

Summary of Theory & Most Frequently Asked Questions

The following is a narrative description of the theory of Sheldon as Shakespeare, with superscripts identifying pages in the book, *WAS SHAKESPEARE A 'HYDDEN MAN'?* (see book below) that provide documentation for the narrative. Immediately following the narrative there are a list of the most frequently asked questions regarding the theory and its documentation.

SUMMARY OF THE THEORY

Query: Why Was the First Completed Copy of the First Folio a Gift to the Family of Ralph Sheldon?^{(48-50)*}

From the beginning of Elizabeth's reign in 1559, the Queen and Robert Dudley, allied with the Inns of the Court, seemed intent on establishing a vigorous native English drama both for entertainment and and for the glory of the House of Tudor.⁽¹⁰⁴⁻⁵⁾ In the main, they used two troupes, the boy actors of the Children of Paul's and an adult troupe ultimately known as Leicester's Men. But to develop the repertory, they relied principally on one man, Ralph Sheldon (1537-1613), a man hidden from public view because of the political implications of his militant Catholic connections, emerging in 1593 as 'William Shakespeare'.⁽¹⁰⁻¹⁶⁾

What's the evidence?

Early Plays for the Queen

In 1566, Dudley (now Earl of Leicester and Chancellor of Oxford) organized entertainment for the Queen's first formal visit to Oxford in August. In April 1566, Leicester forced Oriel College to grant a 60-year lease of a residence to Sheldon: the promising College Provost resigned, after being required to evict his brother from the residence. A first-hand account shows that Sheldon's residence was subsequently used to produce the

main play for the Queen, *Palamon & Arcite*, a version of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* written by noted Court dramatist Richard Edwards.⁽¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁾

Why Sheldon? The first stage performance of *Romeo & Juliet* was around 1560, according to Arthur Brooke: at the time Sheldon was at Middle Temple in London, along with his brother-in-law Edmund Plowden, organizer of Temple entertainments.⁽⁸⁶⁻⁷⁾ Sheldon had returned from a trip to Italy in 1556 to develop his family's silk tapestry business⁽⁶⁸⁻⁸⁰⁾ (silk exports were handled through Verona and silk imports through Venice by Jewish merchants)⁽⁷⁴⁻⁵⁾ in the entourage of Edward Courtenay, a close model for Romeo Montague.⁽⁸⁰⁻¹⁾

Edwards's play at Oxford was triumphant but had a tragic aftermath: in October 1566, the acclaimed^(106-7;115) playwright died suddenly, in his early 40s.⁽¹¹¹⁾ Edwards's actual Court position was filled immediately; however, rather than another talented dramatist, the Court appointed William Hunnis, the Queen's Protestant gardener at Greenwich, a man who despite thorough investigation has never been shown to have written one line of stage dialogue.⁽¹¹⁵⁻⁶⁾ The long-time Master of Paul's, Sebastian Westcott, was a skilled musician but never a dramatist.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Nonetheless, seven plays were produced by Paul's for the 1567/8 Christmas festivities.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ After Edwards's death until its Court productions were halted by Puritan outcry in 1581,^(177-8;120;167) Paul's remained the premier boys troupe, performing numerous plays, none of which had any identified playwright.⁽¹⁰⁴⁻⁶⁾

So, who replaced Edwards as dramatist and why was he unnamed? In the year after Edwards's death the unknown Court dramatist for Paul's wrote *Wit & Will*, the first five-act comedy/morality play featuring an impudent comic servant boy (Will),⁽¹¹⁷⁻⁹⁾ a prototype character of early comedies such as *Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Taming of A (The) Shrew*, *Love's Labor's Lost*.⁽¹²⁰⁻²⁾ Sheldon remained at Oriel College, but if he was the playwright, why was he unnamed? Westcott was under severe public attack for being a "papist" unfit to educate boys.^(113-4;167) Unfortunately, Sheldon had a similar impediment: he was a recusant Catholic married to a Throckmorton, a known militant Catholic family.^(175;241)

