middle Temple to work on publishing his court reports and joined with Sheldon to work on William Sheldon's estate; second, one play, the *Merchant of Venice*, is fixed by an external source reporting on its stage performance in 1578; third, Plowden's death in 1585 puts an outside limit on the dating of the plays. The third point, however, has perhaps the greatest relevance: it eliminates the possibility that the political parallels dealt with in the early history plays related to the events such as the execution of Mary Stuart (1587), the Spanish Armada (1588), or later events. Rather, issues of English succession underlying the *Troublesome Reign* or *Richard II* are those which arose in the mid-1560s,

leading to the Northern Rebellion of the Catholic lords in 1569 and the excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570.

Members of the North family provided important contributions to the Shakespeare oeuvre. Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's Lives, published in 1579 is considered the main source of three Shakespeare plays (*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*), as well as a significant source of *Timon of Athens*. In addition, however, an unpublished manuscript written by George North while residing at the North estate, *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels* (1576) includes references adapted by Shakespeare in at least 11 plays. Any claimant to the Shakespeare oeuvre must provide some method whereby the claimant would have access to a one-off manuscript normally held in the library of the North family estate. In the case of Sheldon, Thomas North appears to have been his direct collaborator in the publication of the Belleforest translations by Sheldon as R.S. The 1577 book of translations includes two prefaces by writers identifying as 'T.N.', one of whom appears to have been Thomas North. The timing of the publication of the translations indicates that Sheldon would have been in communication with North around the period that George North would have completed his manuscript.

The late 1570s saw a Puritan backlash against the hugely popular Elizabethan drama scene, and the 1580s saw retrenchment of the London stage. Major players in the scene disappeared: the prominent boy troupes, the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel, ceased performing at the Court in the early 1580s; Leicester's Men was disbanded in 1583, with actors regrouped as the Queen's Men under the stern Protestant Francis Walsingham; Sebastian Westcott had been convicted of heresy in 1577, and died in 1582; Richard Farrant died in 1580. Leicester came under attack by the anonymous pamphlet *Leicester's Commonwealth*, led an ill-starred expedition to the Low Countries in 1585, and died shortly after the English victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, largely unmourned except by the Queen. Ralph Sheldon was prosecuted for recusancy in 1580, and although he was treated leniently with the help the Lord Burghley, continued to be the target of prosecution until 1587, when he was forced to abandon his long-time service as a Justice of the Peace for Worcestershire.

And although at the end of the 1580s, Edmund Spenser publicly lamented the absence of “Pleasant Willy” from the stage, still the “Shake-scene” (to reinterpret a phrase coined by Robert Greene in 1592) survived. At some time in the late 1580s, the new production of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* trilogy played to thousands of fans. In Part 1 of the trilogy, the writer invented a striking dramatic scene to open the War of the Roses: in the “Temple Garden” the assembled nobles pick either a white or red rose, signifying their allegiance to the House of York or Lancaster (1 *Henry VI*. 2.4). The location for this scene can be precisely located. At the west end of the Great Hall of the Middle Temple, a rose garden grew beneath the south bay window overlooking the lawn sweeping down to the Thames; by all accounts, it was in this garden that the scene preceeded. While there is no theory as to how or why the writer chose this particular location for this very central scene, it is a place which would have been very important to Ralph Sheldon: the Great Hall had been specially designed and constructed by his late, beloved brother-in-law Edmund Plowden.

Although the first performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* can only be confirmed as sometime before 1598 (it was mentioned by Francis Meres), the play can be precisely dated to May 1592 by reference to Sheldon’s life. One puzzling aspect of the play is that while the play’s action takes place on the night before May-day, its title refers to midsummer enchantment. Sheldon’s seventh daughter Katherine appears likely to have married Francis Trentham in May 1592 (a marriage settlement for the couple was filed 26 April 1592, with marriage probably shortly thereafter). Trentham was a personal assistant to the Earl of Oxford, and at some time in 1591, Oxford married Trentham’s sister Elizabeth. While the date of the Oxford marriage is unknown, Trentham negotiated a financial transaction which transferred valuable property from Oxford to Elizabeth Trentham on 4 July 1591, strongly suggesting that Oxford and Elizabeth were married before that date, possibly 24 June 1591 (traditionally Midsummer’s Eve). Thus, it is argued that the play was written by Sheldon to commemorate the wedding of his daughter Katherine to Francis Trentham in May 1592, at the same time celebrating the midsummer marriage of the noble couple Oxford.

