

October 1991

The Case for Shakespeare
by Irvin Matus

The new reading room of the Folger Shakespeare Library is dominated by a huge painting of the sort that Oscar Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* might have characterized as being of "more than usually revolting sentimentality." Many scholars who do their research beneath it would share that view. ("I try to keep my back to it," one longtime reader says.) But when it was painted, around 1792, *The Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions*, by George Romney, was a reflection of the fledgling cult that over the next century matured into what George Bernard Shaw would disdainfully dub "Bardolatry."

The origins of this cult are usually dated to the publication of Samuel Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays, in 1765, and the Shakespeare Jubilee staged by the actor David Garrick in Stratford-on-Avon, in 1769. The jubilee brought into the open a division that would shape perceptions of Shakespeare well into the future: the actor's Shakespeare versus the scholar's Shakespeare. The actor's Shakespeare was a fellow who wrote plum parts, often set to musically poetic verse. Actors do not seem to have ever doubted that he wrote his plays for the stage--what else would one write a play for? The scholar's Shakespeare, on the other hand, could not be revealed in an "ephemeral stage work," as Martha Winburn England put it; he became apparent only in "the eternal values of written commentary." The likeness of the author that would emerge from these studies was of a highly educated man versed in law and classical literature, fluent in several languages, equally at home at court and on the Continent.

In the 1780s the Reverend James Wilmot scoured Stratford and its

environs but could find nothing of the omniscient, cosmopolitan Shakespeare his generation had created. There were only documents of a propertied country gentleman and his rather hard-nosed business dealings, disposed of in a distinctly unpoetic will, sandwiched between church records of his birth and death. Wilmot concluded that the Immortal Bard could not have been that very mortal man. Nowadays, those who dispute the authorship of the plays do concede that there was a "man from Stratford" named "Shakspere" in Elizabethan theater, probably an actor, though not a very good one. He was, they assert, paid off by confederates of the real playwright to go back to Stratford and leave behind the Shakespeare name for the exclusive use of the True Author. No fewer than fifty-eight claimants to that title have been put forward; because the current front-runner is Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, the authorship challengers shall here be called Oxfordians. (And let it be understood that any reference by me to Shakespeare is always to that "man from Stratford.") While modern Shakespeare scholars have sought to restore the playwright to his own age and its teeming theater world, Oxfordians carry on the search for Shakespeare the man of vast knowledge, Shakespeare the well-traveled courtier--the Shakespeare who overwhelms all in his age: the Shakespeare of whom Charles Vere, the spear-carrier for his distant ancestor and the family name, has said: "If you get Shakespeare wrong, you get the Elizabethan Age wrong."

The major questions that have been raised and that will be addressed here are whether the contemporaneous record of the man and playwright is suspect; whether the "Soul of the Age" (as Ben Jonson called him) was the very heart of it as well; and, finally, whether Shakespeare was indeed a man of the theater.

THE MISSING RECORDS CANARD

There is more about Shakespeare in contemporary materials than about most others in English Renaissance theater. An ample supply of references to Shakespeare as a player and playwright establish his position in the acting company that was under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain and, from May of 1603 onward, of King James I. Another ample supply of references made during Shakespeare's lifetime substantiate that his plays were performed in public playhouses and also in private theaters and at court. Relatively few though these documents may seem by modern standards, they pose a considerable problem for Oxfordians--and, as Charlton Ogburn, Oxford's foremost American champion, has said, "you can't get anywhere with Oxford unless you dispose of the Stratford man." Ogburn has led the attempt to portray the record of Shakespeare the man as entirely anomalous, and the documents that place Shakespeare within the theater of his time as ambiguous or faulty, while suggesting that those that have not survived might have been deliberately destroyed. These arguments are a disprovable feast, of which only a taste can be given here.

For example, Oxfordians question not merely whether Shakespeare had enough education to be the author of the plays but whether he had any education at all. Wilmot was the first to discover that there is no record of Shakespeare's having attended the Stratford grammar school (nor, for that matter, is there any record of anyone else's having done so before the nineteenth century). Ogburn plants the suspicion that the school records "would have disappeared because they showed he did not attend it." In contrast, Oxfordians observe, virtually all the other dramatists of Shakespeare's age, except Ben Jonson, had been to university, and Jonson had been a student of the learned William Camden, at Westminster School. Camden, however, was the second master, teaching only the lower forms when Jonson attended. Jonson could not, then, have had much more than a few years of rudimentary schooling before he was put to work, probably at his stepfather's trade, bricklaying. Nevertheless, Jonson would

become, as we shall see, Britain's most admired playwright in the seventeenth century, and also effectively its first poet laureate. In the top rank of classical scholars, he would be granted honorary master's degrees by both Oxford and Cambridge. Evidently there may be more to both scholarship and literary genius than a formal education.