Unique Access to Sources

One distinguishing characteristic of Shakespeare plays is the careful construction from arcane but identifiable literary sources: Sheldon's access to these sources was unique. For example, annotations to a rare volume of Hall's Chronicle (1550) exactly match Sheldon's own handwriting;⁽¹²⁹⁻³³⁾ these annotations follow the plot of *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*,⁽¹³⁷⁻⁴¹⁾ precursor to the *Henry IV&V* plays.^(136;96-7) Plots of four plays – *Richard II*,⁽¹⁵⁰⁻²⁾ *King John*,^(145-7;124-5) *Hamlet*,⁽¹⁵⁴⁻⁶⁾ and *Merchant of Venice*^(169;171-2) – all have significant twists directly drawn from highly esoteric legal theories and cases of Edmund Plowden, Sheldon's brother-in-law. The French novellas of Francois de Belleforest form the basis of *Much Ado About Nothing* (edition 1574)⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ and *Hamlet* (edition 1576)⁽¹⁵⁶⁾; what appears to have been Sheldon's ('R.S.')(57-66) own translations of Belleforest were published in 1577.⁽¹⁶⁰⁻³⁾ These plays all appear to have been originally written in the 1570s, at a time when Leicester's Men was the preeminent English troupe.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ As with Paul's there is no named playwright for any of the plays performed by Leicester's Men.⁽¹⁰⁵⁻⁶⁾

Post-Leicester Evolution

Things fell apart in the 1580s. Sheldon was prosecuted for recusancy.⁽¹⁷⁴⁻⁶⁾ Mounting Puritan pressure caused retrenchment of the London stage: Paul's was banned from Court;⁽¹⁷⁷⁻⁸⁾ Leicester's Men was dissolved in 1583 and the players organized into the Queen's Men under Francis Walsingham.⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ Leicester died after scandal, unmourned.⁽¹⁸²⁻⁵⁾

After Leicester's death in 1588, 'Shakespeare' began his sonnets, venturing into the new poetry style promoted⁽¹⁷⁹⁻⁸¹⁾ by Leicester's nephew Philip Sidney. Sheldon's age (early 50s), marital status, and Court connections made him the perfect man⁽²⁰⁶⁻⁹⁾ to address the young nobleman Southampton⁽²⁰⁶⁻⁸⁾ on the merits of marriage and procreation (sonnet 6 suggests 10 children, as had Sheldon)⁽²⁰⁸⁾. Simultaneously, Sheldon ('R.S.') collected the finest new poetry of Oxford elite poets into *The Phoenix Nest*, published the same year at *Venus & Adonis* (1593), with the same predominant 6-line stanza, dedicated to Leicester and Sidney.⁽¹⁹⁶⁻²⁰⁵⁾

A Midsummer Night's Dream – performed most likely in 1592⁽⁸⁸ⁿ¹⁹⁶⁾ – seems a retrospective on Sheldon's beginnings in drama: a burlesque on the early *R&J*,⁽⁹¹⁻²⁾ with unique sources from a poem on silkworm cultivation^(76-7;91-2) and a utopian town near Mantua,⁽⁷⁷⁻⁸⁰⁾ tracking Sheldon's early trip to Italy to seek out silk for his family's tapestry business.

The unusual profit-sharing agreement of the Globe Theatre – wherein five players shared one-half of the profits without any contribution to construction costs – can be best explained by Sheldon's similar arrangement with the Sheldon family weavers.⁽²²⁴⁻⁷⁾ Further, Sheldon's huge debts at the time from sudden collapse of a loan exactly parallels the 'Shakespeare'-altered plot of *Timon of Athens*.⁽²²⁷⁻⁹⁾

Finale

Sheldon died in March 1613, just before performance of *Henry VIII*, an active collaboration with John Fletcher.^(233;235-6) By contrast, the last play *Two Noble Kinsmen* was a collaboration originally attributed primarily to Fletcher, with a eulogy to its 'noble breeder', suggesting it was written largely after Sheldon's death.⁽²³³⁻⁴²⁾ *Two Noble Kinsmen* was 'Shakespeare's' version of the same play Sheldon first produced for the Queen in August 1566.⁽²³⁴⁾

*All superscripts refer to pages in the author's book, *WAS SHAKESPEARE A 'HYDDEN MAN'?: An Elizabethan Jigsaw Puzzle*, available at no charge at www.hyddenman.com, or for \$11 on Amazon.

MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ISSUE NO. 1: SHELDON'S ITALIAN TRIP

The evidence for Sheldon's trip to Italy with Edward Courtenay at the end of 1555 rests on correspondence filed in the Venetian diplomatic files. The correspondence includes communications between Ambassador Sir Philip Hoby and Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon in November 1555. By letter dated 20 November, Hoby wrote from Antwerp to Courtenay in Louvain, asking Courtenay to 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 him in some stead. See Calendar of State Papers, Venetian (CSPV), vol. 6, Part I (1555-56), ed. Rawdon Brown (London, 1877), p. 253 (No. 284, 20 November 1555).

QUESTION #1: How do we know that "young Sheldon" is Ralph Sheldon?

