

NOTE: This is the Conclusion of the Book, *Was Shakespeare a Hydden Man: An Alternative Theory*. A copy of the book is presented below, with the full documentation for the evidence presented in this Attribution Study.

Summary of an Attribution Study: Why Sheldon Is 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.”¹ 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.”²

Herein follows the case for Ralph Sheldon as author of the plays and poetry cumulatively known as the Shakespeare works. 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.

¹ Love, 14.

² Love, 216.

Two premises underlie the Sheldon case for attribution. First, although the works are traditionally ascribed to the actor William Shakspere, there is some external evidence of his authorship but little, if any, internal or other kind of evidence. Thus, under the cited definition of an “assured attribution,” the authorship of the works falls far short, and is more appropriately classified as “unknown.”³ Second, under the traditional 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.

(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

³ Love himself is 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 Shakspere claim is lacking elements of his own definition, he also does not present any evidence 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 obvious absence of 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. Instead, he simply proposes – without 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 Shakspere] socialising with Inns-of-Court students in the Devil’s Tavern in order to clarify legal issues arising from his plays. . .” See Love 202.

suspect or suspects.”⁴ 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 superior writing and linguistic skills.
- (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 1613/14, 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.

⁴ 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 are considered “full” candidates,⁵ 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 could be compared to the Shakespeare works, and all were also apparently eliminated by failure to match item #3, on stylometric similarities.⁶

Regarding item #9 (the dating of the end of the Shakespeare works around 1613/14) 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 1613/14, with the earliest Christopher Marlowe (1593) and the latest Edward Dyer (1607). The remaining died years after 1613/14, with all but one claimant (Walter Raleigh, 1618) dying at least 8 years later.⁷

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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Elliott and Valenza, 206-07.

⁷ Elliott and Valenza, 193.

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.”⁸ The circumstances of the Shakespeare plays would seem to eliminate the probability that a pseudonym was used 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 supporting 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) Sheldon began his career with the Earl of Leicester under a 60-year lease of a residence in 1566 at Oriel College, Oxford, using the Oriel residence to produce Richard Edwards’s play *Palamon & Arcyte* for Elizabeth’s first formal visit to Oxford in August 1566. Sheldon, with the assistance of his brother-in-law jurist Edmund Plowden, began writing the early Shakespeare history plays in the 1570s, as well as other plays such as the earliest versions of *Hamlet* and the *Merchant of Venice*, presumably acting as the house

⁸ Love, 31.

dramatist for Leicester's Men, the premier drama troupe in England in the 1570s. Subsequently, in 1583, Leicester's Men was incorporated into the Queen's Men, and ultimately into the Lord Chamberlain's Men in the 1590s. Internal and external evidence suggests that Sheldon financed the construction of the Globe Theatre, and in similar manner to the financing of the Sheldon family tapestry weavers, provided his share of the house profits to members of the Lord Chamberlain's acting troupe, including Shakspere and John Heminges. His last two plays were collaborations with John Fletcher, the dramatist who would replace him with the King's Men: the first, *Henry VIII*, a completed collaboration with Fletcher was produced in June 1613, three months after Sheldon's death in March 1613; the second, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, an incomplete collaboration on a play drawn from the same source as his first play with Leicester, *Palamon & Arcyte*, was produced in 1613/14, and included an opening eulogy to its "noble breeder." Subsequently, Heminges and fellow actor Henry Condell collected his plays into the First Folio in 1623, giving the first completed copy of the Folio to the Sheldon family, who owned it until 1781, the best preserved of all extant Folios.

- (2) Although Sheldon did not publish under his own name, he did publish under the initials R.S. in 1577 and 1593, and then beginning in 1593, under the pseudonym "William Shakespeare." The works of R.S. completely parallel Shakespeare plays of the same period. The 1577 work of R.S. was a translation of French tales by Francois de Belleforest, and the mid-1570 versions of *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* derived from mid-1570 Belleforest novellas; there were no other Belleforest translations until 1608. The 1593 R.S. work was a noncommercial anthology celebrating the new

English poetry, particularly from Oxford poets, edited by Sheldon in the years after Leicester's Men had been reincorporated under Francis Walsingham, and featuring the poems of Thomas Lodge; and the mid-1590s play *As You Like It* featured poets in Arden Forest led by a banished Duke Senior in a play derived from a Thomas Lodge work, *Rosalynde*.

(3) [Not available: no stylistic tests comparing the Shakespeare works applied to the written texts of Sheldon.]

(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. In the 1560s, Plowden had designed and constructed the Great Hall of the Middle Temple; in 1 *Henry VI*.2.4, Shakespeare opens the War of the Roses in the garden at the west end of the Great Hall of the Middle Temple.

(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 Is 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.⁹ The preceding chapters have presented detailed external and internal evidence that connects Sheldon with the writer Shakespeare; in this section, the evidence is re-configured 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.

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

⁹ See Diana Price, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (London: Shakespeare-authorship.com, 2012), 307.

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 was the last Catholic heir to the English throne and had been a suitor to the Protestant Princess Elizabeth. Courtenay died suddenly, most likely 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*;¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ 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.

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 & Arcyte* 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 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*."¹¹ 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

¹¹ E.K. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, IV.144.

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 50th 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 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* 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 1573.¹² 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 Chronicle (1578, 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

¹² 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.

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 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 noble 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 preceded. 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 Nights 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 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 & Arcyte* – 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 Gonzaga utopia of Sabbioneta – 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, in January 1556, urging fabrication of the utopian city, beginning with the western side (the location of a gate known as "il Quercia dei Duca" or the Duke's Oak). 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.¹³ 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 more clear.

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 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. . ."

¹³ Under these circumstance, it seems impossible to believe that Elizabeth's father, the Earl of Oxford, could have been the author.

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 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* sonnet), 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. The writer Labeo, according to Hall, lives like a cuttle fish, camouflaged by a black cloud. 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.¹⁴ 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 “pryvate 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

¹⁴ 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.

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 Shakspere, 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 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 clear 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 very 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 are sunk 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. It is thought 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 1613/14. 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"; that the eulogy to Shakespeare seems masked by an exceedingly rare nod to the play's original source, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, appears to be only further proof that Sheldon was Shakespeare. Finally, it is noted that Sheldon's first production for Leicester was Richard Edwards's own version of Chaucer's *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 Shakspere.