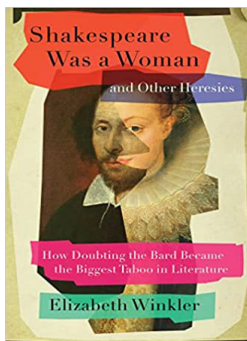


**BOOK  
REVIEW**

# Shakespeare was a Woman and Other Heresies

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“Who has the authority to determine the truth about the past?”

So begins this brilliant, groundbreaking look into what its author, former *Wall Street Journal* and *Atlantic* writer Elizabeth Winkler, calls the *Biggest Taboo in Literature* – questioning the authorship of William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon.

In 2019, Winkler wrote an article for *the Atlantic*, “Was Shakespeare a Woman?” The response was swift and vicious: “Shakespeare derangement syndrome”, “conspiracism”, “neurotic fantasies”, a comparison to Holocaust denial, Obama birthers, and anti-vaxxers. Shakespearean scholar James Shapiro said, “I hope Winkler abandons her authorship fantasies” and offered to improve her understanding of Shakespeare by attending a performance of New York City’s Shakespeare in the Park with her. Perhaps the most revealing comment came from Sir Stanley Wells, honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, “It is immoral to question history and to take credit away from William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon”(p. 18).

But clearly, Winkler doesn’t take away credit, she simply explores the basic question of *how* William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote plays and poems without leaving behind any unambiguous primary source evidence of having done so. The non-posthumous historical records for Shakspere (sic), which is the name as recorded in his baptism entry, and Shakspeare on the plaque on the wall of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford, are comprised of some 70+ documents from the life of a businessman who had no connection whatsoever to poetry or drama. Literary success leaves a paper trail, and in the absence of such, it is far from immoral to ask how the businessman became the greatest writer of all time.

This is not a book that will convince true believers, including those of Mary Sidney and Emilia Bassano, that their candidate is The One, and Winkler doesn’t intend it to. It is, however, *the* book to read for pulling back the green curtain of the Stratford Industrial Complex - The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, publishing houses, university English departments, The Folger Library, and legacy media.

Writing in a fluid, down-to-earth, light, and engaging style, Winkler tells a story of evidentiary common sense in the face of a refusal to acknowledge anything but infallibly received wisdom.

From the book’s title, I had thought that the premise of Shakespeare being a woman would have appeared early on, but Winkler takes her time to build the case. She begins by addressing *The Taboo* and its unspoken threat to academics: questioning Shakespeare’s authorship is the third rail; don’t touch it if you want an academic career.

*But why?*

Winkler presents evidence for why there is doubt: the spelling of the name, the ambiguity of the prefatory material for the 1623 First Folio of collected plays, no mention by his family or friends that he was an author, the complete lack of contemporary



references to the man from Stratford as anything other than a businessman, actor, or family man, the contemporary indications in print that the plays weren't by him, the historical fiction from his biographers. All this is familiar ground to Authorship Doubters, but essential groundwork for readers new to the topic.

In chapter six, "Aberration and the Academy", Winkler shows *The Taboo* as coming from the rise of the English Department during a period of great social upheaval in the nineteenth century.

To the ruling classes, England's unrest at that time was connected to the loosening of the hold of Christianity, the unifier of classes and social order by way of its pathway to order and salvation. It was believed possible at this time that a version of the French Revolution could arrive on Albion's shores, and if so, what was to be done about it? And concurrently, what was to be done to pacify the increasing numbers of women agitating for education?

The answer to both questions was to institute state-regulated education based on the new discipline of English literature, its purpose being to unify social classes by offering the kind of pride and moral guidance found within it.

And whom to have at its center? William Shakespeare, of course.

Winkler goes on, "The working classes needed to be made to feel that they, too, were the inheritors of England's literary heritage...This is how the institution of English began: as moral guidance for the restless masses; as imperialist propaganda; as nationalist liturgy...And the story of Shakespeare, enshrined in the early days of the discipline, has been repeated and repeated into our own time, passed down as a sacred unalterable creed." (pp. 169-171).

Winkler quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man", Shakespeare in this case. She goes on to say, "... religions define themselves by a set of beliefs, but they also define themselves against a set of heresies." (p. 151).

Enter stage right *The Taboo*: every reference to a man called William Shakespeare (or Shakspeare, Shakspere, Shaxspere, Shackspere, Shagspere, et al.) must, *de facto*, be a reference to the author William Shakespeare. To even question this is heresy. This reviewer had first-hand experience when he asked a Folger librarian why the name in the baptism registry was spelled on their website as "Shakespeare" when the facsimile of the original entry in the secretary's hand, just above it, showed it was spelled "Shakspere". The Folger answer was that they 'modernize the spelling'; or in other words, through its insertion of a medial 'e' and an extra 'a', the Folger transforms a suc-

cessful Elizabethan businessman into the most venerated writer of all time. If the greatest Shakespeare library in the world uses this logic, it's no wonder others follow.

