

On 27 September, 2007, Professor Stanley Wells, Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford, criticized Mark Rylance, Chairman of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust, and Sir Derek Jacobi for signing the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt in an article in *The Stage* magazine, reproduced below. After reading Professor Wells' letter, please read Mark's reply, plus a point-by-point rebuttal to Wells' criticisms of the Declaration.

Prof. Stanley Wells, CBE, Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, discusses the authorship of Shakespeare's plays in a recent article in "The Stage" magazine:

In a career of over fifty years I have constantly read and re-read Shakespeare, studied and taught his life and his works, seen all his plays acted on stage, film and television innumerable times, thought and written about their significance, and edited all of them both for Oxford University Press and for Penguin. During all this time, though I have never seen the slightest reason to doubt his authorship, I have frequently been confronted with the suggestion that they were written, not by William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, but by, for instance, Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, the Earl of Oxford - a really horrible piece of work, by the way! - and more recently Sir Henry Neville, Lady Mary Sidney, and, only today, Fulke Greville. I have taken part in debates on the authorship, broadcast about it on radio and on television, and written about it in newspapers and in my own books. In general I have tried to be rational, courteous, and tolerant. Now I have been confronted with a school-boyishly pompous ('We, the undersigned, hereby declare...') and woolly-minded 'declaration of reasonable doubt' prepared by something called the 'Shakespeare Authorship Coalition', signed by close on three hundred persons, and presented by Sir Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance in conjunction with performances of a play on the topic written by Rylance. I hope I can still be rational and (up to a point) courteous about the subject, but the time for tolerance is over. There is no room for reasonable doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote (occasionally, as we are coming to realize, in collaboration with, principally, John Fletcher and Thomas Middleton) the works traditionally ascribed to him, and maybe one or two others.

The evidence is clear. Many of his contemporaries, both during his lifetime and after, named him as the author of one or more of them both in print and in documents that have survived in manuscript. They include, to name but a few, the poets Richard Barnfield and John Weever, the dramatists John Webster and Ben Jonson, the academic Gabriel Harvey, and the writer Francis Meres, who in 1598 not only praised Shakespeare as a poet but also named him as the author of over a dozen plays. Yet the writers of the declaration have the nerve to claim that 'Nobody, including literary contemporaries, ever recognized Mr. Shakspeare as a writer during his lifetime'! The name William Shakespeare occurs on many title pages of editions of his plays and his Sonnets both during his lifetime and after. In 1623 two of his colleagues published the collection of his plays now known as the First Folio which includes tributes to him as the 'sweet swan of Avon' along with a reference to his Stratford monument. The monument itself bears inscriptions comparing the man of Stratford to great figures of classical antiquity and referring to him as a great writer. The anti-Stratfordians waffle on about whether the name is hyphenated or not in apparent ignorance of the flexibility of spelling and printing

conventions of the period. They point to the absence of references to books and manuscripts in the will without mentioning that wills of the testators' possessions were accompanied by inventories, and that Shakespeare's, like many others of the period, is lost. They reiterate nonsense about the level of education revealed by the works without reference to the scholarly studies that have shown that this level is entirely within the compass of anyone who had received a grammar school education. They puzzle over the plays' portrayal of aristocratic characters as if for example Christopher Marlowe, son of a cobbler, or Ben Jonson, son of a bricklayer, wrote only about members of their fathers' class. They express astonishment that a man from Stratford could write plays set in Italy as if there were no books to be read, no one to talk with, and as if the power of the imagination did not exist. Sir Derek says that an author 'writes about his own experience, his own life and personalities.' Has he never read 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'Alice in Wonderland', or 'The Lord of the Rings'? Not to speak of 'I, Claudius.'

No one doubted Shakespeare's authorship until the late eighteenth-century, and the first serious investigator was Delia Bacon who spent a night in Holy Trinity Church in 1856 intending to open the grave, presumably thinking it might contain a slip of paper saying 'It wasn't me, try Christopher, or Francis, or de Vere.' Poor thing, she lost her nerve, came to believe she was the Holy Ghost surrounded by devils, and died in a lunatic asylum. So beware, Mark and Sir Derek! Of course there's a lot we don't know about Shakespeare, of course there are questions we should like to ask, but we know far more about him than about some of his great contemporaries, such as John Webster and John Ford. Actors have much to thank him for, and Rylance and Jacobi are two of the finest Shakespearian actors of their generations. The proper reaction to the fact that Shakespeare of Stratford portrayed a great gallery of people of all kinds and ranks, that he wrote vividly about countries he probably didn't visit, and that he had a supreme understanding of the human heart is not 'How could he have done it?' but 'How wonderful that he did!'

