

Shakespeare Lives!

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By Leigh Michaels

We all took English literature in high school and college, and we all know about William Shakespeare. The greatest dramatist the world has ever known, the finest poet who has written in the English language.

The Bard of Avon.

There's no question that the works of Shakespeare are fabulous and important, and that he was an influential poet and dramatist. In fact, he was the originator of the English novel – though he didn't call it that, and he didn't finalize the form. And he's been called the creator of the modern English language. He is said to have added 10,000 words to the English vocabulary.

But what do we really know about the man behind the plays?

The encyclopedias and the English textbooks say:

Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. He went to school at the Stratford Grammar School, which included such an advanced curriculum that it was as good as a university education. At the age of 18 he married Anne Hathaway, who bore him three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. Between 1585 and 1592 he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of the playing company the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. Almost immediately he started writing stunningly successful, polished poems, and plays at a rate of three or four a year. Within a few years he was the best known and most popular playwright in England. He retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive.

Yeah, well, that last line is pretty accurate – few records survive. The rest of it ... not so much.

Yes, there was a guy in Stratford on Avon who was named William Shakspere – the family pronounced or spelled it with a short A sound, not the long A. And to keep

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the two separate – the author of the plays, and the man from Stratford who's been credited with writing them – I'll refer to them that way, as Shakespeare and Shakspere.

Shakspere may have been born on April 23, but there's no record of exactly when, or where. There's no evidence he ever went to school at all, and to be admitted to Stratford school one had to be able to read and write already; a bit difficult for a boy whose father signed his name with an X. His wife, known so well to history as Anne Hathaway, may actually have been named Agnes Whateley instead. There's no evidence he ever owned a book. He does seem to have been an actor, and he seems to have owned a share in a couple of theaters – but there's no evidence he was any kind of writer. Despite the fact that for years he lived apart from his family, there's no evidence he ever wrote a letter, and only one letter is known to have been addressed to him in his entire life. It was written by a neighbor; it may or may not have been delivered, but it wasn't opened – at least by Shakspere.

There are only six examples of his handwriting – maybe. They're all signatures, they're spelled a number of different ways, and three of them are thought by Scotland Yard to be forgeries or else written with a guided hand. There's nothing else in his handwriting – not his name in a book, not a note, not a line of manuscript or poetry. Though scholars say he may have spent some years as a law clerk or a schoolteacher – professions which call for a lot of writing and signing – no papers exist. It's curious that NOTHING survived, if he was a clerk or a teacher.

His parents, his wife, and his daughters were illiterate. One of them not only couldn't sign her own name, she didn't recognize her husband's handwriting when she was showed a sample.

Though there are dozens of documents which refer to Shakspere, absolutely none have any connection with literary matters. He sued others and he was sued; he was delinquent in paying taxes, he was cited for hoarding grain during a famine, he was called as a witness in a breach of promise case. But there's *nothing* about his being a writer. Nobody called him a writer during his lifetime; nobody seemed to think of him in connection with poetry or plays or literature.

As for him being the most popular playwright of his age – well, when he died,

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nobody seems to have noticed. In an era where poets poured out tributes to deceased celebrities, nobody – absolutely nobody – commented on Shakspere’s death. No, wait a second; one person did comment. His daughter’s husband wrote in his diary, “My father-in-law died yesterday.”

When I was in college, I never questioned the identity of the man who wrote the plays. My teachers told me it was the man from Stratford, and I had no reason to doubt that they were right.

Until about 15 years ago when my husband ran across a little book which had been written by a local Ottumwa author – and I had to admit that the author had some very valid points.

That author, T. Henry Foster, was a businessman who used to send unique Christmas cards. Each year he wrote a small book and had the Torch Press in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, print it for his friends. In 1946 the topic he chose was *Shakespeare, Man of Mystery* and when I read that little book – a discussion of why the author of the plays, and the William Shakspere who lived in Stratford on Avon, were different people – lights started going off in my head.