In any event, is the absence of records from the Stratford grammar school really very suspicious? It so happens that no admission books from before 1715 survive for Westminster School either, and Westminster has been called "the most fashionable school" in Tudor England. In fact, the only knowledge we have of Jonson's attendance there comes from William Drummond's notes of his conversations with the poet, and Drummond tells us nothing more than that Jonson "was put to school by a friend (his master Camden)." Drummond was the closest thing to a Boswell that this Jonson would have: none of the admiring "Tribe of Ben," nor any of his fellow playwrights, thought to tell us more about the life of this notoriously self-promoting man, who made himself a legend in his own time. Clearly, the severe critical eye cast upon Shakespeare's record has been averted from Jonson's.

One set of records that has survived is Henslowe's Diary, which contains virtually all the internal documents of theater in Shakespeare's age that have come down to us. It is actually more of an account book than a diary and was kept by the theater manager Philip Henslowe, who was also the builder of the Rose, Fortune, and Hope playhouses. Ogburn asserts that the "names of all other prominent playwrights of the time...find a place in his diary along with the names of famous actors and others who would be unknown but for his records"--not Shakespeare's, though. That three eminent Shakespeareans failed to cite "another case of an actor of Shakspeare's alleged prominence not mentioned by Henslowe or Alleyn" (the actor Edward Alleyn, Henslowe's son-in-law and partner) amounts, in Ogburn's view, to proof that something is seriously amiss.

Is Shakespeare indeed the only actor not mentioned? We also do not find the actors Richard Burbage, John Heminge, Henry Condell, and other players who had performed at the Rose with Lord Strange's Men and, with the addition of Shakespeare, were to be the nucleus of the Chamberlain's Men. Nor are the dramatists in the first wave of London theater to be found: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, and Robert Greene. Not even Edward Alleyn, who was the first famous tragedian on the Elizabethan stage and who was closely connected with Henslowe, is mentioned in association with the stage until 1596. As a matter of fact, no player or playwright is named in the Diary before 1596, which certainly explains the absence of Shakespeare: by then Shakespeare was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's company, which had no association with Henslowe or his playhouse. No wonder we don't find him in the Diary.

Those records in which Shakespeare's name is associated with theater always bring out the creativity in Oxfordians. There is, for instance, the account book for King James I's triumphal procession through London on March 15, 1604. The Chamberlain's Men had been taken into the new monarch's service ten months earlier, and the nine actors named in the King's license, including Shakespeare, are to be found in this account as the recipients of four and a half yards of red cloth. Ogburn tells us nothing more of what appears in this account than that this grant was made to "diverse persons." Ruth Loyd Miller, another Oxfordian, contends that "the clothe was issued to them not as 'actors' but as men of 'The Chamber.'" The word "actors" is not to be found in the account books it is true; but beside the names of Shakespeare and his fellows the word "Players" IS written, large and grandly. Such matters are important to Oxfordians, because in their scenario Shakespeare the bit actor had been packed off to Stratford in the late 1590s, and here, as in several other documents from after that time, Shakespeare's name heads a list of

his fellow players. They must therefore find some way to show how, when William Shakespeare is mentioned in connection with the Chamberlain's Men, the reference is really to Oxford in his not-so-secret identity. In fact, Oxfordians suggest that Oxford's role in this troupe was not merely as its playwright but as its patron. Could it be, they ask, that the patron of the Chamberlain's Men was not Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain of the Household, who has traditionally been assigned that role, but rather the Lord GREAT Chamberlain of England--who happened to be Oxford?

Aside from the fact that the actors in what had been the Chamberlain's Men had been in the King's service for nearly ten months at the time, this hypothesis also ignores one account of James's procession which makes it certain that the actors' previous patron was unquestionably Lord Hunsdon. In *The Time Triumphant*, by Gilbert Dugdale, which was in print about two weeks after the event, the author wrote of the new sovereign that he "to the mean gave grace: as taking to him the late Lord Chamberlain's Servants, now the King's Actors." This could only be a reference to Hunsdon, who had died six months earlier; Oxford survived another three months. This is but one of several contemporary items that leaves no question that the company had been Hunsdon's. The Hunsdon-versus-Oxford issue, then, is not an issue at all, merely an example of Oxfordian scholarship that is less than scrupulous.