In 1592, Sheldon was 55 years old, in a position to reminisce fondly on the “midsummer madness” of his early dramatic career, initially inspired by his trip to Italy

beginning with his first encounter with the new *commedia dell'arte* in Mantua. The evidence for such an interpretation is primarily three-fold: as discussed earlier, the playlet is a rustic version of *Romeo & Juliet*, performed by “rude mechanicals” – amateur actors, not professionals – much the same as it would have been over 30 years before with the first performances of the iconic play; the playlet itself is derived from a cartoonish version of the tale, set under a mulberry tree, a poem available only in manuscript intended to promote the cultivation of silkworms in England and likely only known to people such as Sheldon with a commercial interest in such a subject; and the King and Queen of the silkworm fairies appear to be developed from Gonzaga prince Vespasiano and his wife Diana in their flawed utopia of Sabbioneta amidst the mulberry trees of Mantua. That this is a backward glance for the playwright seems further supported by the framing of the play using Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, the work that was the source for both *Palamon & Arcite* – the first play that Sheldon worked on for Leicester and the Court – and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – the last play associated with the Shakespeare oeuvre.

As proof that Sheldon was Shakespeare, nothing could be more compelling than the connection between AMND and the Gonzagan utopia of Sabbioneta (part of the Gonzaga land around Mantua) – the connection of which can only be explained by the precise circumstances of Sheldon’s trip to Italy via Mantua in 1556. In the play, there are references to the ‘Duke’s oak,’ Athens, a temple, and a bickering noble couple with a jealous husband, all surrounded by silkworm fairies. This combination can be completely accounted for by reference to the Gonzaga prince and his wife in their dream utopia of Sabbioneta; it has never been explained by any other known literary reference.

Most importantly, however, the access to such a story seems irrefutably tied to Sheldon’s unique experience in Mantua in January 1556. Diplomatic records indicate that Sheldon entered Italy in January 1556 through Mantua, a place of extensive plantings of mulberry trees, with the countryside of Sabbioneta surrounded by such trees. Historians report that the 26-year-old Vespasiano Gonzaga was in Sabbioneta at the exact same time as Sheldon visited Mantua, in January 1556, urging fabrication of the utopian city; construction began with the western side (the location of a gate known as “il Quercia dei Duca” or the Duke’s Oak) in the same year. The city was home to a substantial Jewish community with a temple, and religious tolerance was a foremost principle of the utopian

city; the city was also known as “La Picole Atene” for its classical foundations. Unfortunately, however, the marriage of Vespasiano and Diana was fraught with his jealousy: Italian tradition has it that Diana died in 1559, having been forced to take poison after her husband accused her of infidelity.

In the early 1590s, the attention of Shakespeare seems to have shifted to the new forms of native English poetry originally advocated by Leicester’s nephew Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesie* (c. 1583), inspiring a new generation of poets including Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, and Thomas Lodge. With his “pupil pen,” Shakespeare commenced his sonnets, with the first seventeen directed to the 20-year-old Earl of Southampton urging marriage and children; in 1593 he published his first narrative poem, *Venus & Adonis*, dedicated to Southampton, and echoing the same themes as in his first sonnets.

Southampton grew up as a ward of Lord Burghley, and in 1589, Burghley determined that Southampton should marry Burghley’s granddaughter, Lady Elizabeth de Vere, whom Southampton resolutely refused to marry.<sup>842</sup> As a marriage-broker for Lord Burghley, none could be more suited than Ralph Sheldon. In 1590, he was 53 years old, married since 1557, with ten children; although neither a noble nor a courtier, he was beloved by all, including Burghley and courtiers such as the Queen’s godson John Harington. One specific reference in the early sonnets, however, concretely points to Sheldon as the author. Sonnet 6 refers repeatedly in lines 8-10 to the joys of ten children, with line 10: “Ten times thyself were happier than thou art.” The reference to Sheldon’s own ten children could not be clearer.

