

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 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.