Stanley Wells is Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Actor Mark Rylance, Chairman of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust, replies to Professor Wells' criticisms in a letter to the editor of *The Stage* magazine:

Last year my friend Stanley Wells wrote an article for this journal in which he warned Sir Derek Jacobi and me to beware lest our curiosity for the true identity of the author of the Shakespeare works drive us insane. Stanley holds a number of distinguished academic degrees, he has a CBE, he has published and edited many books on Shakespeare, seen all the plays many times, and sat on boards of The RSC and Shakespeare's Globe, where, for a while, we worked together. He knows how to write a damn good argument.

Stanley is angry because he is totally unconvinced that there is any room for even the slightest doubt that the man from Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare. He is fed up with Sir Derek and me particularly because we have signed the "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt" (www.doubtaboutwill.com) along with over 1200 others to date, including many academics. This declaration, which Stanley mocks in his

article, is the result of a collaborative effort among amateur and professional scholars to clarify why we think there is a reasonable doubt that the actor from Stratford-upon-Avon really wrote the plays attributed specifically to him seven years after his death. We are not insisting that anyone must study this question or, God forbid, change their well-trained minds about any belief or thought they hold precious. We merely want to set the record straight about why some of us have our doubts, and enable a more intelligent discussion for those, like Stanley, who wish to engage with our research.

Putting aside the usual slurs and emotion of Stanley's article, he did actually respond with his own reasons for certainty, which was helpful. [Immediately following this letter] you will find a point by point response to every certainty which Stanley lists in his attempt to prove that there is no doubt about Shakespeare's authorship. You may judge for yourself, if you are interested, how certain this little question of history really is.

By the way, some of the others who have shared our doubts include Dr. Sigmund Freud, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Orson Welles, Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Sir John Gielgud, William and Henry James, Jeremy Irons, John Galsworthy, Daphne Du Maurier, Charlie Chaplin, and three US Supreme Court Justices.

Stanley has often shared his praise and despair about the acting in Shakespeare plays with me. He is not an actor, but I value his opinion. I adore good scholarship and he has been a leader during the most wonderful period of editorial work on Shakespeare's texts since they were written. Our play scripts are now packed with information to help us understand and interpret what we are saying. As an editor of the plays, he is an extraordinary scholar, but in the field of authorship studies, I have to say, I think he is blinded by an attachment to the Stratford actor. He cannot maintain his scholastic objectivity. He shouts, calls people names, and in this particular case warns that those who don't agree with him will fall into insanity. Once I even had the historical delight of Stanley pulling me by my beard at the site of The Rose Theatre! But more worrying to me is his tendency to simply ignore evidence if it contradicts his argument. When we meet as friends, and believe me I do respect him very much for what he has done for Shakespeare, I wouldn't dare bring this subject up for fear of his anger. What's it all about? As I'm often told, "surely it's the plays that matter."

If you are curious about the author of these incredible plays and poems, and not frightened by Stanley's warning of infectious insanity, I recommend that you read a book by Diana Price, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*. It is very straightforward and includes all the known details about William Shakespeare's life that the orthodox biographers omit in order to make their case. I have not yet heard or read any response that answers the many fascinating doubts it raises.

Lastly to my fellow actors I say, scholars never have to stand up in front of anyone and do more than EXPLAIN WHAT someone in Shakespeare is speaking. We actors have to stand up and BE WHY someone in Shakespeare is speaking. We shouldn't allow ourselves to be bullied out of a natural curiosity about an author's true intentions if it assists us in our craft of playing a character's true intentions.

Mark Rylance, Actor and Trustee, Shakespearean Authorship Trust

Point-by-point rebuttal to Prof. Wells' specific objections to the Declaration:

Prof. Wells: "The evidence is clear. Many of his contemporaries, both during his lifetime and after, named him as the author of one or more of them both in print and in documents that have survived in manuscript. They include, to name but a few, the poets Richard Barnfield and John Weever, the dramatists John Webster and Ben Jonson, the academic Gabriel Harvey, and the writer Francis Meres, who in 1598 not only praised Shakespeare as a poet but also named him as the author of over a dozen plays. Yet the writers of the declaration have the nerve to claim that 'Nobody, including literary contemporaries, ever recognized Mr. Shakspere as a writer during his lifetime!'"