The later sonnets have, of course, many more themes, including much legal parlance on issues of property law (leases, bonds, tenancy, mortgages) and references to the author’s “outcast state” (Sonnet 29), both of which are very relevant to Sheldon’s life experience. However, as specific proof toward Sheldon’s authorship, two references seem unique. First, a number of the sonnets mix legal terms with romantic wooing; for example, Sonnet 134 reads, in part: “And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,/Myself I’ll

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<sup>842</sup> Under these circumstance, it seems impossible to believe that Elizabeth’s father, the Earl of Oxford, could have been the author.

forfeit. . ./The statute of thy beauty thou will take,/Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use. . ." Compare this with Sheldon (as R.S.) in a letter to Mistresse A.T. (Sheldon's wife was Anne Throckmorton): "my case being my own lawyer, this I plead: your eies have stolne my hearte: now I must either be accessorie to mine own hurte, or accuse you of the felonie. . ."

Second, Sonnets 124 and 125 are commonly recognized as dealing with the historic issues of the recusant Catholics. Sonnet 124 plainly comments on the actions of certain Catholic recusants willing to die as martyrs for their political actions against England, concluding "To this I witness call the fools of time,/Which die for goodness who have lived for crime" (lines 13-14). Then, in the next sonnet, the writer returns to his private lament, "Were't aught to me I bore the canopy" (Sonnet 125, line 1), to conclude with imagery reflecting on the issues with the previous sonnet: "Hence, thou suborned informer! a true soul/When most impeached stands least in thy control" (lines 13-14). These two sonnets are perhaps the most specific to the personal situation of Ralph Sheldon: in 1594, he was accused of having been involved in a Catholic plot to kill the Queen and foment rebellion in Wales; the charges were found to be baseless, and to have been instigated by informants. Thus, Sheldon was himself innocently classed among recusants attempting political action against the state (that is, among the same "fools of time" he decries in Sonnet 124), but ultimately freed of the false claims of the informers (as indicated in Sonnet 125).

The date of the first performance of *As You Like It* is unknown but was sometime in the 1590s: its acknowledged primary source, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde or Euphues' Golden Legacy* was published in 1590; the publication of the play was "staied" in 1600, and it remained unpublished until the First Folio. The central focus of the play is the Duke Senior, banished to the Forest of Arden by his brother, the evil Duke Frederick, who has usurped his rights at court. Some lords have remained loyal to the Duke in exile, and he lives surrounded by a band of "merry men" living like "Robin Hood" with "many young gentlemen" flocking to him every day, living as they did in the "golden world" (*As You Like It*, 1.1.109-13). Into the group comes Orlando, a young poet who posts many poems on trees to the banished Duke's daughter Rosalynde, also in exile roaming the Forest. The plot is taken directly from Lodge's *Rosalynde*, where the rightful King has

been banished to the Forest of Arden by a villain who has usurped his throne, and a young poet posts many sonnets on trees in the Forest, pursuing the banished king's daughter Rosalynde.

This play seems to recreate metaphorically the probable world of Ralph Sheldon in the 1590s. Largely banished (and his rights usurped by Francis Walsingham?) to live in anonymity in the outpost at Oriel College, in a life centered not far from the Forest of Arden (immediately by his boyhood home of Beoley), he surrounds himself with the premier poets of Oxford. These include Thomas Lodge, Walter Raleigh, Nicholas Breton, the Earl of Oxford, George Peele, Robert Greene, and others, most of whom were much younger than Sheldon. From this band of poets, Sheldon collected a fine anthology of the new English poetry, and published it as *The Phoenix Nest* under the initials R.S. The largest known contributor to this volume was Thomas Lodge, with sixteen poems credited to him. The anthology was published in 1593, the same year as *Venus & Adonis* was published, and is strongly tied to Shakespeare in its dominant poetic forms: 24 poems were in the same 6-line iambic pentameter verse used by Shakespeare in *Venus & Adonis* (a form called the *Venus & Adonis* stanza), and 14 poems in the 14-line iambic pentameter verse now known as the Shakespearean sonnet.