One could go on endlessly with examples of how straightforward evidence is manhandled by the Oxfordians, but let us turn instead to the question put succinctly by Ogburn: "What about the manuscripts of his plays, which he had never shown any interest in having printed?" There is little that gets more attention from Oxfordians than the absence of autograph manuscripts, which they insist must have had some value to the author. However, there is no evidence that Shakespeare's contemporaries attached any more importance to their manuscripts than he did. Certainly, Ben Jonson thought highly

of his plays. In 1616, having carefully selected and edited certain of them (and having rewritten *Every Man in His Humour* entirely), Jonson published a collection in a handsome folio volume. "A major principle behind this selection," Richard Dutton wrote in his book on the folio, "was certainly the promotion of the image of himself as a serious poet--something very different from a mere playwright." Nevertheless, although many examples of his literary output in other forms survive, not a leaf of a Jonson play in his hand has come down to us.

Indifference to the preservation of manuscripts was not peculiar to Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists. In his *English Literary Hands From Chaucer to Dryden*, Anthony G. Petti concluded:

"Even literary figures preoccupied with posthumous fame did not apparently place value on preserving their holograph manuscripts after publication, much less their earlier drafts, and neither, generally speaking, did anyone else, other than close friends, for the cult of collecting literary autographs did not begin in earnest until the end of the 18th century."

Petti found English Renaissance dramatic remains to be in a particularly poor state in every respect, for though "there are references to over three thousand plays in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period,...only a handful of manuscript copies survive, and a mere fraction is extant in print."

At any rate, the manuscript of a play was the property not of the playwright but of the company that produced it; unless an unauthorized printer got hold of it first, a play could not be published without the consent of the shareholders. Oxfordians dismiss this contention, but the two surviving documents that touch on this, and the publication history of Chamberlain's Men and King's Men plays,

leave little room for doubt that the companies did indeed exercise control over publication. The one contract between a playwright and an acting company that still exists is that between Richard Brome and Queen Henrietta's players. Brome, the contract stipulated,

"should not suffer any play made or to be made or composed by him for your subjects or their successors in the said company in Salisbury Court to be printed by his consent or knowledge, privity, or direction without the license from the said company or the major part of them."

The agreement of the sharers in the Whitefriars Theatre provides even more important information about a company's determination to control publication of its plays:

"no man of the said Company shall at any time hereafter put into print, or cause to be put in print, any manner of play book now in use, or that hereafter shall be sold unto them, upon the penalty and forfeiture of forty pounds...."

Here we see that even a shareholder, as Shakespeare was in the Globe company was forbidden to derive personal benefit from what was viewed as the property of the company as a whole. There is no reason to think that such contracts were confined to these two particular acting companies. All the evidence is to the contrary--especially where the Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men are concerned. In the forty-eight-year history of this company it had four principal playwrights--Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Philip Massinger, and James Shirley. Although the shareholders did put plays into print from time to time, only three plays, all by Massinger, show evidence of having been printed with the author's cooperation; all three give unmistakable evidence that they were published with the company's

consent as well.

What seems even more suspicious to Oxfordians than Shakespeare's indifference to his own greatness is the complementary indifference of his contemporaries. "To make Shakspeare the author," said Peter Jaszi, an Oxfordian attorney, in an authorship debate in Washington, D.C., in September of 1987, "we would have to explain away the lack of recognition, in life and at death, that he would have received as such an author, in London or in Stratford." This seems a perfectly reasonable idea in the twentieth century, and especially nowadays, when a person can be famous for being famous, and journalists and biographers will root through trash to find every scrap of paper that may hold some secret to this evanescent personality. But the Elizabethans were guilty of something more than failing to anticipate what our century would want to know about Shakespeare: there is little reason to believe they shared our exalted opinion of the Bard.

To put Shakespeare into the perspective of his age, one must recognize that stage plays were considered things of slight literary merit. In 1612 Sir Thomas Bodley, the founder of the famous Bodleian Library, at Oxford, took the library's keeper to task for cataloguing "riffraffs," a category that included plays. "Some plays," he allowed, "may be worth the keeping, but hardly one in forty." For although the playwrights of other nations were "men of great fame for wisdom and learning," such qualities were "seldom or never seen among us." Indeed, he feared the scandal "when it shall be given out that we stuff [the library] full of baggage books." None of Shakespeare's plays was among the one in forty.

For all the honors that were soon to be conferred on Ben Jonson, when his 1616 folio, *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*, appeared, a wag posed the famous question, "Pray tell me, Ben, where doth the mystery lurk./What others call a play you call a work."

