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Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford

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EDWARD DE VERE better known as “WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE”

1550 - 1604

The great British playwright and poet, William Shakespeare, is generally acknowledged to be the greatest writer who ever lived. There is a good deal of dispute about his identity (which will be discussed below), but the talent and achievements of the author are agreed to by all.

Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-six plays, including such masterpieces as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*, a magnificent set of 154 sonnets, and a few longer poems. In view of his genius, accomplishments, and deserved fame, it may seem a bit odd that his name does not appear higher on this list. I have ranked Shakespeare this low not because I am unappreciative of his artistic accomplishments, but only because of my belief that, in general, literary and artistic figures have had comparatively little influence on human history.

The activities of a religious leader, scientist, politician, explorer, or philosopher frequently influence developments in many other fields of human endeavor. For example, scientific advances have had tremendous impact upon economic and political affairs, and have also affected religious beliefs, philosophical attitudes, and developments in art.

However, a famous painter, though he may have a great deal of influence upon the work of subsequent painters, is likely to have very little influence upon the development of music and literature, and virtually none upon science, exploration, or other fields of

human endeavor. Similar statements can be made concerning poets, playwrights, and composers of music. In general, artistic figures influence only art, and indeed, only the particular field of art in which they work. It is for this reason that no figure in the literary, musical, or visual arts has been ranked in the top twenty, and only a handful appear on this list at all.

Why, then, are there *any* artistic figures on this list? One answer is that our general culture—in the sociological sense—is in part created by art. Art helps to form the connective glue of society. It is no accident that art is a feature of *every* human civilization that has ever existed.

Furthermore, the enjoyment of art plays a direct part in the life of each individual person. In other words, an individual may spend part of his time reading books, part of his time looking at paintings, etc. Even if the time we spent listening to music had no effect whatsoever upon our other activities that time would still represent some not insignificant fraction of our lives. However, art *does* affect our other activities, and in some sense our whole life. Art connects us to our souls; it expresses our deepest feelings and validates them for us.

In some cases, artistic works have a more or less explicit philosophical content, which can influence our attitudes on other topics. This, of course, occurs more frequently in the case of literary compositions than in the case of music or paintings. For example, when in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act III, scene 1) Shakespeare has the prince say, "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill," an idea is presented that (whether or not one accepts it) has obvious philosophical content, and is more likely to influence political attitudes than is, say, viewing the "Mona Lisa."

It seems beyond dispute that Shakespeare is preeminent among all literary figures. Relatively few people today read the works of Chaucer, Virgil, or even Homer, except when those works are assigned reading in school. However, a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays is certain to be well attended. Shakespeare's gift for a well-turned phrase is without parallel, and he is frequently quoted—even by persons who have never seen or read his

plays. Furthermore, it is plain that his popularity is not a mere passing fad. His works have given pleasure to readers and viewers for almost four centuries. As they have already stood the test of time, it seems reasonable to assume that the works of Shakespeare will continue to be popular for a good many centuries to come.

In assessing Shakespeare's importance, one should take into account that had he not lived, his plays would never have been written at all. (Of course, a corresponding statement could be made regarding every artistic or literary figure, but that factor does not seem particularly important in evaluating the influence of minor artists.)

Although Shakespeare wrote in English, he is truly a world figure. If not quite a universal language, English is closer to being one than any other language ever has been. Moreover, Shakespeare's works have been very widely translated, and his works have been read and performed in a very large number of countries.

There are, of course, some popular authors whose writings are disdained by literary critics. Not so with Shakespeare, whose works have received unstinting praise from literary scholars. Generations of playwrights have studied his works and have attempted to emulate his literary virtues. This combination of enormous influence on other writers and continued worldwide popularity makes it plain that William Shakespeare is entitled to a high position in this book. However, there has long been a controversy as to the identity of the man who wrote under that name.

The orthodox view (which I accepted uncritically when writing the first edition of this book) is that he was the same person as William Shakspeare, who was born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1564 and died there in 1616. However, on carefully evaluating the arguments of the skeptics and the counter-arguments of the orthodox, I have concluded that the skeptics have much the better of the argument and have reasonably established their case.