Two external sources from the latter half of the 1590s firmly connected Sheldon to Shakespeare. First, Sir John Harington annotated a copy of his 1596 book *Metamorphosis of Ajax* with “Sheldon : Will” aside a portion of the book suggesting that a young impudent boy Wil go with the narrator to Oxford. Harington was an ardent follower of the London stage, and he was annotating a book for the highly cultured Baron Lumley. The book was written before there were any published plays under the name “William Shakespeare” but the character of the young impudent boy Wil strongly hearkens to the young page boy Will who was the iconic star of the early play *Wit and Will*. The only Sheldon that Harington refers to in his work is Ralph, whom he expressly praises (in a third pamphlet following the original book) as “one of the sufficientist wise men of England, fittest to be made of the [Queen’s Privy] Counsell, but for one matter [Sheldon’s recusant status].”



The second source is the 1597 satires of Puritan poet-satirist Joseph Hall, which publicly castigate a writer Hall calls “Labeo” for indecent poetry; that the actual poetry was Shakespeare’s hugely popular *Venus & Adonis* is proved by reference to an allusion to the same “Labeo” by another contemporary satirist, John Marston. According to Hall, Labeo avoids criticism by living like a cuttle fish – under disguise – and shifting the criticism to “another’s name.” The most prominent classical “Labeo” was the Roman Antistius Labeo, a lawyer from a wealthy family who was forced to resign public office because he was Republican sympathizer who fell afoul of Augustus’ regime; after losing his official positions, he devoted himself to his writings on legal issues and early literature.<sup>843</sup> Like Antistius, Sheldon had been forced to resign his public offices because of principled differences with the English government; prosecuted for his stance on Catholicism and religious tolerance, Sheldon from then on led, as described by antiquarian Thomas Habington, a “private lyfe.”

At the end of 1598, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage began construction of a new playhouse for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the Globe Theatre. Ultimately, the ownership and profits of the Globe were divided into two equal shares, one held by the Burbage brothers, and the other by five members of the acting troupe. Who funded the Globe construction? No extant record answers this question, but it is uncontroverted that except for Richard Burbage, no member of the acting troupe contributed funds to its construction. Nonetheless, five members of the troupe obtained, as a group, a one-half share in the ownership of the Globe and in its subsequent profits. These actors included William Shakspeare, as well as John Heminges, who later, with actor Henry Condell, published the First Folio. So, who was the person who funded the Globe construction and then subsequently gave up the rights to the profits from the Globe operations to members of the acting troupe?

Again, like so many of the puzzling aspects of the Shakespeare tradition, Sheldon’s life can provide an answer: the very generous treatment of the players in the

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<sup>843</sup> This issue is, like many others, not disputed by proponents of other claimants, but largely left unanswered. Proponents of Francis Bacon point out that Bacon had a disagreement with the Queen, and temporarily left public office; Bacon, however, regained public position thereafter.

acting troupe closely mirrored the Sheldon family's benevolent arrangements with its tapestry weavers; by William Sheldon's 1570 will, the profits of a long-term lease were made available for the use of tapestry weavers in Worcestershire and Warwickshire. Moreover, there is straightforward evidence that Sheldon incurred massive (and unexplained) debt in the decade of the 1590s, eventually ending up nearly bankrupt when his lender (a former close friend Thomas Horde) suddenly called in his loans. These circumstances are remarkably similar to those portrayed in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*: Timon is a wealthy man whose friends without notice call in their loans to him, despite Timon's prior generosity towards them, with catastrophic results for Timon. Shakespeare's plot markedly alters that of the probable source of the story – in the other version, Timon's downfall is when his ships sink at sea, while Shakespeare's Timon loses his fortune when friends demand immediate repayment of their loans. Obviously, this parallels the circumstances of Sheldon and Horde. Evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote *Timon* in 1607, near the same time Sheldon lost much of his land and wealth to Horde's claim for debt.

Two plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, are recognized as the last Shakespeare plays, both produced around 1613/4. Both are also well-accepted as collaborations with John Fletcher, the dramatist who succeeded Shakespeare as the house dramatist for the King's Men. But curiously, whereas *Henry VIII* was included in the First Folio, *Two Noble Kinsmen* was not. That is, while the members of the troupe who put together the Folio, John Heminges and Henry Condell, looked on the first play as authored by Shakespeare, the second play was considered a work by John Fletcher. Detailed stylometric analyses show significant differences in the structures of the two plays: Shakespeare's lines are integrated with Fletcher's lines throughout all acts of *Henry VIII*, without evidence that Fletcher edited Shakespeare's lines; in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, however, Shakespeare's lines are generally confined to the first and last act, with considerable evidence that Fletcher modified Shakespeare's work.

