Elizabeth, Leicester & Ralph Sheldon: The Beginnings of Shakespeare Theater

Let me first introduce myself. I am Nancy Peters Maude. I am here today because of my research on a man named Ralph Sheldon, a man born in 1537 in a tiny hamlet on the edge of the Forest of Arden, very near the heart of what is now known as 'Shakespeare country.'

I first encountered Sheldon over 13 years ago at the British Museum. Sheldon's magnificent silk tapestry maps were featured as part of an exhibit on "Shakespeare's World." But I became quickly fixed on other items. To me, he stood out as a perfect 'generic Shakespeare.'

He was from Warwickshire, was legally trained at Middle Temple, had nine daughters and owned hawks but, most importantly, he died in 1613 (when the plays ended) and had a clear rationale for hidden identity: he was a prosecuted Catholic recusant. And as it happens, publishers of the First Folio gave the first completed copy of the Folio to Sheldon's family in 1623.

There is one big catch: if Sheldon was Shakespeare, the clock for when the plays began has to be reset to the 1560s – to the early years of Elizabeth's reign, decades earlier than traditionally assumed.

Is this possible?

This presentation concludes yes, and that Elizabeth herself was key to this early start to the Shakespeare canon. This lays out the theory that Shakespeare theater began with Elizabeth's early collaboration with Robert Dudley, later the Earl of Leicester, in the first two decades of her reign, after they engaged a brilliant young writer, Ralph Sheldon, in 1566, to create a repertory for the new English stage.

This, of course, turns conventional wisdom on its head.

Conventional wisdom would say that 'Shakespeare' wrote, financed, and produced all his plays after a date of roughly 1588. And then conversely, that the early Elizabethan period from about 1559 to 1583 produced little repertory of note and no illustrious playwright.

So, the question is: can this narrative be challenged? I would argue emphatically 'yes.'

To do so, I would point to one document – Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia* – that offers what seems an irrefutable date. Meres published this book in 1598, and in it listed 12 plays by the "most excellent" Shakespeare. Thus, by 1598, all 12 plays must have been written, produced and performed under the name of "Shakespeare." This list is shown in Chart 1.

Now consider the conventional narrative. By this, the young man from Stratford first produced *Henry VI* (Part I) around 1588. But from there the canon had to grow explosively. Those listed by Meres – comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, histories like *Richard III*, and tragedies like *Romeo & Juliet* – all must have been produced under the actor's name sometime in the 1590s before 1598. Then, in addition to the 12 plays named by Meres, at least 6 other 'Shakespeare' plays were also produced and performed in the 1590s: the *Henry VI* trilogy, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. So, by this narrative, the young actor produced 18 masterworks in roughly a decade – at the same time he published *Venus & Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and he wrote his sonnets. And all the while he kept his day job as an actor.

Is that possible? Could any playwright, regardless of education or class, have written and produced so much so quickly?

I would offer an alternative theory. What if, instead of the plays erupting in one big bang in one decade, the Shakespeare repertory evolved over several decades, beginning with the early years of Elizabeth's reign?

But if, in fact, the Shakespeare canon developed first in these early years, what do we know of the repertory of the period?

First and foremost, we know that Elizabeth – like her father and grandfather before her – loved a good interlude. We also know that for the first two decades of her reign, she relied primarily on two men, Robert Dudley and Sebastian Westcott, to produce her Court entertainment.

Her first official event was at Hatfield House in 1551, where, at age 18, she hosted a performance by the Children of Paul's produced by Westcott, who was a gifted musician. She remained close with Westcott for the next 30 years until his death in 1582.

But Elizabeth's main partner in English drama was Dudley, a childhood friend and a dynamic impresario. She collaborated with him on transforming English drama from the beginning of her reign, and Dudley established his own troupe of actors around May 1559. Leicester's Men – as they were later known – performed not only at Court but also in public playhouses around London, and they toured extensively throughout the English countryside.

But, no matter how talented the producers, drama depends on its repertory, and at the beginning of her reign, Elizabeth had almost none. For the most part, the sparse repertory was limited to staid morality plays.

So, how was a monarch to both expand the repertory and keep the quality of the scripts?

To this problem, Elizabeth offered a different solution to that of her sister Mary. Whereas Mary simply banned interludes outright unless they were approved by her, Elizabeth focused on the playwrights. In May, 1559, she decreed that henceforth, all plays and interludes would be written by men of "auctoritie, learning and wisdom."

This fiat seems to have set the tone for her entire reign. In the early years, much of the new repertory came from gentlemen of the Inns of the Court. But once the universities expanded their reach, the highly regarded "University Wits" dominated the stage.

In the first two decades of her reign, the volume of repertory grew steadily. Three troupes – two boy troupes, the Children of Paul's under Westcott and the long-standing Children of the Chapel Royal, as well as the adult troupe Leicester's Men – performed over sixty plays at Court. After 1583, however, all of these troupes stopped performing regularly at Court.