The bulk of the evidence indicates that "William Shakespeare" was a pseudonym used by Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, and that William Shakspeare (or *Shaxpere*, or *Shakspeyr*, or *Shagspere*, or *Shaxbere*: the family name was spelled several ways in

Stratford, but almost always without the first "e"; it was therefore pronounced quite differently—with a short "a"—than Shakespeare) was merely a prosperous merchant whose business took him to London, but who had nothing to do with the writing of the plays.

I am not suggesting that de Vere was a ghostwriter for Shakspeare, who took public credit for the plays at the time. During his lifetime, Shakspeare was *not* considered to be the author, nor did he ever claim to be! The notion that Shakspeare was the great playwright William Shakespeare did not arise until 1623—seven years after Shakspeare died!—when the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays appeared. The editors of that book included some prefatory material in which it was strongly hinted (though never said directly) that the man from Stratford-on-Avon was the author.

To understand why it is so unlikely that Shakspeare was the playwright it is first necessary to present the orthodox version of his biography, which goes as follows:

Shakspeare's father, John, had once been fairly prosperous, but he fell on hard times, and young William was reared in difficult financial circumstances. Nevertheless, he attended the Stratford Grammar School, where he studied Latin and classical literature.

When William was eighteen he made a young woman named Anne Hathaway pregnant. He duly married her, and she gave birth a few months later. Two and one-half years later she gave birth to twins: so William had a wife and three children to support before he was twenty-one years old.

We have no knowledge of his activities or whereabouts for the next six years, but in the early 1590s he was present in London as a member of an acting troupe. He was a successful actor, but soon branched out into writing plays and poetry. By 1598 he was already being hailed as the greatest of all English writers, living or dead. Shakspeare stayed in London for about twenty years, during which time he wrote at least thirty-six plays, 154 sonnets, and a few longer poems. Within a few years he became prosperous, and in 1597 was able to purchase an expensive home ("New Place") in Stratford. His family remained behind in Stratford the whole time, but he continued to support them.

Oddly, he never published any of the great plays he was writing. But unscrupulous printers, realizing their commercial value, published pirated editions of nearly half of them. Although the pirated editions are often rather garbled, Shakspeare made no attempt to interfere.

About 1612, when he was forty-eight years old, he suddenly retired from writing, returned to Stratford, and resumed living with his wife. He died there in April 1616, and was buried in the church courtyard. The stone over his supposed grave does not bear his name; however, some time later a monument was erected on the wall nearby. Three weeks before his death he executed a will, leaving most of his property to his elder daughter, Susanna. She and her descendants continued to live at New Place until the last of them died, in 1670.



Hedingham Castle, the birthplace and childhood home of Edward de Vere.

It should be pointed out that a good deal of the foregoing biography is pure conjecture on the part of orthodox biographers. For example, there is no actual record of Shakspeare ever being a student at Stratford Grammar School. Nor did any student or teacher there ever claim to have been a classmate or instructor of the famous playwright. Similarly, it is unclear that he ever had an acting career.

Nevertheless, at first sight, the official story may sound plausible. However, as soon as we examine it closely, grave difficulties arise.

The first problem—mentioned even by many orthodox biographers—is that we have so little information about the life of Shakspeare, *very* much less than we would expect to have about so prominent a person. In an attempt to explain this surprising paucity of data people sometimes say, “He lived almost four hundred years ago. Naturally most of the documents by and about him have been lost.” But that view greatly underestimates the amount of information we have about the era Shakspeare lived in.

He was not living in a backward country or a barbaric age, but in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a well-documented era where there were printing presses, where writing materials were commonplace, and where very many persons knew how to read and write. Of course, many papers have been lost; but several *million* original documents from that era still survive.

Because of the great interest in William Shakespeare, an army of scholars has spent three generations scouring that data, searching for information about the world’s most renowned literary genius. As a by-product of that search they have uncovered reams of information about every other major poet of the day—and about many minor poets as well. But all they have uncovered about Shakspeare are about three dozen minor references, not one of which describes him as a poet or playwright!

We know incomparably more about the lives of Francis Bacon, Queen Elizabeth, Ben Jonson, or Edmund Spenser than we do about Shakspeare’s life. Indeed, we know far more about even such a minor poet as John Lyly than we do of Shakspeare.

The contrast with Isaac Newton—history’s foremost scientific

genius—is particularly striking. We have many *thousands* of original documents by and about Newton (who, like Shakspeare, came from a small town in England). Admittedly, Newton was born seventy-eight years after Shakspeare. But we also have much more detailed information about Galileo (born the same year as Shakspeare), about Michelangelo (born eighty-nine years earlier), or even about Boccaccio (born in 1313) than we do about Shakspeare.