So, what could explain the discrepant handling of the two plays? As always, reference to Sheldon can provide an answer: Sheldon died in March 1613, just several months before the first performance of *Henry VIII*, during which the Globe Theatre was burned down. From the markedly different type of collaboration between the two plays, it

is suggested that Shakespeare – like Sheldon – was still alive to complete his collaboration with Fletcher on *Henry VIII*, but his death in March 1613 prevented a full collaboration on the second play. That death intervened between the two plays is supported by the fact that the Prologue to *Two Noble Kinsmen* includes a eulogy to the play’s “noble breeder.” Even in death, though, the writer Shakespeare remains the “craftie Cuttle” (as Hall described “Labeo”): the eulogy to the play’s writer is masked by an exceedingly rare nod to Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of the play’s original source, *The Knight’s Tale*. Finally, it is noted that Sheldon’s first production for Leicester was Richard Edwards’s own version of *The Knight’s Tale*; that Sheldon would have left behind a shell of a play based on the same original English source to be his final farewell to the English stage cannot be coincidental.

Finally, bibliographical evidence is uncontroverted that the Sheldon family received, apparently as a gift, what was most probably the first completed copy of the First Folio. To this day, it remains the extant copy with the most unquestioned provenance, having been maintained without alteration by the Sheldon family until 1781. Notably, no other extant copy of the First Folio appears to have been owned by the family of any other Shakespeare candidate, including the family of the actor William Shakspeare.

Thus, as required by Professor Love’s definition of an “assured attribution,” it can be demonstrated that a substantial amount of evidence – both external and internal – ties Ralph Sheldon to a large portion of the Shakespeare works, leaving no reasonable doubt but that Sheldon was Shakespeare. Undertaking his literary work, Sheldon wrote either anonymously, under the initials R.S., or under the iconic name of William Shakespeare, but never (that is known) under his own name Ralph Sheldon. A summary of Sheldon’s life contrasting his known public life with his proposed life as a private literary ‘hydden man’ is presented in Appendix I. In all, significant evidence connects Sheldon/R.S. with around 24 of 38 acknowledged Shakespeare plays, as well as to the sonnets, *Venus & Adonis*, and the First Folio; each of these works, with the relevant evidence, is listed in order of the chronology as revised under this theory in Appendix II.



# Appendix I: Ralph Sheldon (1537–1613) as Shakespeare

Ralph Sheldon (1537-1613) as Shakespeare

Date	Public life	Hydden life		
		As Anonymous	As R.S.	As William Shakespeare
1537	Born at Beoley Worcestershire.			
1555/6	Travels to northern Italy.			
Nov. 1556	Enters Middle Temple.			
1557	Marries Anne Throckmorton.			
1559	(Elizabeth proclaims that all plays must be written by men of authority, learning and wisdom; Dudley's players first perform.)			
1560		First version of R&J produced in London.		
1561/2	( <i>Gorboduc</i> first performed at Inner Temple under Dudley.)			
1566	Dudley (now Leicester) obtains 60-year lease at Oriel College Oxford for Sheldon.			
Aug. 1566	Palamon & Arcite rehearsed in Sheldon's Oxford residence.	Produced <i>Palamon &amp; Arcite</i> at Oxford.		
Oct. 1566	(Richard Edwards, court dramatist dies.)			

Date	Public life	Hydden life		
		As Anonymous	As R.S.	As William Shakespeare
Dec. 1567		<i>Wit and Will</i> and <i>King of the Scottes</i> performed at court by Children of Paul's.		
1568/9	(Paul's playhouse begins operations.)	Publishes version of <i>Wit and Will</i> .		
1570/1	William Sheldon (Ralph's father), dies; brother-in-law Plowden becomes co-executor of the will and leaves Middle Temple.	Annotates Hall's <i>Chronicle for Famous Victories</i> .		
1573/4	(Leicester's Men received patent from Queen to perform throughout England.)	First performance of <i>Famous Victories</i> .		
1574-78		Using legal writings of Plowden, writes <i>Troublesome Reign, Richard II, Hamlet, Merchant of Venice</i> .		
1576-78	(George North's A Brief Discourse of Rebellion manuscript in Thomas North's family library.)	Translates Belleforest novellas for <i>Much Ado About Nothing, Hamlet</i>	Translates Belleforest novellas; published with help of Thomas North.	
1577	(Leicester's Men operates first stand-alone theater; Holinshed's Chronicles published.)	Early version of <i>Comedy of Errors</i> performed by Children of Paul's.		