Our reply: We stand by the position stated in the declaration. During his lifetime, not one of the above-named contemporaries, or anyone else, ever specifically recognized William Shakspere of Stratford as the author William Shakespeare, or as any kind of writer at all. While it is true that several contemporaries commented on the author Shakespeare, none identifies him as the man from Stratford until the First Folio appeared in 1623, seven years after he died, and none claims to have known the author personally until then.

Notice that Prof. Wells doesn't actually quote any of the literary contemporaries he names. If he did, it would be apparent that none identifies him as William Shakspere of Stratford. Assuming that every reference to "Shakespeare" is a reference to the man from Stratford begs the question. Were the author and the Stratford man really one and the same person? All contemporary references to "Shakespeare" were impersonal references to the author. It is strange that nothing from Shakspere's lifetime corroborates the First Folio – nothing, for example, that says, "my friend and fellow writer, William Shakespeare of Stratford."

For a discussion of the differences between "personal," "impersonal" and "ambiguous" documentary references, see the chapter on "Literary Paper Trails" in *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography: New Evidence of an Authorship Problem*, by Diana Price. (Greenwood Press; 2001, 111-150)

Prof. Wells: "The name William Shakespeare occurs on many title pages of editions of his plays and his Sonnets both during his lifetime and after. In 1623 two of his colleagues published the collection of his plays now known as the First Folio which includes tributes to him as the 'sweet swan of Avon' along with a reference to his Stratford monument. The monument itself bears inscriptions comparing the man of Stratford to great figures of classical antiquity and referring to him as a great writer. The anti-Stratfordians waffle on about whether the name is hyphenated or not in apparent ignorance of the flexibility of spelling and printing conventions of the period."

Our reply: The declaration acknowledges the reasons why most scholars have accepted the traditional attribution of the works. It even concedes that they "seem to amount to a *prima facie* case for Mr. Shakspere." But it also explains why we find them problematic.

We are well aware of the lack of standardized spellings during the period, but there is a difference between others spelling a man's name in various ways and a writer having no

standardized way of spelling his own name! The name on the works was virtually always spelled the same way, except it was often hyphenated, while no two of the six signatures often attributed to Mr. Shakspere (some doubt that they are his) are spelled the same way. On his monument, and three times in his will, Mr. Shakspere's name is spelled differently from the name on the works. It is also spelled "Shakspere," or a close variant, in all eight official church records relating to him, from baptism to burial, as it was for his father and forebears. So it is possible to make a clear distinction between the two. This reinforces doubts about whether Shakspere and the author were really the same man. If there were no other reasons for doubt, the spelling differences would not matter; but in the context of the many other good reasons for doubting, the spelling issue is noteworthy.

The declaration acknowledges that the apparent testimony of his two fellow actors, Heminges and Condell, is "perhaps the strongest link to Mr. Shakspere." But it also points out that "neither of them was a writer . . . and several scholars doubt that they wrote the passages attributed to them." We would add that neither of them was a man of means who could finance such a project. Even orthodox scholars have doubted their role. According to Edmond Malone's Variorum edition, for example, "every word of the first half of (Heminges and Condell's) address to the reader . . . was written by Ben Jonson." (*The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*. 21 vols. London, 1821), 2:674.

The declaration acknowledges that Ben Jonson's reference to the "Sweet swan of Avon," and Leonard Digges' reference to "thy Stratford monument," point to the Stratford man. But it also points out that neither Jonson, nor Digges, ever made a personal reference to him while he lived, and they offer no further identifying information – not his dates of birth and death, or names of any family members, or any revealing episode from his life. Like references to him during his lifetime, theirs merely portray the author, not the man. For more on the First Folio, see *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (ibid, 169-94).

The declaration admits that "(today's) effigy and inscription on the Stratford monument suggest that 'Shakspeare' had been a writer." It also points out, however, that "the effigy does not look the same as the one erected in the early 1600s. A sketch by a reputable antiquarian (Dugdale) in 1634 shows a man with a drooping moustache holding a wool or grain sack, but no pen, no paper, and no writing surface as in today's monument." Records show that the monument was "repaired," and even Prof. Wells' eminent colleague, Brian Vickers, has concluded that the monument was altered to depict a writer.