No wonder there seemed to be such a vacuum around the plays, and such a wide gulf between the works and the man who supposedly created them. What I had been told all those years simply wasn’t true.

Why does it matter?

Many people say, we have the plays, that’s the important thing, so it doesn’t matter who wrote them. Well, yes, it does matter, just as it helps us to understand today’s best sellers by knowing who the authors are, and what their mindsets and biases are. When we read the op-ed page, we glance first at who wrote the piece – because we know Cal Thomas is a conservative and Rekha Basu is a liberal, and we want to take that into account when we consider what they have to say. If it didn’t matter, why would the newspaper even print the names?

The scholars certainly stretch to find connections between Shakspere’s experience and life – or what we think we know of his life – and the plays. But it’s very difficult

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to find those connections. People make a big thing of his son being named Hamnet – because of the similarity to the famous Hamlet of the play. But in fact, Shakspere’s son was named for a neighbor.

One scholar spent years traveling in England, looking for evidence of Shakespeare the author – convinced that somewhere, portions of his library must have survived, or his manuscripts, or some evidence of his work, or letters, or some connection between his life and his plays. He was, of course, looking for Shakspere, the Stratford man. He found nothing connecting him with writing – and he subsequently committed suicide, convinced that Shakespeare was a fraud and his own life’s work had been wasted.

The plays refer to travels across Europe – to hunting and hawking – to English and French nobility, to warfare, to jousting. Where did a guy from a rural county in 16th century England – a town so far from London that his accent would have been almost incomprehensible to city residents when he first went to the capital – learn about all of those things?

Some scholars say he had such a wonderful imagination that he made it all up.

Well – I think that attitude diminishes the man and the work. He was just *lucky* enough to get it right?

The fact is that writers write what they know. Even when they’re writing science fiction or fantasy, the kinds of stories they choose to write are rooted in their own experience. Even when they try not to, writers choose stories, characters, images, comparisons that reflect their own lives and experience and likes and dislikes.

I’m a middle-class Iowan, born and raised on a farm. I’m a traditional woman – I cook and bake and sew. I don’t jump out of airplanes, I don’t race cars, I don’t dance. So when I write my stories, even when I’m writing about the rich and the famous, the choices I make in telling the story tell the reader a lot about me – who I am, how I spend my spare time, what I think is funny. I’ve had people write me with an analysis of my character based on reading my books – and it’s scary how right they are.

If you read Shakespeare without thinking about the man from Stratford, the man

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you've been told wrote the plays, you'll find a portrait of the author, just as my readers can read between the lines and see me.

And Shakespeare – the playwright and poet – simply doesn't fit with the middle-class man from Stratford. The man who wrote “who steals my purse steals trash” isn't the same man who would sue his neighbors for a shilling debt. The man who wrote of how important his reputation was to him isn't the same man who was fined for hoarding grain during a famine.

The author of the plays was intimately acquainted with the law, medicine, art, botany, astronomy, natural history, magic, geography, music, rhetoric, court life, astronomy, heraldry, military and naval terminology, ancient and modern history, philosophy, classical literature in the original Greek and Latin as well as in French, Italian, Spanish, and English. Where would William Shakspere, the butcher boy of Stratford, have learned all that?

Scholars say Shakespeare got all his information from books. But Elizabethan England wasn't like today, with the local library and the Internet. *Where did he get the books?* Why is there no evidence that he ever bought a book, owned a book, or even handled a book? At the time, books were so precious that they were named in wills. But though Shakespeare named things like a gilt bowl and his second-best bed in his will, he made no mention of anything literary. He didn't even leave a family Bible to his oldest daughter, much less a history book or a volume of poems – or a manuscript.

Besides, reading and research only get you so far. Lucky or not, it's hard to write convincingly about something without any personal experience whatsoever. And it's not just that Shakespeare chooses to write about kings and crowns – anybody can imagine enough to do that, though they're unlikely to get the details and the feelings and the attitudes right.