Date	Public life	Hydden life		
		As Anonymous	As R.S.	As William Shakespeare
1578	(Puritan backlash against playhouses accelerates.)	<i>Merchant of Venice</i> first performed.		
1580/1	Arrested for recusancy; released through the influence of Burghley.			
1581/2	(Children of Paul's and Children of Chapel Royal cease Court performances.)			
1583	(Leicester's Men disbanded and Queen's Men formed; Sidney writes <i>Defence of Poesie</i> .)			
1585	Plowden dies			
1587	Ceases to be JOP for Worcestershire.			
1588	(Leicester dies.)			
1588-92		Produces <i>Henry VI</i> trilogy.  1591: <i>Troublesome Reign</i> published.		
1592		Produces <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i> for daughter's wedding, also honoring the wedding of the Earl of Oxford.		
1593			Edits the <i>Phoenix Nest</i> celebrating new poetry, with major form the <i>Venus &amp;</i>	Writes early sonnets and <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i>

Date	Public life	Hydden life		
		As Anonymous	As R.S.	As William Shakespeare
			<i>Adonis</i> sonnet; Thomas Lodge is largest contributor.	
1594		<i>Titus Andronicus, Taming of a Shrew, Richard III</i> published.		
c. 1596		Produces <i>As You Like It</i> , based on Thomas Lodge's <i>Rosalynde</i> .		
1597		Criticized by Puritan writer Hall using the reference 'Labeo.'  <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet, Richard II</i> published.		
1598	(Lord Chamberlain's Men obtain monopoly for stage performance; Francis Meres lists eleven plays by Shakespeare.)	<i>I Henry IV</i> published.		First plays published under name of 'William Shakespeare': <i>Richard II, Richard III</i> . Also <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> ('W. Shakspeare')
1599	(Globe Theatre opened.)	Gives up ownership share in Globe to five players.		<i>I Henry V</i> published with author's name.
1600		<i>Henry V</i> published.		Published <i>Merchant of Venice, Much</i>



Date	Public life	Hydden life		
		As Anonymous	As R.S.	As William Shakespeare
				<i>Ado About Nothing, 2 Henry IV, Midsummer Night's Dream.</i>
1602		<i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i> published.		
1603	Creditor Horde called in huge loan. (King's Men formed, under the patronage of Earl of Pembroke.)	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> published.	Writes note to Earl of Pembroke inviting him to daughter's wedding.	Published <i>Hamlet</i> .
1605	Lost much land under agreement with creditor Horde			
1607/08		Writes <i>Timon of Athens</i> , about a generous man bankrupt by friends calling in loans.		Published <i>King Lear</i> (as 'Master William Shakespeare')
1609				Published <i>Pericles</i> .
1613/4	Sheldon dies March 1613. (Globe Theatre burns down June 1613.)	Two plays produced in collaboration with John Fletcher, house dramatist for King's Men after Sheldon's death.		
1623	Sheldon family given copy of first produced completed copy of First Folio.			First Folio added 18 plays to the Shakespeare repertory.



# Appendix II: Evidence Connecting Shakespeare Works, Sheldon, and R.S., Set Forth in a Revised Chronology

This book presents detailed evidence which links the work of the writer Shakespeare with Ralph Sheldon, and the writer R.S. This evidence is summarized below, showing the most significant of these links, following a chronology of the works as revised under this theory.

Evidence Connecting Shakespeare Works, Sheldon, and R.S., Set Forth in a Revised Chronology.

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
1560	<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>	<p>Italian trip: Verona was the chief export city for tapestry silk, thereby central to the original purpose of his trip to Italy in the Courtenay retinue.</p> <p>Italian trip: Catholic Courtenay is model for Romeo Montague.</p> <p>The play was first performed in London circa 1560; Sheldon was in London at Middle Temple around 1556-61, with his brother-in-law Plowden in charge of Middle Temple entertainments.</p> <p>Also compare <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>.</p>	
Late 1560s to 1570s	<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	Italian trip: reference to sailmaker in Bergamo.	

