

# Shakespeare and his stable of bards

Typical for the early theatre, the plays resulted from a collaborative effort involving the finest playwrights and poets as well as the royal court.

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Brussels, 14 December 2011. – An independent review by Icons of Europe concludes that William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an ingenious and prolific theatrical entrepreneur who managed a stable of playwright and poets that included the renown Ben Jonson. No evidence has been found to support Shakespeare being the sole or “true author” of works bearing his name.

Typical for the era, the writers in Shakespeare’s stable produced the *plays* through a collaborative effort. The courts of Queen Elizabeth and especially King James participated in this collaboration by commissioning plays for their own entertainment and providing material for the dramatic content. No evidence supports the idea of a single nobleman being the “true author”.

Separately, the origin of the Shakespearean *sonnets* needs more research. Did Shakespeare copy the acclaimed sonnet writer Edmund Spenser?

## Shakespeare authorship question

Since long, arguments have been raised on why Shakespeare could not alone have written the works bearing his name, and various theories point instead to noblemen such as Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh and Edward de Vere. The movie *Anonymous* picks Vere as the true author, while some newspaper articles downplay the need for knowing the true identity of the authorship in the first place (thereby implying the non-existence of any “true” author).

In response, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust repeated the movie’s pointed question “Was Shakespeare a fraud?” and convened a group of 60 scholars in September 2011 to support its own viewpoint that “Shakespeare was indeed the true author of the plays which bear his name”.

HRH The Prince of Wales, President of the Royal Shakespeare Company added his support and voice to this campaign with a statement on Shakespeare’s relationship with the royal court.

Whereas the 60 scholars confirm Shakespeare’s personal background and his role as a prolific and respected theatrical company manager, none could provide any meaningful evidence to support the orthodox “true author” concept. In contrast, the collaborative approach to writing the plays was detailed by the scholars replying to questions 24-27:

“None of Shakespeare’s plays is the product of an isolated genius ... He formed temporary partnerships with other playwrights ... Shakespeare was a frequent collaborator in the writing of scripts, especially in the beginning of his career ... Collaboration was arguably the default form of writing in the early theatre.”

Other Trust scholars expressed a need for more debate and research on the authorship subject.

## Royal patronage and participation

It’s well known that Shakespeare was part-owner and manager of a theatrical production / playing company that, privileged with royal patronage since 1594, entertained the court and dominated the commercial London scene. Much like today’s ensemble of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Shakespeare’s company was named the King’s Men, when James VI of Scotland also ascended to the throne of England and Ireland as James I in 1603.



As patrons of the arts, the king, the queen consort Anne of Denmark and their noblemen – the latter often self-styled poets and playwrights who sometimes acted in the plays – could provide the company with information and ideas if not also ongoing advice and inputs to the development of new plays commissioned by the court.

The beheading of James’s mother Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587 for treason; James’s fascination with witchcraft; insider knowledge about the Danish court and castles; and the noblemen’s

own lifestyle and travel experience offered plenty of dramatic and factual material for elaboration by Shakespeare's company.

According to Prince Charles: "Shakespeare's company performed before Queen Elizabeth three or four times a year and at least three times as often for King James". At this rate, the company would have staged over 150 performances at the court during a 22-year period. "Shakespeare and the King must have known each other well", concludes Prince Charles in his statement to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

### Stable of playwrights / Ben Jonson



While Shakespeare, in direct contact with King James (1566-1625), appears to have been responsible for the overall development and staging of plays, the poet and playwright Ben Jonson (1572-1637) stands out as an important if not the lead writer of scripts in the stable of the King's Men company.

Jonson's private and professional relationships with Shakespeare and the court are well-documented. He was appointed Poet Laureate by King James shortly after Shakespeare's death. From this time dates the prominence of the tribe of Ben, younger poets influenced by Jonson. Today, the tribe is still vocal in the press.