The real indications of what sort of man authored the plays comes in the comparisons he's making when he's not thinking about it – the images and metaphors that come naturally, effortlessly, to his pen. Shakespeare uses jousting and hunting with falcons as metaphors. But those are sports that William Shakspere wouldn't have known the first thing about. Only noblemen were allowed to own – or

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could afford – hunting falcons. Only noblemen would have been welcomed on the field at jousting tournaments. But fishing – the one sport that William could have been good at, living on the river Avon as he did – fishing is not mentioned in the plays or poems.

Scholars say that the works of Shakespeare were written by a genius. They say that he didn't need to study or practice, because he was a genius. And how do we know that Shakespeare was a genius? Because he wrote these wonderful plays with no study or practice. That's what is known as circular reasoning – taking a conclusion and using it as a premise to base that same conclusion on.

The plays ARE a work of genius. But even genius needs practice. Even genius needs training. Genius does not spring full-fledged out of nothingness. Yo Yo Ma practices the cello every day, and he didn't start out playing at Carnegie Hall.

So who wrote the plays?

Early in the 20th century, a man with the unfortunate name of Looney (it's pronounced Lone - ee, but that hasn't stopped the jokes) started searching for the author of the plays. He started with the premise that the author must have practiced his craft – he couldn't have simply started writing at the level of Shakespeare's first known work – and that when he started publishing as Shakespeare he probably stopped writing under his own name. He also deduced from the content of the plays what the author's interests, expertise, and experience was likely to have been – where he'd traveled, what he'd studied, what he'd done.

Looney searched through Elizabethan records for an author whose style was similar to Shakespeare's, but more primitive – not yet developed. He discovered Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford – an author who was known and commented on by his contemporaries as “the best for comedy among us,” though no comedy he wrote is known today. An author whose style is eerily reminiscent of Shakespeare – so close, in fact, that when Shakespearean scholars are shown intermixed passages of Shakespeare and de Vere, some of them can't tell the difference. (One actually got it entirely backwards, crediting the Shakespeare lines to de Vere and vice versa.)

Edward de Vere was the highest-ranking noble in England, second only to Queen

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Elizabeth, and in fact for much of his life he was considered a potential successor to the throne. He was born in 1550, making him fourteen years older than Shakspere. When he was 12, his father died and Edward became the 17th earl in a long line of a noble family, hereditary great chamberlain to the Queen.

At his father's death, he became a ward of the court and was put into the care of Elizabeth's main councilor, William Cecil, later named Lord Burghley. De Vere attended college at Oxford, studying law, medicine, and natural science, and received a masters degree. He was a favorite at court, writing and producing court plays and poetry, jousting in tournaments, flirting with the queen. He married Lord Burghley's daughter; it was not a happy marriage, though it eventually produced three daughters. Oxford wanted to travel, and he defied the queen's orders so he could do so, eventually spending several years in Italy and traveling through Europe. He supported companies of actors; he was the patron of writers; he was an accomplished writer and translator himself.

Interestingly enough, the same scholars who go to such lengths to find connections between the life of William Shakspere and the plays pooh-pooch the idea of looking for connections between the life of Edward de Vere and the plays.

Are there any such connections? Oh, my goodness, yes.

Before de Vere's father died and he became the 17th Earl of Oxford, he was known as Lord Bulbeck – and his crest was a lion shaking a broken spear. When he was studying at Oxford, and performed on the student stage, he was referred to by his fellows as an excellent actor: “Thy countenance shakes a spear.” And, by the way, several of the early occurrences of Shakespeare's name as an author, on early poems and plays, show the name hyphenated as Shake-hyphen-Speare. That seems to be a pretty clear indication that it wasn't actually a name – since there's no other English name hyphenated in such a way (only combinations of two last names).