A related problem is the fact that during his years in London the great playwright was virtually invisible. Shakspeare is supposed to have spent roughly twenty years in London (1592–1612). But we cannot find a *single* record, during that whole twenty-year stretch, of anyone seeing the great actor and playwright in the flesh. When people saw the famous actor Richard Burbage or met the playwright Ben Jonson, they marked it down as a notable event. But if anyone in London, during the whole twenty years of his greatest prominence, saw Shakspeare on stage, or discussed poetry with him, or corresponded with him, or met him at a party or on the street, they did not think the encounter worthy of mention!

The only plausible explanation for the above facts is that the name “William Shakespeare” was a pseudonym used by the author in a successful attempt to keep his identity secret, and that those persons who did meet the author therefore did not know they were meeting the great William Shakespeare. (Obviously, Shakspeare, whose name was so similar, could not have successfully hidden behind such a pen-name.)

Perhaps an even graver difficulty with the official story is the attitude towards Shakspeare in Stratford-on-Avon. Though Shakspeare is supposed to have been the greatest writer in England—and a well-known actor to boot—nobody in his home town seemed to be aware that he was a famous man, nor that there was anything unusual about him! This is even more amazing when one recalls that he was poor when he left Stratford and wealthy when he returned, a change which would naturally tend to make friends and neighbors curious. Yet the fact is that during his lifetime, *not one of his friends, or neighbors in Stratford—not even his own family!—ever referred to Shakspeare as an actor, a playwright, a poet, or a literary figure of any sort!*

Well, what about the manuscripts of the plays in Shakspeare's own handwriting? Surely they prove that he was the author. Unfortunately, there are no manuscripts of the plays in his handwriting, or any early drafts, or any fragments, or any unpublished or unfinished works. In fact, aside from six signatures on legal documents, there is **NOTHING** in his handwriting! No notes, no notebooks, no memoranda, no diaries. Not a single personal letter by him survives, nor a single business letter. (Nor do even his earliest biographers report having seen a single line in his handwriting.) Judging from the record, it appears that Shakspeare, far from being an author, was barely literate, or even illiterate!

A related point is that Shakspeare's parents, wife, and children were all illiterate. Now a man does not choose his parents, and he might select a mate for reasons other than her reading ability, but it seems scarcely believable that a man to whom the written word meant so much would allow his own daughters to grow up unable to read and write. If Shakspeare was indeed Shakespeare, then he is the *only* prominent author in history whose children are known to have been illiterate!

Then there is the question of Shakspeare's will. The original document survives: it is three pages long, and lists his property in considerable detail, with many specific bequests. Nowhere does it mention any poems, any plays, any manuscripts, any works in progress, or any literary rights. Nor does it make mention of any personal books or papers. There is no hint that he would like to see his remaining plays published (although at least twenty of them had not yet appeared in print), or that he had ever written a play or poem in his life. It is the will of an unschooled, possibly illiterate, merchant.

We might also note that, in an era when the English poets typically arranged gaudy funerals and composed lengthy poetic eulogies when one of their members died, the death of Shakspeare in 1616 went completely unmentioned by every writer in England. Not even Ben Jonson—who later claimed to have been a great admirer and friend of William Shakespeare—expressed the slight-

Monsieur tres honorable

Monsieur j'ay receu voz lettres, plaines d'humanité et courtoisie, & fort ressemblantes
à vostre grand amour et singuliere affection envers moy. comme vrais enfans
deuement procréés d'une telle mere. pour la quelle ie me trouue de iour en iour
plus tenu a v. h. voz bons admonestemens pour l'observation du bon ordre
selon voz appointemens, ie me delibere (dieu aidant) de garder en toute diligence
comme chose que ie cognois et considere cestre spécialement a mon propre
bien et profit, vsant en cela l'aduis et autorité de ceux qui sont au pres
de moy. la discretion desquels i'estime si grande (s'il me conuient parler
quelque chose a leur aduantage) qui non seulement ils se porteront
selon qu'un tel temps le requiert, ains que plus est feront tant que
ie me gouverne selon que vous auez ordonné et commandé. Quant a l'ordre
de mon estude pour ce que il requiert un long discours a l'expliquer par
si me mesme, et le temps est court a ceste heure, ie vous prie affectueuse-
ment m'en excuser pour le present. vous assurant que par le premier
passant ie le vous feray sauoir bien au long (pendant ie prie adieu
vous donner santé.