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
		<p>Italian trip: Sheldon and servant Hyckes like Lucentio and servant Tranio.</p> <p>Reference to ‘Burton-heath’ – home of Sly – is to Barton-on-the-heath, 2 miles from Sheldon’s manor house.</p> <p>Richard Edwards’s story used for Induction: Sheldon produced Edwards’s last play before Edwards’s sudden death.</p> <p><i>Wit and Will</i> first play produced after Edwards’s death, and the theme of ‘wit and will’ prominent in first version <i>Taming of a Shrew</i>.</p>	
Mid 1570s	<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	<p>Italian trip: waterway between Verona and Milan.</p> <p>Italian trip: <i>commedia dell’arte</i> (Mantua).</p> <p>Theme of ‘wit and will’ repeated.</p>	
Late 1570s	<i>Love’s Labour’s Lost</i>	<p>Italian trip: <i>commedia dell’arte</i>.</p> <p>Theme of ‘wit and will’ repeated.</p> <p>Play’s performance dated to late 1570s when boy acting troupes still extant.</p>	
Circa 1574 (source-play)	<i>Henry V</i>	<p>Sheldon annotated Hall’s Chronicle with outline of source-play <i>Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth</i>.</p> <p>Reference to brother-in-law Plowden’s theory of ‘King’s Two Bodies.</p>	

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
Mid-1570s (source-play)	<i>King John</i> ( <i>Troublesome Reign</i> )	Plowden's mid-1560s manuscript on succession issues formed basis for plot twists.	
Late 1570s (source-play)	<i>Richard II</i>	Plowden's theory of 'King's Two Bodies' underpins the entire play.  Plot very allied in detail with <i>Troublesome Reign</i> , early source-play of <i>King John</i> .	
Late 1570s (source-play)	<i>Hamlet, Much Ado About Nothing</i>	Two Plowden case reports used in plot of <i>Hamlet</i> .	Belleforest novellas source of both plays: translations of Belleforest by R.S. published in 1577.
1577 (source-play)	<i>Comedy of Errors</i>	Source-play <i>Historie of Error</i> performed in 1577: no other known playwright at Court.	
1578 (source-play)	<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	Italian trip: Sheldon tapestry interests in Venice, with Jewish merchants as principal traders.  Plowden case reports on equity issues underlie the legal theory of the plot.  Law Merchant legal procedures allow plot twist: the same as those routinely used in international wool trading such as engaged in by Sheldon's family.	
Mid-1580s	<i>Parts 1 &amp; 2 Henry IV</i>	Reference to "Puff of Barson" as Falstaff in <i>2 Henry IV</i> is to Barcheston funerary memorial of Sheldon's maternal ancestor, suggesting a link between Sheldon and Falstaff.	
Late 1580s	<i>1 Henry VI</i>	The opening of the War of the Roses is set in "Temple Garden," the garden next to the Middle Temple Hall designed by Plowden.	

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
Various dates	<i>Richard III</i> , 2 <i>Henry VI</i> , and seven other plays		Quotes taken from George North's 1576 manuscript; R.S. collaborating with T.N. (Thomas North), George's relative in 1577.
1592	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<p>Playlet <i>Pyramus &amp; Thisbe</i> is archaic form of <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>.</p> <p>Principal source for playlet <i>Pyramus and Thisbe</i> was manuscript poem set under a mulberry tree that advocated silkworm cultivation by Dr. Thomas Moffett: Sheldon's tapestry business needed source of silk; Dr. Moffett was in Countess of Pembroke's social circle as also were Sheldon's friends Breton and Raleigh.</p> <p>Quarreling King &amp; Queen of Fairies (amidst the silkworm fairies) in the woods near Athens with the Duke's oak are strongly mirrored by Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga and his wife Diana at their utopian city Sabbioneta amidst the mulberry trees by Mantua: Sheldon visited Mantua when first entering Italy in January 1556, the same date that Vespasiano was at Sabbioneta urging its construction (construction was begun in 1556 at the western side, by the Duke's Oak – the western gate of the City).</p>	