But back to connections between de Vere and the works.

Obscure de Vere relatives – people whom history has pretty much ignored – wander through Shakespeare's plays. A secondary character in the historical plays is de Vere's several-times-great-grandfather. And he plays a much larger role on stage

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than he did in real life, indicating that the author had a special interest in making him look good.

In the official court records, there's a list of books purchased on behalf of the young Edward, Earl of Oxford, by Lord Burghley – including all the major books which Shakespeare used as references and sources for his plays. De Vere was educated in part by a tutor, William Golding, who is credited for translating Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from Latin into English. Which book did Shakespeare use most as a source? You guessed it – Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both the original and Golding's translation.

And as long as we're talking about Burghley – let's look at Polonius, the councilor to the throne, from *Hamlet* – and the famous speech we all know about “Neither a borrower nor a lender be ... this above all to thy own self be true...” It's lifted concept for concept – almost word for word – from the household rules maintained by William Cecil, Lord Burghley – the man who was de Vere's guardian, foster parent, and father-in-law. Even the scholars who firmly believe in William Shakspeare of Stratford on Avon admit that Polonius *is* Burghley. But those household rules were private, not published until long after Shakspeare was dead. How would he have learned about them? Or was it just coincidence that he came up with the same ideas, in almost the same words, and put them in the mouth of a councilor to the throne? And how did he get away with parodying the queen's most powerful adviser without landing in the tower of London?

Then there's that bit about the Bard of Avon. De Vere owned an estate only a few miles away from Stratford, located on the Avon River, and there's a tradition connected to that house which says that William Shakespeare wrote one of the plays in an upstairs room there.

Why didn't Edward de Vere use his own name?

Writing entertainments for the court was one thing; writing plays for public consumption was a very different, crass, low-class thing to do. And Edward de Vere was very much a man of his time and class – one who felt strongly that birth was of ultimate importance.

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Plus, remember what was going on then. Elizabeth was sitting on a very uncertain throne. Half the population still thought she was a bastard and a usurper; the whole cult of Gloriana the magnificent queen came later, largely because of the Shakespearean plays. She was fending off two superpowers – Spain and France – trying to keep them from chewing up England as an appetizer. And the treasury was nearly broke; her grandfather, Henry VII, had been a wily old miser, but her father – Henry VIII – could have originated the term conspicuous consumption.

Elizabeth needed money and troops, and to get those things she needed political support. She needed, in short, an aroused population. How was she to do that, in an age when the people were largely illiterate, when there was no CNN? She couldn't just call a press conference. She couldn't sit down with *60 Minutes* and make her case to the nation. She couldn't put it in a book – the vast majority of her people couldn't read.

Edward de Vere had the talent and ability to write plays which would stir the patriotism of the people and make them willing to sacrifice, to back their queen, to fight to the death. He wrote the history plays to fire up the population. But if those plays were known to have originated right next door to the throne, they wouldn't have been nearly as well-received, or as effective, as when they were supposedly written by a common man. It's the difference between Condoleeza Rice writing an article in support of the Iraq War, and the editor of the *New York Times* writing it.

By the way, Elizabeth I made a grant of 1000 pounds sterling per year to her “cousin Edward” – the Earl of Oxford – without asking for any reckoning of what the money was spent for. Elizabeth was one of the most parsimonious monarchs in history; when she spent a shilling, she wanted a shilling and a half's worth of value. Yet she made this huge grant – enough to buy three good-sized estates each year – annually until her death. What did Edward do to earn it? Let's think...

Interestingly, there was a report at the time that Shakespeare “spent at the rate of 1,000 pounds per year”. Shakspere, of Stratford, never had anything near that sort of income.

When Edward de Vere died in 1604, King James I ordered eight Shakespeare plays performed at court to honor his memory. When Oxford's widow died nine

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years later, the King ordered fourteen Shakespeare plays performed in her honor.