The declaration also points out that "the strange inscription never states that Mr. Shakspere *was* the author William Shakespeare . . . It neither names, nor quotes from, any of the works; and it never mentions poetry, plays, acting or theater." Prof. Wells says that the inscription refers to him as "a great writer," but it never explicitly says this. Even many orthodox scholars find the inscription enigmatic. Epitaphs of other writers of the time identify them clearly as writers, so why not Mr. Shakspere's epitaph?

Yes, the monument compares him to "great figures of classical antiquity;" but not those to whom one would expect him to be compared. The initial lines say in Latin that he was "In judgment a Nestor, in intellect a Socrates, in art a Virgil." Neither Nestor nor Socrates was a writer, much less a poet-dramatist. Virgil was a great writer, but he was not among Shakespeare's principal sources. The obvious choice would have been Ovid, his favorite.

This proves nothing, but it illustrates how the orthodox case always seems problematic. For more on the monument, see *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (ibid, 153-68).

Prof. Wells: “They point to the absence of references to books and manuscripts in the will without mentioning that wills of the testators’ possessions were accompanied by inventories, and that Shakespeare’s, like many others of the period, is lost.”

Our reply: The will references no such inventory. It’s an undocumented assumption that such an inventory of books and manuscripts ever existed. If such an inventory did exist, what became of the alleged literary effects? As the declaration states, “No book that Mr. Shakspeare owned, or that is known to have been in his possession, has ever been found.” It also mentions no musical instruments, despite the author’s apparent musical expertise. Nor did he designate money for anyone’s education, or for the Stratford grammar school.

The problem isn’t just a lack of literary effects. The will is long and detailed, yet nothing about it suggests in any way that it is the will of a man who had lived the life of a writer. As Price puts it in *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, “If Shakspeare of Stratford was a successful businessman, theatre shareholder, investor, entrepreneur, and broker, there is no conflict whatsoever between the substance and appearance of the will and the man’s life history. But if he was the greatest writer in the English language, you would never in 400 years guess it from the will’s content and presentation.” (ibid, 149-50)

Prof. Wells: “They reiterate nonsense about the level of education revealed by the works without reference to the scholarly studies that have shown that this level is entirely within the compass of anyone who had received a grammar school education.”

Our reply: That an enormous range of knowledge is found in the works is not “nonsense,” and Wells questions no specific area of knowledge mentioned in the declaration. The list includes: “law, philosophy, classical literature, ancient and modern history, mathematics, astronomy, art, music, medicine, horticulture, heraldry, military and naval terminology and tactics; etiquette and manners of the nobility; English, French and Italian court life; Italy, and aristocratic pastimes such as falconry, equestrian sports and royal tennis.”

If Wells’ point is that all of the knowledge in the works could have been acquired at the Stratford grammar school, the idea is absurd. If his point is that someone with a grammar school education could have gone on to acquire such a range of knowledge, we agree that it is not impossible, as the declaration itself specifically states. The problem is that apart from the *assumption* that he wrote the works, nothing shows that he *did* acquire all of this knowledge. As the declaration says, “Scholars know *nothing* about how he acquired the breadth and depth of knowledge found in the works. This is not to say that a commoner, even in the rigid, hierarchical social structure of Elizabethan England, could not have done it somehow, but how could it have happened without leaving a single trace?”

Even most orthodox scholars do not, like Wells, say that the level of education evident in the works was within the compass of “anyone” educated at the Stratford grammar school. Most say that he was a “genius” to explain how his education could have been sufficient. But there is a problem with this explanation. He lacks the background characteristics we normally expect to find in a literary genius – an enriched, stimulating home environment,

well-educated parents, extensive travel, and living in multiple locations during childhood. Shakspere's parents were illiterate, and nothing suggests he lived anywhere but Stratford.

We would call special attention to Dean Keith Simonton, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Davis, a recipient of the prestigious Sir Francis Galton Prize for Lifetime Contributions to the Study of Creativity, and widely regarded as the world's leading expert on creativity and genius. Given what we know about Mr. Shakspere, Simonton finds it incredible to think that he wrote the works.

Not only does no documentary evidence show that Shakspere ever attended the Stratford grammar school, there are reasons to think he did not, or that he didn't get much out of it. The six surviving signatures allegedly his suggest that he had difficulty signing his name. The absence of manuscripts, or even a letter in his hand, suggests that he could not write.