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
		<p>Play likely performed at Sheldon's daughter's wedding to brother of the Earl of Oxford's second wife in May 1592, and would have honored the Earl of Oxford and his wife who were probably married near the previous midsummer night in 1591.</p>	
Early 1590s, onward	Sonnets	<p>Sheldon's age (mid-50s), marital status, and stature as older playwright advising young Southampton (an avid theater buff) make him the perfect advisor on the issues of marriage and procreation, very like Falstaff to Prince Hal.</p> <p>Sheldon was long acquainted with Lord Burghley who had attended to Southampton as the Queen's ward, and who wanted the young noble to marry his granddaughter.</p> <p>Sonnet 6 repeatedly raises the joys of 10 children; Sheldon had 10 children.</p> <p>Sonnet 29 laments the writer's "outcast state" and Sonnet 39 notes he was made "lame by fortune's dearest spite"; these are apt for Sheldon's situation as a prosecuted Catholic.</p> <p>Sonnets 124 and 125 are recognized as dealing with Catholics and informants; Sheldon's arrest in 1594 due to baseless claims of an informant directly relates to these sonnets.</p>	<p>In the same manner as Sonnets 46 and 134, R.S. wrote romantic note to A.T. (Anne Throckmorton) using legal metaphors.</p>

Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
1593	<i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i>	<p>The sense of the outcast state of the writer of Sonnet 29 is repeated in the trials of Wat the Hare.</p> <p>Puritan satirist Joseph Hall criticized the author of <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i>, referring to him as “Labeo,” derived from the surname of a Roman man who, forced from government positions due to principled stance, retired to write, characteristics matching Sheldon’s circumstances. Hall described Labeo as a “craftie Cuttle” – someone who lives under disguise, shifting blame to “another’s name.”</p>	<p><i>Phoenix Nest</i> was a tribute to ‘new poetry’: <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i> was the writer’s first published attempt at a full-length narrative poem of the new style.</p> <p>The major poetry form was the six-line <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i> stanza.</p> <p>The main contributor to the <i>Nest</i> was Thomas Lodge, whose poem <i>Scylla’s Metamorphosis</i> (1589) was basis for <i>Venus &amp; Adonis</i>.</p>
Mid-1590s	<i>As You Like It</i>	<p>Banished Duke Senior with young gentlemen flocking to him is apt metaphor for Sheldon as R.S. at Oriel College collecting poetry from younger Oxford poets, including Lodge, for <i>Phoenix Nest</i>.</p>	<p>Lodge also provides basis for play with <i>Rosalynde</i> (1590).</p> <p>Orlando’s poems for Rosalind is apt metaphor for Lodge writing <i>Rosalynde</i>.</p> <p>Editor R.S.’s perfection compares to no “blot” on play scripts.</p>



Date	Shakespeare Works	Sheldon	R.S.
Various dates	<i>Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus</i>		All based on Thomas North's <i>Plutarch's Lives</i> (1579); R.S. collaborated with North as T.N. in 1577.
Circa 1607	<i>Timon of Athens</i>	In play's original plot in source material, Timon lost his fortune when his ships sank at sea; in the play, he loses his fortune when former friends demand repayment for large loans: Sheldon's friend Horde called in large note owed by Sheldon in 1603, nearly bankrupting Sheldon.	
1613/4	<i>Henry VIII, Two Noble Kinsmen</i>	Both plays are collaborations with John Fletcher but only <i>Henry VIII</i> is in the First Folio; <i>Henry VIII</i> is well integrated between Shakespeare's and Fletcher's lines while <i>Two Noble Kinsmen</i> is not: Sheldon died in March 1613, with only a bare outline of the first and last acts of <i>Two Noble Kinsmen</i> left behind.  the first play that Sheldon produced officially for the Court was Edwards's <i>Palamon &amp; Arcite</i> , based on Chaucer's <i>The Knight's Tale</i> (the writer's first act); <i>Two Noble Kinsmen</i> , the last Shakespeare play, also based on <i>The Knight's Tale</i> by Chaucer, was a story about Palamon and Arcite (the writer's last act).	
1623	First Folio	Sheldon's family received what was most likely the first published full copy of the First Folio, as a gift.	



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