Other writers in Shakespeare's stable of playwrights and poets – and actors – include Jonson's friends John Fletcher (dramatist, a house playwright for the King's Men), Francis Beaumont (dramatist, collaborated with Fletcher), and Michael Drayton (poet, member of a stable of playwrights during five years for the theatrical syndicate of Philip Henslowe), as well as Thomas Middleton (playwright and poet).

A scholar of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust points to Thomas Heywood ("claimed to have a finger in over 200 plays") and Anthony Munday ("known as the best plotter") as examples of how collaborating dramatists in general contributed to a play of a theatrical company at the time. According to other scholars of the Trust, Shakespeare collaborated during Queen Elizabeth's reign with dramatists such as George

Peele, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Nashe and/or Thomas Kyd. A separate source suggests that John Florio, the Anglo-Italian linguist and royal language tutor at the Court of James I could have had a role in the play writing.

In parallel, ambitious and learned noblemen (e.g. Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford) supported individually the livelihood of various untitled poets and playwrights by commissioning works ad hoc in their own name for the pleasure of Her/His Majesty.

The linguistic style of these untitled writers may therefore be seen in works later attributed to their clients.

Ambitious noblemen also commissioned writings, ad hoc in their own name.

### Labelling the plays

As re-commissioning company manager armed with royal patronage, privileged information and sources of funds, Shakespeare would obviously have had the upper hand in assigning his own popular name to the plays. Revealingly, Jonson says about him: "... in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line" (1630).

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, a collection of 36 plays were published in his name under the implicit patronage of King James. Copyright law was first introduced in England in 1709 to protect author rights.

Scholars argue today if the playwright Robert Greene did not accuse Shakespeare in 1592 for being an "upstart Crow" at the "Shake-scene" and "an absolute Jack of all trades" who had the cheek to write or rewrite plays if not to commit plagiarism. In support of Greene, Thomas Nashe protested also against "the public's neglect of worthy writers".

It is therefore difficult to apply any authorship authentication method to the intricate script outsourcing and development approach used by Shakespeare's company (and other companies).

### Shakespeare's First Folio

The complexity of this script development approach is illustrated by the terms of foul paper, fair copy and prompt-book used in the First Folio of "Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies,

Histories, & Tragedies” [sic] published in 1623 (seven years after his death). The publication of the 36 plays was dedicated to the influential courtier and politician Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke and his brother William.

The Folio’s prefatory verse by Jonson is entitled “To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare and what he hath left us” [sic]. Its very first lines say: “To draw no envy (Shakespeare) on thy name, Am I thus ample to thy Booke, and Fame”.

Several lines of Jonson’s prefatory verse of Shakespeare’s First Folio appear to heap sarcasm – and not praise as often said – at Shakespeare’s alleged authorship.

Known for his satire and self-admiration, Jonson could be alluding, sarcastically, to Shakespeare’s alleged authorship and his own ghost writing role.

The famous line “Sweet swan of Avon! what a sight it were” seems also to have a double-meaning. It has been clarified, however, that the original text does say “sight”, not “fight” as sometimes cited. Jonson’s separate comment on the Folio’s much-discussed engraving, “Reader, looke Not on his Picture, but his Booke”, is also open for more than one interpretation.

### The sonnets / Edmund Spenser

Shake-speares Sonnets [sic] were first published in 1609 *without* explicit attribution to Shakespeare and later not included in the First Folio (the odd title could be a pun on the late Robert Greene’s sniping “Shake-scene” and plagiarism accusation in 1592). Two of the sonnets had already been published in a 1599 anthology entitled “The Passionate Pilgrim by W. Shakespeare”.

Earlier, the poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey had with Sir Thomas Wyatt created the sonnet format, today said to be used for the Shakespearean sonnets. The latter are in turn seen also to share elements with the sonnets of the acclaimed sonnet writer Edmund Spenser. Admired but poor, Spenser was appointed Poet Laureate on his death in January 1599 and is known as a “poet’s poet”. Did Shakespeare copy Howard-Wyatt’s and/or Spenser’s sonnets?