Edward Oxenford

Letter written (in French) by Edward de Vere when he was 13 years old.

est regret when Shakspeare died, or mentioned the event at all. Clearly, the other poets of the day saw no connection between the Stratford man and the great playwright.

To my mind, the foregoing arguments are already conclusive, and no further proof is needed that Shakspeare was not the playwright and that "William Shakespeare" was a pseudonym used to conceal the true author's identity. However, there are additional strong arguments against Shakspeare being the author, although their persuasiveness is not crucial to the case against him.

For example, it has been pointed out that most dramatists and writers of fiction include in their writings many incidents from their own lives. (Often, such events form a major part of the story.) But the plays of Shakespeare are virtually devoid of any incidents or circumstances which can be traced back to Shakspeare's own experiences.

Another argument is that the author, William Shakespeare, was obviously an extremely well educated man; witness his enormous vocabulary (*much* larger than that of any other playwright), his familiarity with both Latin and French, his accurate knowledge of legal terminology, and his voluminous knowledge of classical literature. But everyone agrees that Shakspeare never attended a university, and (as explained above) it is doubtful whether he even attended grammar school.

Still another point is that Shakespeare (the author) seems to be of aristocratic sympathies and background, very familiar with the sports of the aristocracy (such as fox-hunting and falconry) and familiar with court life and court intrigues. Shakspeare, on the other hand, came from a small town and had a petit bourgeois background.

There are many other aspects of the life of Shakspeare that do not fit in with the hypothesis that he was the famous author, William Shakespeare, and I could easily write many pages describing additional difficulties with that theory. (The reader who wants more details can find them in the excellent book, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, by Charlton Ogburn.) Of course, orthodox

biographers have constructed hypothetical explanations for each of those difficulties, and for each of the problems I have already described. Some of those explanations are rather unlikely, but each one individually is at least possible.

For example, it is *possible*—although people tend to save letters that they receive from famous men—that by the merest coincidence *every* personal or business letter that Shakspeare ever wrote has vanished without a trace, together with all his notes, notebooks, and manuscripts. It is *possible* that the greatest of English poets composed for his own epitaph the childish piece of doggerel that we see on Shakspeare's gravestone. It is *possible* that a man whose plays show that he admired intelligent, educated women let his own daughters grow up illiterate. And it is *possible* that, although Shakspeare was the most celebrated writer in England, not a single one of his friends, family, or neighbors in Stratford ever referred to him as an actor, poet, or playwright. It's not very likely, but it's *possible*!

However, in this case, as in most, the whole is greater than any of its parts. Were there just one or two difficulties with the official story, we might accept even rather far-fetched explanations for them. But after a while we can't help noticing that *nothing* seems to fit the official story naturally. Everything about that story seems to require an ad hoc, and often far-fetched, explanation. The problem is that William Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon was a barely literate small-town merchant, and neither his education, nor his character, nor his actions, nor what his family and neighbors said about him, are consistent with his being the great author, William Shakespeare.

Well, if Shakspeare was not the author of the plays, who was? Many other persons have been suggested, of which the best known is the famous philosopher Francis Bacon. But in recent years, the accumulation of evidence has swung opinion strongly towards Edward de Vere.

We know a lot about Edward de Vere: he led an adventurous life, and many events in his life are mirrored in the plays. He was

born in 1550, the son and heir of the 16th Earl of Oxford, a wealthy and high-ranking aristocrat. As befit the heir to a title which went back to the Norman Conquest, young Edward received training in all the customary skills of a young lord: riding, hunting, military arts, and also such milder pursuits as music and dancing. Nor was his academic education ignored. He had private tutors for both French and Latin, as well as other subjects. Eventually he obtained a bachelor's degree from Cambridge University and a master's degree from Oxford. Afterwards, he studied law for a year at Gray's Inn, one of the famed Inns of Court in London.

His father died when Edward was only twelve, and his mother subsequently remarried. However, Edward did not remain with his mother for long. Instead, he became a royal ward, and a guardian was appointed for him. The guardian chosen was William Cecil, Lord Treasurer of England, and a member of Queen Elizabeth's privy council for many years. As the Queen's oldest and most trusted adviser, Cecil was one of the most powerful men in England.