The records on this entire repertory are definitely scant. But one particular time period stands out. In the 16 years between 1567 and 1583, about 50 plays were staged at Court by the three principal troupes. None of these plays, however, has an identified playwright and only two are associated with printed texts.

This gap is pronounced if you compare plays produced both before and after: playwright John Heywood worked with Westcott during the 1550s; Richard Edwards with the Chapel Royal between 1561 and 1566; and John Lyly at Court with Oxford's Boys after 1583. All three of these playwrights have printed plays tied to their performances.

This gap becomes even more significant if one adds the public performances by Leicester's Men. In 1574, the Queen authorized this company alone to stage plays

throughout England, and in 1576, the company opened the first stand-alone public playhouse on the outskirts of London. Much to the dismay of City authorities, these performances brought boisterous mass audiences to London. However, notwithstanding the great popularity of these plays, there is no record at all of the plays: no names, no texts, and no playwright.

Where did all this repertory go? Did it simply vanish? Did the dramatist just abandon his scripts?

But even if we do not know where this repertory went, we do have good evidence of performances of 'Shakespeare' plays before 1590.

The first clue of these performances is found within the Meres' list itself. Of the 12 plays, only one – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – can be verified as first produced in the 1590s. None of the rest have proof of an initial production in that decade. So, if they were not first performed in the eight years before 1598, when were these 11 plays first on stage?

Contemporaneous accounts provide specific evidence of early stage performances for some plays on the Meres' list and other early plays. Poet Arthur Brooke reported on a version of *Romeo & Juliet* staged around 1560. Critic Stephen Gosson wrote of a play named *The Jew* on stage in 1578. Circumstances surrounding the Court performance of *Historie of* Error in 1577 strongly indicate an early version of *Comedy of Errors.* The title of another Court play from 1577, *Titus & Gesippus*, reflect the original names of the two main characters of *Gentlemen of Verona*.

Similar evidence is available for at least two plays not on the Meres's list. *Hamlet* appears to have had multiple performances by 1589 according to commentary by Thomas Nashe. The original source of *Much Ado About Nothing* was a French

novella published in 1574 with a heroine named “Fenicia”; this seems tied to the title of a Court play produced at the end of the same year, *Panecia*.

And then there are the so-called ‘source-plays’ – plays whose plot structure and historical sources closely match early Shakespeare plays. Such plays include *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, and *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. These plays tightly parallel Shakespeare’s *King John*, *Henry IV* Parts 1&2, *Henry V* and *Richard III* – all of which are early history plays and, except for *Henry V*, included on Meres’ list. These three source-plays were printed, and all three were performed by the Queen’s Men, the troupe which replaced Leicester’s Men as the Court troupe in 1583.

Numerous eminent scholars of the mid-20th century such as Geoffrey Bullough, Kenneth Muir, and Dover Wilson have recognized these source-plays – and others such as *King Leir* (L-E-I-R), *Taming of A Shrew*, as well as a lost play of *Richard II* – as clear antecedents of the Shakespeare plays.

In all, if one considers evidence of contemporary commentaries, title similarities, and the source-plays, at least 13 of the early Shakespeare plays can be associated with performances prior to 1590, and some specifically to the 1570s. These include 9 of the 11 Meres’ plays that have no record of first performance in the 1590s.

Most modern scholars (such as Andrew Gurr, and others) do not deny the existence of these early plays. Rather, they simply assume that the Stratford Man found the old plays, rewrote them, and produced them under his own name without credit to the original playwright.

There is, however, no factual evidence to show when – or how, as a practical matter – the young actor could have possibly reclaimed these earlier plays as his own. Did he merely discover (say) *Romeo & Juliet* in a playhouse bin and

subsequently convince the playhouse owner that he – the young actor – should produce the play again, but as his own?

Given the acknowledged existence of these earlier plays, is there room for another theory? What if, instead of a plagiarist, the immensely talented playwright 'Shakespeare' was an early pioneer of English drama, and these early plays were simply first versions of what later become 'Shakespeare' plays?

If we go back to what we know of the repertory between 1567 and 1583, we can find clear tracks of a trail-blazing 'Shakespeare': *Wit & Will*, first performed in 1567 by the Children of Paul's is the first known 5-act morality play, and it features the ground-breaking, wise-cracking servant boy Will. Both the 5-act play and the impudent servant boy are trademark Shakespeare, with the character Will being the prototype for numerous variations in early Shakespeare comedies, including the *Comedy of Errors*.

Furthermore, the dating of the early history plays – which are derived from the early source-plays – is far more compatible with the events of the 1570s, that is, the aftermath of the Northern Lords rebellion and the papal excommunication of Elizabeth, than later decades. In 1574, Elizabeth gave Leicester's Men a license to produce plays throughout England – what better plays than the early Shakespeare histories to promote the Tudor monarchy?