In the essay *The Portrait of Mr WH*, Oscar Wilde discusses the mystery of the enigmatic dedicatee Mr. W.H. of the Shakespearean sonnets and drops a hint to “Will”. Oscar Wilde had contact with descendants of the Henry Howard family, who earlier administered the patronage of King James during a period of his reign.

It is therefore conceivable – subject to more research – that the scholar Lord William (‘Bold Will’) Howard, Henry’s grandson and courtier to the king, was the sonnets dedicatee as well as the model for the Chandos painting by an unknown painter still assumed to portray Shakespeare.

### Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey

Today, it is telling that some of the greatest poets of Shakespeare’s era have a place at Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey. That is:



(a) Edmund Spenser’s grave and a monument of 1620 erected by the wife of a nephew to Lord William (‘Bold Will’) Howard; (b) Ben Jonson’s grave and a monument erected before 1728 by a grateful descendent of Edward de Vere; and (c) the graves of Francis Beaumont and Michael Drayton. A catalogue published by Westminster Abbey provides information on the life and/or oeuvre of these four writers.

A large relief, opposite Shakespeare’s monument, pays tribute to a direct descendant of Henry Howard, Elizabeth, dowager Baroness of Lechmere (born Howard and died 1739) and to her husband Sir Thomas Robinson (architect of a wing of the magnificent Castle Howard).

In contrast, the commemoration of Shakespeare came late and is controversial. His monument was not placed in Poets’ Corner until 1740 (helped by two theatre fundraising benefits). The Westminster Abbey provides no information on his life or legacy – other than citing Jonson’s famous but dismissive and almost prophetic lines of the First Folio prefatory verse of 1623:

■ “My Shakespeare, rise! I will not lodge thee by Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lye A little further on to make thee room”. – Blunt!

## In conclusion: Shakespeare and his entourage

Thus, William Shakespeare was an ingenious and prolific theatrical entrepreneur who collaborated with a stable of playwright and poets that included the renowned Ben Jonson. No evidence has been found to support *Shakespeare or a nobleman* being the sole or “true author” of works bearing Shakespeare’s name.

Among other sources, this conclusion is supported by the First Folio of 1623, Ben Jonson, Westminster Abbey, scholars of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and attempts to stifle debate.

However, there is every reason to celebrate Shakespeare’s entrepreneurial contribution to the historic oeuvre of plays (and sonnets?), as well as the creative inputs of his titled and untitled entourage – in particular King James and his noblemen, and Ben Jonson and Edmund Spenser.

In view of Shakespeare’s round anniversaries in 2014 and 2016, it’s high time to set the record straight and tell the truth on an exceptional and rich facet of Britain’s history and culture.



“Our ignorance of history causes us to slander our own times” (Gustave Flaubert).

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### SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In addition to the sources stated in the above conclusion, several hyperlinks refer to encyclopaedia sites whose content on the era of Shakespeare appears to be carefully edited and coordinated. Certain information has been double-checked with other sources. In November 2011, Icons of Europe sent a draft of this article to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust for comment.



Icons of Europe is engaged in historical research of cultural and political figures. Founded in 2001, this Brussels-based association was inaugurated under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

### ABOVE IMAGES

**King James** (1566-1625), portrayed by John de Critz or Marcus Gheerhardt the Younger, at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia, United States.

**Benjamin Jonson** (1572-1637), after Abraham van Blyenberch, oil on panel, probably early 19th century (circa 1617), at the National Portrait Gallery, London.

**Edmund Spenser** (c. 1552 – 1599), oil painting by unknown artist.

**William Shakespeare** ? (1564-1616) Scholars have not been able to determine with certainty whether this portrait – called the Chandos portrait after a previous owner, really depicts Shakespeare – nor who painted it. At the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG1). The portrait may have served as a reference for the engraving of Shakespeare’s First Folio (1623), on which Ben Jonson says: “Reader, looke Not on his Picture, but his Booke.”