Young de Vere, as befitted his high rank, was treated as a family member in Cecil's household. (A somewhat mysterious incident, in which he killed one of Cecil's servants, was kept out of the courts due to Cecil's influence.) In his late teens he was introduced to Court, where he met all the leading figures, including the Queen herself. She was much taken with the young man who, in addition to being brilliant, athletic, and charming, was also very good-looking, and he soon became a favorite of hers.

When he was twenty-one, de Vere married Anne Cecil, his guardian's daughter. Since they had been reared together, and she was almost his "kid sister," such a marriage was quite unusual. (But Posthumus Leonatus, the hero of *Cymbeline*, was also a royal ward who married his guardian's daughter, and there are many other resemblances between his story and de Vere's.)

When he was twenty-four, de Vere embarked on a lengthy trip through Europe. He visited France and Germany, spent about ten months in Italy, and then returned to England via France. On the trip back across the English Channel his ship was attacked by pirates, who planned to hold their captives for ransom. But de

Vere informed the pirates of his personal friendship with Queen Elizabeth, and the pirates decided it was prudent to release him promptly without demanding a ransom. (A very similar incident occurs to the hero of *Hamlet*.)

Meanwhile, his wife Anne had given birth to a daughter. Though the girl had been born only eight months after de Vere left England, he insisted that the child was not his, and, claiming that Anne was an adulteress, he refused to live with her. Most historians feel that his charge was ill-founded. Apparently de Vere eventually reached this conclusion also, as after a five-year separation he dropped his charges and resumed living with Anne. (False charges of the adultery of a blameless young wife are a common theme in Shakespeare's plays. For example: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Othello*. And in every case the grievously wronged wife forgives her husband.)

During the five-year separation from his wife, de Vere had an affair with a court lady, which resulted in her pregnancy. Queen Elizabeth, angered at this, had de Vere arrested and sent to the Tower of London. He was released after a few months; but a friend of the young woman, resentful of de Vere's actions, attacked him, and de Vere was badly injured. Street brawls between the two families continued for a while, until the Queen threatened to jail them all unless the fighting stopped. (Reminds one of *Romeo and Juliet*.)

After de Vere resumed living with his wife, they had five children together. Then Anne, still only thirty-two years old, died suddenly. Four years later de Vere remarried, and his second wife outlived him.

Meanwhile, de Vere's financial affairs—which had been in bad shape, due to his spendthrift habits—had improved radically. In 1586, when de Vere was thirty-six years old, Queen Elizabeth granted him a lifetime pension in the extraordinary amount of 1,000 pounds a year. That is equivalent to about \$100,000 a year today, tax-free! A remarkable sum, especially considering that Elizabeth was notoriously tight-fisted with money! Curiously, the grant made no mention of any duties which de Vere must perform in return, nor of any past services for which he was being rewarded. The

grant, however, was paid regularly for the rest of her life, and her successor (King James I) continued to pay it after her death in 1603.

De Vere had always been intensely interested in poetry and the theatre, was friends with many literary figures, and as a young man is known to have written poetry and plays in his own name. (Those early plays have been lost, but several of the poems survive. Some of them are quite good, though well below the standard of the mature William Shakespeare.) However he did not publish any of them, due to the prevailing notion that it was discreditable for an aristocrat to write poetry for publication. (Such an attitude seems very peculiar nowadays; but historians agree that such an attitude was common at the time, and that the taboo was rarely violated.)

After the grant by Queen Elizabeth, though, de Vere never wrote another line in his own name. But within a few years, poems and plays started appearing by the invisible author "William Shakespeare."

Why did Elizabeth grant this extraordinarily generous pension to de Vere? Although no reason was ever stated, the obvious explanation is that she—like so many other monarchs before her—was patronizing a talented artist in the hopes that his achievements would glorify her reign. If that was her motive, she certainly got her money's worth. Indeed, no ruler before or since seems to have made a better choice!

After being awarded the pension by the Queen, the formerly very active Edward de Vere retired completely from court life. Presumably, he spent the last eighteen years of his life writing and revising the great plays and poetry that have made "William Shakespeare" famous. He died in 1604, during an epidemic of the plague, and was buried near his country home at Hackney, near the village of Stratford. (There were two towns in England named Stratford; and at the time that one was larger than Stratford-on-Avon.)