Why didn't the truth come out after de Vere's death?

It seems to have been an open secret in the court at the time the plays were written, so why didn't the news spread afterward? Because there was no such thing as investigative journalism, and because the ruling dynasty still was an uncertain thing. James, as a Scottish import, was no more popular than Elizabeth had been early on, so the throne had a vested interest in continuing to keep the secret.

Also, Shakespeare was active at the end of the 16th century and early into the 17th century. The First Folio – the first published collection of Shakespeare plays – was printed in 1623. Just a few years later, Charles I was beheaded and Cromwell and the Puritans took over the government. Among their first moves was to close the theaters – such cesspits of immorality they were said to be.

It was nearly a hundred years later before the English theater got back on its feet, and by then, Shakespeare was old stuff; the theater had moved on. In the 1700s a famous English actor revived Shakespeare – but by then everyone who knew the truth about the author was dead, and nobody thought to dig further into the question of who really wrote the plays. They took the First Folio on face value.

Doesn't the First Folio identify Shakespeare as Shakspere of Stratford?

It can be read that way – and it has been, for centuries. However, the references are mysterious enough, with double-meanings everywhere. Comments like “Sweet Swan of Avon” can equally well refer to de Vere, because of his estate nearby. And the Folio specializes in such general, non-specific references.

The authorship controversy

It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that the authorship question really got started, and then it was other authors who led the charge – including Walt Whitman, Washington Irving, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Professors of English literature didn't agree – and understandably so; it's asking a lot for someone who got his Ph.D.

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based on a dissertation about what Shakspeare must have studied in the Grammar School at Stratford to say, “Oops, I guess I’ve had the wrong guy all along.”

Actors form another group who doubt the standard definition – Charlie Chaplin, Sir John Gielgud, and Jeremy Irons among them. Others who support an alternative to the Stratford Shakspeare include Sigmund Freud, several prime ministers of England, and at least three present and past Supreme Court justices. One of the justices has said that if writing the plays of Shakespeare was a crime, the guy from Stratford would have to be released for lack of evidence.

There are some common arguments that supporters of the Stratford Shakspeare make:

Scholars say Shakespeare made mistakes that no one who had actually traveled would have made – which would support the idea that the plays were written by someone who *hadn't* traveled. Shakespeare said there was a seacoast in Bohemia, and he had characters travel by canal between Italian cities. What these scholars don't tell you is that in Shakespeare's day Bohemia actually did have a seacoast – it's landlocked now – and the Italian cities in this case were connected by a canal. It wasn't Shakespeare who was wrong – it's the scholars.

Scholars say Shakespeare lifted his plots from other authors. The argument is made that Shakespeare never had an original thought, that his plays were based on earlier works and lifted straight from them. He did use certain books as the basis for some plays, but there's evidence that many of the early works he's supposed to have plagiarized were actually his own first drafts. However, they were written too early to be the work of the young William Shakspeare, so the scholars say that he must have just ... ahem ... borrowed them.

Scholars say Shakspeare didn't list the plays and manuscripts in his will because they were owned by the company. This is another example of wanting to have things both ways. The Stratfordians say that Shakspeare could afford to buy a big house in Stratford and retire there because he was well off from his years in the theater, yet they add that the plays and his interest in the theater and the company weren't valuable enough to mention in his will. And they say that all those plays and poems he wrote over the years went straight to the company, and he didn't have a

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single line left over in his possession when he died. Not a rough draft, not a copy, not so much as a jotted note about changing a character's name.

Scholars say some of the plays were written after de Vere's death. But the dating of the plays has been set by Stratfordian scholars based on the life span of their own candidate. They started with the years of Shakspere's life and assumed that the plays were written within that time frame. To make the plays fit based on the known dates of first performances, they've had to take the stand that Shakspere produced very polished works very early in his life, and they assume that early drafts were by someone else and Shakspere plagiarized them.

