

## *Chapter I*

### WHO WAS SHAKESPEARE?

The 400th anniversary of the birth of the William Shakespeare, who is buried in Stratford-on-Avon, was widely celebrated throughout the world even though his authorship of the literary works commonly attributed to him has not been established beyond a reasonable doubt. In fact, his authorship is more cogently disputed today than at any time since it was first alleged.

While it is true that the great majority of the professors and teachers of English literature still accept the man from Stratford as the authentic author, with or without reservations, it is the creative literary artists, knowing what is involved in producing literature of high quality, who seriously question the claim made in his behalf.

Henry James has said, "I am sort of haunted by the conviction that the divine William was the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world."<sup>2</sup>

The distinguished editor and scholar, Henry Watter-son, has said, "The man who can believe that William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon wrote the dramas that

stand in his name could believe that Benedict Arnold wrote the Declaration of Independence and Herbert Spencer the novels of Dickens.”<sup>3</sup>

Mark Twain wrote in reference to Shakespeare: “About him you can find nothing. We can go to the records and find out the life history of every renowned horse of modern times, but not Shakespeare. There are many reasons for this, but there is one worth all the rest put together—he hadn’t any history to tell.” Of course, Mark Twain must have meant that “he hadn’t any *literary* history to tell,” for there are records of his baptism, marriage, law suits, real estate transactions, children, last Will and Testament, and death and burial, but no records of his ever having written any of the dramas which bear the name of Shakespeare.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, Sigmund Freud, Lord Palmerston, Prince Bismarck—all of these took the position that there was something incredible and absurd about the Shakespeare authorship.<sup>3</sup> They have agreed on only one point—not who the author was but who he could not have been.

The genius who wrote those magnificent plays and sonnets was not only a brilliant mind but a highly educated person—either college-educated or self-educated. Also, he must have moved freely in the highest court circles at one time or another, travelled on the continent of Europe, and at least visited Italy.

But there is no documentary evidence to show that the Shakespeare of Stratford possessed a common school education or even owned a book or could have had a

fighting chance to educate himself outside of a college, because there were no public libraries in his day, no published grammars, no dictionaries as in the days of Abraham Lincoln (who had been able to educate himself by such means).

Almost all the books which the author of those plays would have had to read to be self-educated were at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, where they were fastened down by chains to reading desks from which the general public was rigorously excluded—such books in those days were as precious as jewels. They were open only to formally registered students. There is no documentary record of the Shakespeare from Stratford as having been among those so registered. What about access to the private libraries of the rich and the influential? There is likewise no documentary evidence that he ever had any such access. All the biographies which credit him with an education are based on speculation.<sup>4</sup>

In five of the six authentic signatures we have of this man, his name is spelt Shaksper, in one Shakspe. There are authentic references to him in which his name is variously spelt Shaxper, Shagsper, and Shacksper, but none of the signatures or references has the same spelling as the name printed in the First Folio.

In the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, issued in 1910 from the very heart of conservative England, we have the following statement regarding the Shakespeare of Stratford:

We do not know the identity of Shakespeare’s father; we are by no means certain of the identity of his wife. . . . We do not know whether he ever went to

school. No biography of Shakespeare, therefore, which deserves any confidence has ever been constructed without a large infusion of the tell-tale words "apparently," "probably," "there can be little doubt," and no small infusion of the still more tell-tale "perhaps," "it would be natural," "according to what was usual at the time," etc. etc.<sup>5</sup>

In 1620 Ben Jonson made a list of the distinguished persons he had known. It contained no mention of anyone by the name of Shaksper or Shakespeare. Then, within three years, the First Folio was published containing his enthusiastic and lyrical praise of the "Soul of the Age," "Star of Poets," "Sweet Swan of Avon." (See Appendix VI).

In a description of Stratford, published in 1645, there is included the following:

Stratford owes all its glory to two of its sons—John, Archbishop of Canterbury, who built a church there; and Hugh Clopton who built at his own cost a bridge of fourteen arches across the Avon.