Unlike Shakspeare—or any of the other persons suggested as the author—Edward de Vere seems to fit perfectly the requirements for the mysterious William Shakespeare.

He had an excellent education, had studied law, and was well-versed in foreign languages. (He certainly knew Latin and French, and possibly other languages as well.)

He was an aristocrat, and had an insider's knowledge of court life and court intrigue.

He had the large amount of free time necessary to compose the plays.

He was repeatedly described by others as brilliant and talented.

He had a lifelong interest in the theatre, and is known to have written poetry and plays in his own name when he was younger. Indeed, he was *specifically* named, during his lifetime, as one of those noblemen who had written poetry but (because of the taboo mentioned above) had not published it under his own name. Moreover, he was praised as the most skillful and excellent of the gentlemen who had done so. (These descriptions are in documents surviving from that era.)

The plays of William Shakespeare contain a large number of incidents and characters which can be clearly identified as relating to events, personalities, and situations in the life of Edward de Vere. (A few of them have been noted above, but there are many others.)

The only problem at all with accepting de Vere as the author of the plays is the question: Why did he keep his identity a secret? There are several possible explanations.

1) There was a strong taboo at that time against noblemen writing poetry for publication, or plays for the commercial theatre.

2) De Vere was known to be an insider at court. Since many of the plays dealt with court life, if he admitted authorship people would naturally (and probably correctly!) have assumed that various characters in the plays were intended as insulting parodies of various real people in court. Today, such writing is accepted as commonplace and, though hardly friendly, not a cause for action. By the standards of those days, however, it would at least have been grounds for a lawsuit, and more likely for a duel. By hiding his identity, de Vere avoided such problems.

3) Many of the sonnets of William Shakespeare are addressed

to a female lover. His admission of authorship, therefore, would be embarrassing to his wife.

4) Far worse, many of the other sonnets are addressed to a *male*, and have often been interpreted as showing that the author was homosexual or bisexual. Whether or not that interpretation is correct (and the majority of critics believe it is not), admitting that he was the author of the sonnets would have caused gossip that would have been very embarrassing to his family.

Perhaps no one of these answers is entirely convincing by itself. Taken together, though, they might indeed be the full explanation for de Vere's concealing his identity. However, it is certainly possible that he had additional reasons which we do not know of. (For example, it is possible that, as a condition of the pension granted him, Elizabeth had insisted that he follow the social norms—and avoid possible duels between her courtiers—by not publishing anything in his own name.)

Whether or not we know the full explanation for de Vere's concealing his authorship, he matches the requirements for Shakespeare perfectly in all other respects—and remember: nobody else even comes close! To me, it seems virtually certain that he is the author.

One final question: How did Shakspeare ever get to be considered the author of the plays? That belief seems to have its origin in three references, each made a few years after Shakspeare had died, and each somewhat ambiguous. Unless an unusual coincidence is postulated, it appears that someone (or ones) deliberately committed a hoax. Why was that done, and by whom?

We cannot be certain of the answer to that question; but the most likely explanation is that the hoax was perpetrated by de Vere's family when they decided (about 1620) to have his collected works published and chose to continue to keep his identity secret. Their motives were probably quite similar to his: fear of scandal (and perhaps other motives, such as a promise to the monarch). To make the deception more complete, they decided to present another person as the author. Shakspeare was the obvious choice as the stand-in, because of the similarity of names. Also, since he had

been dead for several years he could not expose the fraud; and since he was little known in London, and even less remembered, there were very few others in town who would realize that the story was a hoax.

The deception was probably fairly easy to carry out. Ben Jonson, who provided a prefatory poem to the First Folio edition, was persuaded to include a couple of ambiguous lines that strongly hinted (without saying so directly, or telling any other flat-out lies) that the author came from Stratford-on-Avon. They also arranged for a monument to be erected there, near Shakspere's grave, with an inscription which includes strong (though vague) words of praise. Since the identity of William Shakespeare had always been kept a secret, a few hints that he was the man from Stratford sufficed to get the story started. Nobody at the time was very interested in checking the story carefully. (There was much less interest in literary biography then than there is now.) By the time the first biography of Shakespeare was written (by William Rowe: 1709) those who knew the truth had long been dead, and the myth of Shakspere's authorship long accepted.