Conversely, if we look at the plays in comparison with the life span of Edward de Vere, we find a much easier and more reasonable writing pace and development of talent, voice and style. None of the plays is definitely linked to events which occurred after the death of Edward de Vere; though some scholars determinedly link *The Tempest* to a 1612 shipwreck, nothing about that event is specific enough to confirm the theory.

Even some Stratfordian scholars feel that the playwright stopped writing earlier than conventional wisdom has held. They think he ceased production and retired to Stratford about 1604. Backers of de Vere point out that 1604 is the year de Vere died.

Scholars say de Vere supporters are elitists who believe that only an aristocrat could have written the plays. But it's not a matter of rank or nobility, it's a matter of experience. It's not that the common man couldn't write plays, it's that a man of Shakspere's background couldn't write *these* plays.

Ben Jonson wrote plays in the same era as Shakespeare. Ben Jonson was a common man, from the middle class, though he had a university education. And his plays reflect his experience and his background. Read a Shakespeare play and a Ben Jonson play back to back, and you'll see what I mean.

Scholars point out that the plays bear Shakespeare's name as author. There's an incredibly naive statement on a website I stumbled across the other day: "Good evidence that William Shakespeare wrote the plays and poems bearing his name is

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the fact that his name appears on them as the author.”

So – they’re saying that the name on the cover must be the exact legal name of the person who wrote the book?

Well, first, there’s a long tradition of writers using pen names, from Homer on. At least one of the Gospels was not actually written by the guy whose name it bears.

Second, it’s *not* the same name on the cover. It’s a *similar* name, but the man from Stratford would have written it as *William Shakspeare*.

And just because the cover says William Shakespeare, or sometimes William Shake-speare (hyphenated), or even if it said William Shakspeare, there’s nothing connecting that name with a specific individual.

My books say Leigh Michaels wrote them. Even the copyright notice says Leigh Michaels wrote them. Shall we go looking through phone books to see if we can find someone named Leigh Michaels? There are probably several people across the United States with that legal name. That doesn’t make any of them the author. *Leigh Michaels* is a pen name – and so was *William Shakespeare*.

The works of William Shakespeare deserves the truth. Edward de Vere deserves the honor of being known as their author, the mind behind some of the greatest and most influential works ever written in the English language.

Leigh Michaels (www.leighmichaels.com) is the author of 80 contemporary romance novels published by Harlequin Books in 25 languages and 120 countries, with 30 million copies in print. She is also the author of non-fiction books, including *On Writing Romance*, published by Writers Digest Books. She teaches writing online at Gotham Writers Workshop, www.writingclasses.com.

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For further reading:

Mark Anderson, *“Shakespeare” By Another Name*. Gotham Books, 2005. The most up-to-date, and a good combination of scholarship with readability.

Joseph Sobran, *Alias Shakespeare*. The Free Press, 1997. A very readable discussion by the well-known syndicated columnist.

Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1984. The bible of the authorship question, an exhaustive 892-page dissertation which includes chronologies, citations, and bibliography.

American Bar Association, *Shakespeare Cross-Examination*. American Bar Association, 1961. A compilation of articles which first appeared in the American Bar Association Journal, discussing Shakespeare’s legal experience and expertise.

Peter Sammartino, *The Man Who Was William Shakespeare*. Cornwall Books, 1990. A brief and readable introduction to the authorship question. Includes tables which compare all the candidates.

J. Thomas Looney, *“Shakespeare” Identified*. Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920. The original exposé, long out of print but available in some reprint editions.

Dorothy Ogburn and Charlton Ogburn, Jr., *Shake-Speare, The Real Man Behind the Name*, William Morrow & Co., 1962. A shorter summary of the argument for Oxford as Shakespeare.

Sarah Smith, *Chasing Shakespeares*, Atria Books, 2003. A novelized approach to the authorship question, as Smith’s characters chase the smoking gun evidence which would prove who wrote the plays.