In commenting on this paragraph, Dr. Thomas C. Mendenhall, at one time Professor in Ohio State University, writes, "The church referred to is that containing Shakespeare's tomb and also those of the Clopton family. The citation is evidence that 29 years after his death, and 22 years after the publication of the complete First Folio edition of his works, Shakespeare was not considered an asset in the town in which he was born and which today . . . lives and feeds upon his memory. Evidently the myth had not yet started on its triumphant way."<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, the whole case for the authorship of the man from Stratford rests upon wild speculations and the flimsiest of evidence, namely, the resemblance of his name to that printed in the First Folio and Ben Jonson's reference to the author as the "Swan of Avon," whom neither he nor other poets were previously aware of if we can judge by their unanimous silence at the time of his death in 1616. This one fact alone, the roaring silence of all the contemporary literary artists, should cause the most enthusiastic Stratfordian to stop, look, and *listen*.

Charles Dickens declared: "The life of William Shakespeare is a fine mystery, and I tremble every day lest something should turn up." Well, something has turned up, if not to cause Dickens to tremble, at least to disturb the complacency of those who have a vested interest in maintaining the Stratford legend.

In 1895 Wilbur Ziegler published a novel under the title *It Was Marlowe: A Story of the Secret of Three Centuries*, which suggested that Marlowe, Raleigh, and the Earl of Rutland wrote the works attributed to Shakespeare.

In 1901 T. C. Mendenhall published an article in the December issue of *The Popular Science Monthly* which showed an amazing similarity between the literary styles of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

In 1951 Sherwood E. Silliman, a lawyer living in Scarsdale, N. Y., registered in the Copyright Office a fanciful play, *The Laurel Bough*, based on the theory that Christopher Marlowe, the Elizabethan dramatist whose plays in blank verse immediately preceded the works of William Shakespeare, did not die an early death in 1593,



as commonly believed, but by the help of a clever and influential woman managed to foil his would-be murderers and live to continue his writing under the pseudonym of Shakespeare. Mr. Silliman's play was published in 1956 (see Appendix X).

Calvin Hoffman, an American poet and playwright, after more than twenty years of research, has uncovered a mass of new evidence on this controversial issue; all of which points in but one direction, namely, to the authorship of Christopher Marlowe. In a book entitled *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, first published in 1955 and then re-edited and republished in 1960, Calvin Hoffman presents this new evidence in logical and convincing order.

It was the argument of this book which several years ago brought about the permission of an English court to open the tomb of Sir Thomas Walsingham, the patron of Christopher Marlowe, in Chislehurst, England, news of which was widely heralded in the public press. The court's permission, however, allowed only the examination of the ornamental enclosure above the crypt. No papers were found among the quantities of sand uncovered, but obviously none should have been expected. Pharaoh Akhnaton's famous *Ode to Aton* was not found in the entrance of his tomb but inside his coffin. Permission must eventually be obtained to examine the coffins in the Walsingham crypt. If this archeological investigation is worth doing at all, it should be done thoroughly.

Over fifty candidates for the authorship of the Shakespearean works have been seriously suggested during the past century, including Queen Elizabeth I.<sup>8</sup> Any list of

the leading candidates at the present time would probably include at least the names of Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere—Seventeenth Earl of Oxford—the Sixth Earl of Derby, and Christopher Marlowe. Is there any logical way of narrowing this list? The author believes there is. Here are some relevant questions which must be asked.

1. If any of these candidates has left behind any verse bearing his own name, how does such poetry compare with the quality of the verse to be found in the First Folio? Does it display the same level of poetic genius and imagination?

2. Is there any objective method of identifying the literary style of a given author apart from the subjective judgment of the investigator so that the literary styles of various authors of the Elizabethan era may be scientifically compared with that of the First Folio? In short, is there such a thing as a literary fingerprint which may help in identifying the real author of the Shakespearean work?

3. Finally, what was the historical context that not only made it desirable but absolutely necessary for the author to hide behind a pseudonym, the use of which was not merely temporary but was so carefully guarded even beyond the date of the author's death that it has remained a mystery until our own time? Many an author has used a pseudonym but has been ready enough to identify himself after his work has brought fame and recognition. Obviously, the author of the Shakespearean works had an adequate reason for not identifying himself, even after several of his literary offerings had been widely acclaimed. It must have been a matter of life and

death. What were the circumstances and attitudes of the age in which the author lived which could account for such a compelling motivation to conceal his real name?

These are the questions which the following chapters will attempt to answer.