Though John Dryden was an admirer of Shakespeare's, he confessed that Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher "had with the advantage of Shakespeare's wit, which was their precedent, great natural gifts, improv'd by study," and that for this reason "their Plays are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the Stage; two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare's or Jonson's." Whether or not Dryden's estimate is reliable, the Restoration audiences of Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher saw the plays as they had been written. But Shakespeare offended this refined age, violating its idea of dramatic form and good taste. Not many of his plays escaped thorough adaptation. The *Macbeth* that Restoration audiences saw owed more to Sir William Davenant than to Shakespeare; Nahum Tate's revision of *King Lear* is notorious. *Antony and Cleopatra* was newly made by Dryden to become *All for Love*. And so on.

In Shakespeare and Jonson, the scholar Gerald Eades Bentley set himself the task of comparing the reputations of the two in the seventeenth century. By tabulating direct references to the playwrights, their plays, and their characters, he found that "not only was Jonson mentioned oftener, quoted oftener, and praised oftener, but his individual plays and poems were named more frequently than Shakespeare's, though his canon is smaller." Six plays by Jonson were mentioned more frequently than any work by Shakespeare; there were more than twice as many references to *Catiline* as to the most frequently named Shakespeare tragedy, *Othello*.

Well into the next century Shakespeare would be derided "for neglecting the unities, for ignoring the ancients, for violating decorum by resorting to tragicomedy and supernatural characters, and for using puns and blank verse." In 1709 his greatest interpreter

in Restoration theater, the tragedian Thomas Betterton, looked down loftily upon the man who "liv'd under a kind of mere Light of Nature ...in a state of almost universal License and Ignorance."

Betterton's opinion appeared in the first modern edition of Shakespeare's plays, edited by Nicholas Rowe himself a dramatist who would become poet laureate of Britain. Ben Jonson had left behind carefully edited plays, and an excellent Beaumont and Fletcher folio was published in 1647; the Shakespeare folio texts were by comparison poor stuff. Rowe's attempt to put the texts in order incidentally set into motion the incredible reversal of opinion about their author. In 1725 Alexander Pope's edition attempted to better Rowe, and was in turn challenged by Lewis Theobald, with more to come. Finally Samuel Johnson set his formidable self to the task, for which he enlisted the aid of several literary scholars. However, not even this titanic effort satisfied George Steevens (who would collaborate with Johnson on subsequent editions). "A perfect edition of the plays of Shakespeare," he wrote after the publication of Johnson's edition, "requires at once the assistance of the Antiquary, the Historian, the Grammarian, and the Poet." It had not been a hundred years since Nahum Tate, Rowe's predecessor as poet laureate, had reworked King Lear, which he declared to be "a heap of jewels...dazzling in their disorder," and Dryden had removed from Troilus and Cressida "that heap of Rubbish, under which so many excellent Thoughts lay wholly bury'd." Now the originals of these plays and their brethren needed nothing less than the efforts of a legion of scholars to be fully revealed. It was inevitable that someone would conclude that the author who required such a throwing about of brains must have been quite a brain himself, at once a master of the classics, of geography, of law, of court life--of any subject that could be found in his plays. This would become the Shakespeare of the authorship debate.

A MAN OF THE THEATER

At the heart of the authorship controversy is not only what we should expect to find of the author in his own time but precisely what his special genius was. Was it essential that he have been a man deeply involved in the world of the theater (as Oxford was not)? Or could he have been, as Algernon Charles Swinburne contended, a learned belletrist who wrote for the studious future reader "who would be competent and careful to appreciate what his audience and fellow actors could not"?

Virtually all the support Ogburn can muster for the notion that Shakespeare was not a man of the theater is from nineteenth-century critics. For instance, Ogburn cites William Hazlitt's comment "We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all, Hamlet." Hazlitt wrote this, however, in a review of a specific performance (by Edmund Kean). In fact, it was Hazlitt who believed that Shakespeare wrote for the "great vulgar and the small," and that he did so for those "in his time, not for posterity." Indeed, no one has more eloquently captured the unique qualities of Shakespeare's theater than Hazlitt did when he wrote in praise of the "wonderful truth and individuality of conception" of his characters, each "as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as well as of the author, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind." This is precisely what a playwright must accomplish. And no one has done it better than Shakespeare. Unlike the narrative poet or the novelist who, in Hazlitt's words, "answer[s] for his characters himself," Shakespeare created characters who "introduced upon the stage are liable to be asked all sorts of questions, and are forced to answer for themselves." Simply, Shakespeare had the power to make a well-rehearsed actor seem spontaneous, even unpredictable--the power to improvise a life upon the stage.