ANSWER: The letter clearly refers to Sheldon's father as a "very dear friend of mine": William Sheldon, Ralph's father, and Philip Hoby were long-time friends and close neighbors, both holding lands within 6 miles of each other in Worcestershire; William witnessed Hoby's will a week before Hoby's death on 9 May 1558. In November 1555, Ralph was the 18-year-old heir to William, unmarried, and a scholar who entered Middle Temple one year later. The Sheldon family ancestry has been

very thoroughly studied, and there are no known alternatives to Ralph as the scholar “young Sheldon.” See *Hydden Man*, p. 70.

QUESTION #2: While Courtenay indeed traveled to Italy around the end of November, how do we know that Sheldon actually accompanied him?

ANSWER: The day after receiving Hoby’s request to meet with Sheldon, Courtenay immediately replies, and promising to “look after young Sheldon, whom he has not yet seen.” See CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, p. 254 (No. 285, 21 November 1555). At the time that Hoby contacted Courtenay on behalf of Sheldon, Courtenay had been delayed in his planned trip to Italy, desperately trying to raise more funds for his travel. See CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, p.243 (No. 273, 11 November 1555). By 22 November, however, Courtenay had obtained a line of credit. See CSPV, vol. 6, Part I, p. 255-56 (No. 286, 22 November 1555). Clearly Courtenay, on the day (21 November) when he agreed to look after the 18-year-old Sheldon intended leave for Italy as soon as possible, without incurring any further delay. Given this very tight timing (especially as by 21 November he had yet to meet the “young Sheldon”) the sole way that Courtenay could have agreed to “look after” the young man would have been to include him with his entourage on his Italian trip. It seems highly improbable that Courtenay would have broken his promise to Ambassador Hoby, thereby abandoning an 18-year-old Englishman (and fellow Catholic) by himself in Louvain, a place where the young man had only just arrived to seek Courtenay’s assistance. See *Hydden Man*, p. 71. Courtenay died suddenly in Padua in September 1556; Sheldon entered Middle Temple in November 1556.

Further, Sheldon's own epitaph upon his death in 1613 supports the timing of the Italian trip, stating that "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; the following November 1556, Sheldon entered Middle Temple, and he married Anne Throckmorton in May 1557.] According to E.A.B. Barnard, Sheldon married "shortly after his return from those 'tapestry' travels abroad, with Richard Hyckes [the family's chief tapestry weaver] as his mentor." See *Hydden Man*, p. 69.

ISSUE NO. 2: HANDWRITING COMPARISON WITH HALL'S CHRONICLE (1550) ANNOTATIONS

In the book on pages 129-34, evidence is presented regarding a comparison of Sheldon's handwriting (from a 1585 signature of Sheldon's) to script annotating a volume of Hall's Chronicle (1550), the rare book which is the acknowledged source for the early Shakespeare histories. The comparison is largely based on the very unique capital "R" in Sheldon's signature, matching a similar "R" in the annotations, along with a rare, old-fashioned version of a final "n", and similar irregular sizing and spacing in the two hands. Photographs are provided.

QUESTION: Has the handwriting comparison been reviewed by any expert in such matters?

ANSWER: Yes, the author submitted the evidence related to the handwriting comparison to Vanessa Wilke, Curator of Medieval Manuscripts, Huntington Library. Ms. Wilke reviewed the evidence, and by email dated 10 May 2022, she replied: “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,” concluding that the author’s presentation of the evidence showed a “compelling case.” This is reported in *Hydden Man*, p. 133, footnote 407.

ISSUE NO. 3: THE USE OF ‘R.S.’ BY RALPH SHELDON

The Sheldon as Shakespeare theory is based, in part, on a conclusion that Sheldon was also known under the initials of “R.S.,” initials used in both literary publications of Sheldon’s work (primarily in a 1577 translation of Belleforest novellas, and in a 1593 poetry anthology *The Phoenix Nest*) and in other third-party references to him in published works, particularly those by poet Nicholas Breton. An overall view of the methodology and documentation connected with this conclusion is included in *Hydden Man*, pp. 57-66, with additional summaries related specifically the Belleforest translation at pp. 158-63, and to the *Phoenix Nest* on p. 199-200. A further discussion of an R.S. letter published by Nicholas Breton is included at pp. 230-32.

QUESTION: Given that the initials “R.S.” are a very frequent pairing, how can you be assured that the reference is to Ralph Sheldon, and not some other early English writer also R.S.?

ANSWER: In general, there are three parts to this answer:

(1) The subject matter and source material show strong relationship to Sheldon’s life, and particularly in the case of the two Sheldon literary works, to the Shakespeare oeuvre.