If anyone stands as the living face of *The Taboo* it is Sir Stanley Wells, who agreed, reluctantly, to be interviewed by Winkler. During their conversation, she was dumbfounded by the shallowness of Wells' knowledge of basic Shakespearean facts. Reading about it was jaw-dropping. Regarding the first use of Shakespeare by a third party and the first appearance of the name with a hyphen in 1594, Wells, a recognized world authority, replied that he had never studied it (p. 173). When she asked why in his chapter on allusions to Shakespeare, Wells had omitted the 1628 Thomas Vicars allusion about "that poet who takes his name from shaking and spear" he said he didn't remember it and then referred to it as some sort of joke. To three or four more questions along similar lines, Wells could not come up with a reasoned response. When asked about the views of arguably England's most accomplished Shakespearean actors, Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance, both of them Doubters, he said, "They're both bonkers." (p. 176)

Turning to James Shapiro, another Shakespearean cleric, Winkler tried to take up his offer of seeing a Shakespeare production with him, but he declined, citing the pressure of writing his new book. She did manage to speak to Harvard scholar Stephen Greenblatt, author of the 2004 *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, and asked him if it was possible to say, 'I know Shakespeare wrote the works.' He brushed off the question with, "These epistemological questions are above my pay grade" (p.321).

Winkler also interviewed Stratfordian expert Marjorie Garber, a retired Harvard professor who, unlike many of her peers, has never written a biography of Shakespeare. Their four-hour conversation was maddeningly frustrating for Winkler because Garber is a postmodernist, meaning she believes the author of any work is irrelevant, that only the text matters, and knowledge of the author's life adds nothing to it. (There goes my broader understanding of *The Crucible*, then.)

And so it goes. "The problem isn't the evidence but getting people to listen to the evidence." Winkler quotes from Charlton Ogburn, author of *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (p. 215).

Several chapters of Winkler's book take on who the author(s) might be. Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, received the lion's share of her attention primarily because there is so much documented circumstantial evidence for his authorship compared to so little undocumented circumstantial evidence for the Stratford

man's claim. A second reason for taking de Vere's claim seriously is the way in which he emerged as a candidate. He was put forward by John Thomas Looney in his 1920 book *Shakespeare Identified*. Looney started with a blank slate and identified 18 likely characteristics of the author by reading the works (at this point, I will lose all post-modernists). Assuming that the name was a pseudonym (not unreasonable since it's been estimated that up to 80 percent of Elizabethan writings were pseudonymous or anonymous), he read Elizabethan poetry, looking for Shakespeare-like poems, and found one written by Edward de Vere, a man unknown to him but whose life matched every one of the 18 characteristics Looney had deduced.

The other candidates Winkler investigates, including Christopher Marlowe and Francis Bacon, emerged not so much from a scientific method approach like Looney's, but rather from a sense that, based on contemporaneous evidence, this person *feels right*. I hasten to add that this is not an invalidation since inductive and deductive reasoning are both valid tools for uncovering the truth and as there is no smoking gun, one cannot prove anyone is *not* the author; that is, in the absence of corroborating evidence, one cannot prove a negative. The best that can be done in such circumstances is to debate which candidate has the better argument in his or her favor.

Francis Bacon is not a serious candidate these days except for Baconians, but I found Ros Barber's championing of Christopher Marlowe to be excellent.

The idea that the author "Was a Woman" comes late in the book for candidates Mary Sidney and Emilia Bassano with Penelope Rich appearing as the possible Dark Lady of the Sonnets. The arguments for them are extremely well made in the context of the idea that Shakespeare's plays were probably co-authored, which is where Winkler's book took me in the end. Single author adherents, especially those of the Stratford man, will bristle at the thought, but they would do well to take note of Winkler's final chapter, "Negative Capability." From John Keats in 1817, "[S]everal things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (p. 318)

Easily said, but we're not going to see it applied after academia has, I predict, savaged this book. Expect

"high-octane emotion and very low facts" from the reviewers that journals and publishing houses consult in their effort to hide from the religious mob they don't want to turn on them.

I also predict these to be some of their rebuttals:

His name was on the plays. (*A correct statement is: "During the lifetime of William Shakspeare there was a dramatist and poet publishing under the name of William Shakespeare."*)

There are thousands of references to Shakespeare as a writer. (*True, but all are posthumous, and not one of them gives any personal information about him; all of them are impersonal, such as play reviews and commentary on style.*)

William Basse wrote a poem entitled "On Mr. Wm. Shakespeare, he dyed in April 1616". (*It wasn't entitled as such, and the poem was first published in 1633, ten years after the First Folio made the Stratford connection which means it's not personal evidence, but simply a repetition of what was thought of as a fact.*)

We don't have information about lots of poet dramatists of the time. (*Diana Price, in her brilliant book Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography, demolishes that argument by providing paper trails for 24 contemporary authors with primary source evidence for each one.*)

The First Folio says Stratford on Avon. (*No, it doesn't. The prefatory material says Avon on one page and Stratford a few pages later. There are many Stratford's in England and Avon was the name given to Hampton Court Palace, the site of many Court performances of plays, including those of Shakespeare.*)

In the First Folio Heminges and Condell refer to "...a friend as was our Shakespeare...". (*Indeed, they do, but they also lie when they state the plays are "...offered to you cured and perfect of their limbs..." when in fact, over 1700 revisions had to be made in the Second Folio in 1632. They regret Shakespeare was not alive to oversee the printing of his plays, but Shakspeare was very much alive and presumably able to do so after his retirement in 1610 or 1611. Add to this that many scholars doubt that Heminges and Condell even wrote the dedicatory letter given how much of it paralleled the work of Ben Jonson.*)

And that's how it's likely to play out in the Amazon one-star reviews. My advice is to recognize the *ad hominem* ("If you can't win on facts, attack the source") and read this book. It's a page-turner set to become a classic of clear-headed reasoning, referred to for years to come.