Both sets of plays – those produced by the boy actors and those by Leicester's Men – were exceedingly popular. Both groups set up separate public playhouses apart from the Court. Boisterous audiences eventually caused City authorities to shut down these playhouses. Might not the plays that drew such enthusiatic audiences to these playhouses – particularly to the public playhouses operated by Leicester's Men – be early versions of blockbuster hits like *Hamlet* or *Henry V*?

But if this early repertory was, in fact, never lost, and instead included such early versions of ‘Shakespeare’ masterpieces, who was the anonymous writer?

At this point, let me re-introduce Ralph Sheldon, the man whose family was given the first published complete copy of the First Folio. Sheldon provides a link between the early repertory and the modern Shakespeare works.

In August, 1566, Leicester hosted Elizabeth at her first official visit to Oxford University. In the run-up to the visit Leicester set up Sheldon in a 60-year lease to a residence at a rural outpost of Oriel College where rehearsals were held for the play to be staged for the Queen. The play – *Palamon & Arcite* – was written by the noted Court dramatist, Richard Edwards.

After a triumphant reception for his play, Edwards died suddenly in October 1566. Thereafter the record on any Court playwright for the next 16 years went blank. Yet the plays continued.

So who remained as the Court dramatist? Nominally, Edwards was replaced by William Hunnis, a stalwart Protestant formerly the Queen’s Gardener at Greenwich, a man who was never found to have written a line of stage dialogue. Similarly, the two other men who produced plays for the Queen between 1567 and 1583, Westcott and Richard Farrant, were not known as writers. This conspicuously leaves Sheldon as the likely playwright.

Of great significance, Sheldon’s position as a recusant Catholic in the Protestant reign of Elizabeth provides a reasonable explanation for the secrecy shrouding the identity of Elizabeth’s head playwright. Public acknowledgement of the Catholic Sheldon would have invited political scandal. For Elizabeth and Leicester, openly crediting a known papist recusant as their chief dramatist would have been

untenable, even suicidal. Anonymity and obfuscation were far safer. Hence, the mysterious gap in court records between 1567 and 1583.

One of the most striking aspects of Shakespeare plays is the intricate plot construction taken from bits and pieces of various identifiable sources, some both rare and esoteric. This, I would argue, is a critical test of anyone proposed to be 'Shakespeare': to be the writer, a person must have had access to even the most esoteric of these sources.

For example, the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet* is widely recognized as derived from the legal holding in a 1561 judicial case, *Hales v. Petit*, published in 1571 as part of case reports written in Norman French by an eminent Catholic jurist, Edmund Plowden. To this, Sheldon had unique access: Plowden was his brother-in-law, a fellow member of Middle Temple, and co-executor of the estate of William Sheldon, Ralph's wealthy father, in the 1570s.

Similarly esoteric sources underpin other early plays, and are similarly tied to Sheldon:

- In addition to *Hamlet*, plots of three other plays (*King John*, *Richard II*, and *Merchant of Venice*) were all constructed using Plowden's legal writings – including manuscripts from the 1560s.
- A rare volume of Hall's Chronicle (ed. 1550) has annotations in handwriting matching Sheldon's own that track the early plots of *Henry IV&V*.
- *Merchant of Venice* includes details of Jewish merchants in Venice unknown in England but familiar to Sheldon from his trip to Italy in 1556 on behalf of his family's silk tapestry business – these merchants handled the foreign silk imports into Italy.

- The same 1556 trip included Verona, then the major export center for Italian silk, the locale for both *Gentlemen of Verona* and *Romeo & Juliet*.
- An obscure 1591 manuscript advocating silk cultivation in England – a topic of relevance to Sheldon's business – retold the story of *Pyramus & Thisbe*, the playlet performed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Shakespeare play closely tracked the pamphlet, with the lead actor Bottom the Weaver – "bottom" a term for a silkworm cocoon – and fairies Moth and Cobweb.
- Two novellas by Francois de Belleforest published in the 1570s were the basis for *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; the first English translation of Belleforest novellas was published in 1577, translated by a writer 'R.S.,' as in Ralph Sheldon.

These examples sharply overlap with the Meres' plays and other early plays. In a comparison, Sheldon can be tied directly to 8 of the 12 Meres' plays, 4 of which are also considered source-plays, as well as *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing.* This can be seen in Chart 2.

But behind Sheldon as a master dramatist lay the dynamic collaboration between the Queen and Leicester to promote English drama throughout England. Leicester, though, disappeared from the Court entertainments around 1583, replaced by Francis Walsingham and his Queen's Men. As able as Walsingham was as a Court administrator, it is well understood that he had limited, if any, interest in stage drama. Thus, to the extent that Elizabeth herself transformed the English drama scene, it would have been most effectively done with her long-time ally Leicester in the first two decades of her reign, with Sheldon emerging as the hidden hand behind the plays later credited to 'Shakespeare.'