In the search for the dramatist with this singular ability, the singularity of Shakespeare's experience of theater has been overlooked. Virtually throughout his known career he was a member of the greatest and most stable acting organization of his day. Only Thomas Heywood, who fares poorly among the major playwrights of that era, approached Shakespeare's association of nearly twenty years, as player, playwright, and shareholder, with a single acting company. The importance of this relationship is everywhere evident in his plays.

Early in his career he wrote plays for whatever company wanted them. One of the Henry VI plays was enacted by Lord Strange's company; Part III was in the repertoire of the Earl of Pembroke's players. Titus Andronicus was passed among--in some order--the players of the Earl of Derby, the Earl of Pembroke, and the Earl of Sussex. Like such early comedies as *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, these plays can be effective on the stage, but they have merely flashes of what sets apart Shakespeare's work for the Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men--the individual voice, the personalized vocabulary, the rhythms of speech, the almost palpable image of the person to whom they belong. At the height of his powers, no role was so small that Shakespeare could not give a special life to it; in *Measure for Measure*, as Kenneth Muir observed, "Barnardine is given only seven speeches, Juliet seven and Froth eight, with a total of only 232 words between the three characters. But Shakespeare knew that all three could be made into unforgettable figures."

For indeed, his characters were "living persons, not fictions of the mind." They reflect his intimate knowledge of the qualities of his fellow actors. He knew the actor who would play the part--his look

and gestures, the sound of his voice, the way he moved. Is it coincidental that Shakespeare alone among his contemporaries created great female roles? For no other dramatist could have known the talents of his "boy actresses" as Shakespeare knew those of his Beatrice and Cleopatra, his Rosalind and Desdemona. And after all, Shakespeare's theater, unlike that of his contemporaries, is a theater of characters, a world on the stage, richly populated with humanity in all its variety. His great tragedies *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* were fashioned from little more than fables; they are not, like those of his contemporaries, constrained by either theme or plot. Where Jonson's characters "display a stubborn fixedness, a refusal to change or grow," Shakespeare's creations have a spontaneity and a mutability that may seem puzzling on the printed page but that assume a vividness on the stage. It is from these characters that Shakespeare's plays take their form and come to life. So unapproachable is the dramatic standard set by Shakespeare that Peter Brook, his most famous directorial interpreter in our time, has written with evident exasperation, "in the second half of the twentieth century...we are faced with the infuriating fact that Shakespeare is still our model."

The sheer number of candidates put forward as having had the unique qualifications of position and education to be the True Author is evidence that these qualifications were not at all unique in Shakespeare's time. And there is, after all, really very little in Shakespeare's plays that required knowledge beyond materials that were publicly available. What the authorship partisans have failed to demonstrate is how any of their candidates had the intimate knowledge and experience of theater and drama to create plays that remain the standard by which all other stage works are measured. Those qualifications are possessed uniquely by the man who was an active member of an extraordinary theatrical ensemble--William Shakespeare, gentleman of Stratford.

The actor's Shakespeare was a fellow who wrote plum parts, often set to musically poetic verse. Actors do not seem to have ever doubted that he wrote his plays for the stage—what else would one write a play for? The scholar's Shakespeare, on the other hand, could not be revealed in an "ephemeral stage work," as Martha Winburn England put it; he became apparent only in "the eternal values of written commentary." That three eminent Shakespeareans failed to cite "another case of an actor of Shakspeare's alleged prominence not mentioned by Henslowe or Alleyn" (the actor Edward Alleyn, Henslowe's son-in-law and partner) amounts, in Ogburn's view, to proof that something is seriously amiss. Is Shakespeare indeed the only actor not mentioned? The Shakespeare authorship question is the argument that someone other than William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the works attributed to him. Anti-Stratfordians—a collective term for adherents of the various alternative-authorship theories—believe that Shakespeare of Stratford was a front to shield the identity of the real author or authors, who for some reason—usually social rank, state security, or gender—did not want or could not accept public credit. Although the idea has attracted So Shakespeare's enemies were enemies of the faith and also his codefendants in that court case include some known Catholic recusants. That's just one other example; I could go on. Obviously, the point is that now there's an abundance of evidence to show that he retained his Catholic sympathies. To the extent to which he was really practicing his faith is more difficult to prove, of course, because you don't leave a paper trail when you're embarking on illegal activity. While recent scholarly works have continued to speculate about Shakespeare's faith, the late G.K. Chesterton wrote even before