(2) In the case of the *Phoenix Nest*, the Harvard editor of the 1931 modern edition of the book, Hyder Edward Rollins, thought that the unknown identity of its editor R.S. – referred to as an “Inner Temple Gentleman” in the work – as the major question presented by the work, and he exhaustively investigated all reasonable possibilities – including all known members of the Inner Temple with initials “R.S.” – to no avail. He reported on his investigation in detail in his edition of the work.

(3) In the case of both Sheldon literary works there is evidence of deliberate obfuscation of the identity of R.S., especially incontrovertible in the case of the *Phoenix Nest*. In the *Nest*, the fact that Rollins, despite his extensive investigation into members of the Inner Temple, found no evidence that R.S. was, in fact, a member of the Temple, is particularly damning. The poets included in the anthology were all highly regarded Oxford poets, and would have been fully apprised of the identity of the editor of the anthology, who personally obtained the original manuscripts of the original poems included in the collection from each individual poet. Such an elite group would also have been familiar with

the connection – or lack thereof – of the editor R.S. to the Inner Temple. The fact that nonetheless the work was published indicates that even if the impression was, at best, misleading, the obfuscation was viewed as benign, and most possibly, necessary.

Given the obvious depth of the shrouding of the identity of the writer Shakespeare – a shroud which remains, even after 400 years – it must be expected that the lengths taken to disguise the writer’s identity were exceedingly broad, and even extreme. Especially given the evidence that the R.S. identity was deliberately obfuscated in the cases of the writer’s own published literary works, one can fairly conclude – with the other evidence provided – that the masked “R.S.” identity was that of the disguised writer, Ralph Sheldon, aka Shakespeare.

ISSUE NO. 4: THE OLDER AGE OF SHELDON

Sheldon was born in 1537, nearly three decades before the actor Shakspeare, born in 1564. This obviously affects the dating of the plays and other writings identified to Shakespeare.

QUESTION: Given the large discrepancy between the two men, what evidence would support Shakespeare as an older man (Sheldon) as opposed to a much younger man (Shakspeare)?

ANSWER: Actually, as outlined below, there is considerable evidence that indicates that the writer was an older man, recognized as such in

contemporary commentaries, and a man with old-fashioned writing practices. Four examples are cited below:

(1) The 1609 Quarto of *Troilus & Cressida* includes a preface to the play entitled "A Never Writer, to an Ever Reader. News." The preface is effusive in its praise for the author: "So much and much savored self ot wit is in his comedies that they seem, for their height of pleasure, to be born in the sea that brought forth Venus. Amongst all there is none more witty than this. . ." There is then a warning that follows: "And believe this, that when he is gone and his comedies out of sale, you will scramble for them and set up a new English inquisition." The original title page to this Quarto did not include this preface. However, for some unknown reason, while the printing the original Quarto, the printer stopped printing, canceled the title page, reset the type of the upper half of it, and added the new preface before the text. Thus, there are two extant variants of the 1609 Quarto, with the preface printed only in the second, later variant. At the time of this printing in 1609, Sheldon would have been 72 years old. By contrast, Shakspeare would have been 45 years old, hardly an age when critics would be alerting readers to his imminent death.

(2) In June 1984, *Notes & Queries* published a letter from L.C. Horne that discussed a little known volume of poetry, *Envies Scourge, and Vertues Honour* published in 1599 (STC 15107.7) by unknown writer, 'M.L.' The article prints part of the text (Sigs a8^v-B1^R):

My selfe is sted a reverend with have blamed
Without desert, whereof I am ashamed.

Pardon sweet wit (which hast a liberall part

of pure infusion in thy happy braine)
My sorrowing sobs have bloodlesse left my hart,
that giddy rage so cleare a spring did staine,
Let worthlesse lines bee scattered heere and there,
But verses live supported by a speare.

As noted by Horne, the work is dedicated to Thomas Paget, Treasurer of the Middle Temple in 1599, it clearly echoes the satires of poets Joseph Hall and John Marston in the late 1590s. These satires (see *Hydden Man*, pp. 212-17) chastised a so-called “Labeo” for the lascivious nature of the writer’s more recent works, with specific indications that the satire referred to Shakespeare and his 1593 work, *Venus & Adonis*. This later poem by M.L. – with its references to “sweet wit” and “speare” – would seem to be also be about Shakespeare, and seems to offer an abject apology for an earlier attack that is unidentified but in the same vein as those of Hall and Marston.

What most puzzled Horne, however, about M.L.’s verse is its use of the word ‘reverend’ – a term that Horne noted “normally implied a fairly advanced aged in the recipient” and also had a religious connotation. As this certainly would not apply to the actor Shakspeare (who, in 1599 was 35 years old), Horne could not understand the use of the term to the writer Shakespeare. Of course, as applied to Ralph Sheldon, who in 1599 was 62 years old (and a revered member of the Middle Temple), the use of ‘reverend’ to describe the man whom M.L. previously “blamed without desert, whereof [M.L. is] ashamed” makes far more sense.

(3) The analysis of the “Hand D” Addition to the play *The Booke of Sir Thomas More* provoked more discussion about the writer Shakespeare’s old-fashioned writing practices. In support of “Hand D” as the work of Shakespeare, the eminent Shakespearean editor J. Dover Wilson, compared the spelling in the Hand D portion of *Thomas More* with that of other plays in the Shakespeare canon. According to Wilson:

These spelling [of 370 specified words in Hand D] are, for the most part, unusual forms for writers of the period. They are old-fashioned; and it is unlikely, to say the least of it, that any two authors would be equally old-fashioned in the spelling of all these words. It is, therefore, very encouraging to find parallels in the quartos for every one of them. The accumulation of coincidences is by this time growing into an impressive pile. Can we crown it by citing a spelling from both the Addition and the quarto which is not only old-fashioned but very old-fashioned?

Wilson answers affirmatively, citing the example of the use of “scilens” appearing once in Hand D Addition and eighteen times in *2 Henry IV*, and nowhere else in Elizabethan drama. Of this, Wilson wrote: “When coincidences accumulate, every additional one increasing the probability of the case, it only remains to decide the point at which probability passes into certainty.” [This work of Wilson originally published in Dover Wilson, “Bibliographical Links between the Three Pages and the Good Quartos,” in *Shakespeare’s Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*, ed. A.E. Pollard (Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. 128; reported and discussed in Timothy Irish Watt, “The authorship of the Hand-D Addition in the Book of Sir Thomas More,” in *Shakespeare, Computers, and the Mystery of Authorship*, eds. Hugh Craig and Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 139.]

This commentary by Watts is cited in The Arden Shakespeare edition of *Sir Thomas More*, ed. John Jowett (2011). Jowett notes: “Some of the items

discussed [by Watt] show a characteristic that has been noticed elsewhere of Shakespeare: that he is old-fashioned in his linguistic preferences.” Jowett attributes this characteristic as “perhaps because of his provincial origins in Stratford-upon-Avon” (Jowett, p. 449). It might be more logical to attribute this characteristic of the writer to his advanced age, rather than a provincial dialect.

(4) In a highly technical analysis of the use of the auxiliary “do” in the language of the Elizabethan playwrights, Jonathan Hope (*The Authorship of Shakespeare’s Plays*, Cambridge University Press, 1994) found a startling anomaly.

In the early Middle England, questions could be formed without – or with – the use of the auxiliary verb “do.” That is, the question could be “Went you home?” or alternatively “Did you go home?” – with the latter version (in Hope’s terms, the “regulated” version) becoming the preferred modern usage. (Hope, 11). Hope compared this usage by Shakespeare and five other Elizabethan playwrights. From this, Hope expected that increasing usage of the more modern form (‘do’ or ‘did’) would indicate a later date of birth for the named playwright. (Hope, pp.17-20).

Here Hope found his anomaly: although Shakespeare and Marlowe apparently were both born in the same year (1564), Shakespeare had a far lower rate of usage of the modern form than Marlowe. And overall, Shakespeare’s use of the modern form – with a strong preference for not using the ‘do’ verb – was very much lower than any of the other playwrights, all of whom were born after 1564. Although Hope noted that “individual variation” from a “central trend”

might be expected among the six playwrights, he concluded: “Given the isolation of Shakespeare [as shown on a graph of the results with Shakespeare at the far end of the graph], it might be inferred that Shakespeare is the anomaly here” (Hope, p. 20).

Hope provides no explanation for this anomaly. He compares the usage across the plays, but finds no variation over the range of the plays (Hope, pp. 21-2). He tries to reconcile the reputation of Shakespeare with the finding: “It can also be pointed out here that despite the picture painted in literary studies of Shakespeare as a dramatic and linguistic innovator, this is one linguistic feature which could well have struck his contemporaries as old-fashioned” (Hope, p. 21).

Maybe this anomaly can best be explained in another way. Maybe the writer Shakespeare was not the actor Shakspeare but rather Ralph Sheldon, a man who was – in fact – 27 years older than Marlowe, and much older than any of the other playwrights sampled?