Even many orthodox scholars clearly find the Stratford grammar school an insufficient explanation. Otherwise there would be no need for all of the fanciful explanations about what he was doing with himself during the so-called "lost years" between 1585 and 1592. Some even propose that he did, somehow, manage to attend some university somewhere. For more about his education, see *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (ibid, 233-250).

Prof. Wells: "They puzzle over the plays' portrayal of aristocratic characters as if for example Christopher Marlowe, son of a cobbler, or Ben Jonson, son of a bricklayer, wrote only about members of their fathers' class."

Our reply: The problem is not that one expects a commoner to write only about members of his own class. We never said that. The problem is that Shakespeare writes consistently from the *point of view* of the upper classes. Nearly every play is set among them, and deals mainly with their concerns. As one commentator observed, "even when he writes about life on a desert island, it is about 'court life' on a desert island." His fully realized characters are all upper class, while he treats those from the lower classes as stereotypes.

There is a clear difference between Shakespeare's portrayal of aristocratic characters and Marlowe's or Jonson's. Shakespeare's aristocrats always seem natural, human, authentic. His insight into, and sympathy for, the concerns and problems of monarchs is unmatched. Yet he looks down on commoners, portraying them as undignified and slightly ridiculous. That Shakespeare wrote from an aristocratic point of view has been noted by some of our most insightful writers. Walt Whitman, the "poet of Democracy," found the history plays offensive to his egalitarian sensibilities. Commenting on them, he wrote as follows:

"Conceived out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism — personifying in unparalleled ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic cast, its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation) — only one of the 'wolfish earls' so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendent and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works . . ."

— "November Boughs"

Prof. Wells: “They express astonishment that a man from Stratford could write plays set in Italy as if there were no books to be read, no one to talk with, and as if the power of the imagination did not exist.”

Our reply: The problem is that there are so *many* plays set in Italy, and they are so very detailed and accurate in their portrayals not just of geography, but of people and culture. Nearly half of the non-history plays are set in Italy, and others are in adjoining countries. In contrast, not a single play is set in Mr. Shakspere’s Elizabethan or Jacobean England. How can it be that Italy had such a strong hold on his imagination, but not his own land? Why write so many plays from second-hand knowledge, rather than his own experience? How did he achieve such accuracy and realism using only others’ powers of observation?

Orthodox scholars have claimed to find errors relating to specific details in the Italian plays, only to find later that Shakespeare got it right, and their own views were in error. *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, places several scenes on the “seacoast of Bohemia.” Some orthodox scholars used this as an example of an error of geography, until it was pointed out that Bohemia did have a seacoast for a time during the sixteenth century. Others questioned references to travel by boat between cities in northern Italy, until it was pointed out that boat travel was common at the time, using canals between cities.

Even some early orthodox scholars have shown that Shakespeare’s detailed descriptions imply first-hand knowledge. See, for example, Violet M. Jeffery on, e.g., the Sagittary in *Othello* (*Modern Language Review* (1932: 24-35), or Edward Sullivan's "Shakespeare and the Waterways of North Italy" (*The Nineteenth Century*, v. 64, Aug. 1908, 215-232). Unfortunately, this early scholarship is often overlooked by today’s orthodox scholars.

As a testament to the Italian plays’ authenticity, H. H. Furness, in a footnote to his *New Variorum Merchant of Venice*, included the following note by C.A. Brown (1888, 72-73):

“The Merchant of Venice is a merchant of no other place in the world. Everything he says or does, or that is said or done about him . . . is, throughout the play, Venetian. Ben Jonson, in his *Volpone*, gives no more than can be gathered from any one book of travels that has ever been published; nothing but the popular notion of the city. Shakespeare, in addition to the general national spirit of the play, describes the Exchange held on the Rialto; the riches of the merchants; their argosies 'From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England; From Lisbon, Barbary, and India:' some with 'silks' and 'spices,' 'richly fraught;' he represents 'the trade and profit of the city' as consisting 'of all nations;' he talks familiarly of the 'masquing mates,' with their 'torch-bearers' in the streets; of 'the common ferry which trades to Venice. . . All this is written with a perfect knowledge of the place.”

Books, conversation and imagination go only so far. They don’t explain the Italian plays. We know of no other example of a writer portraying so accurately the details of a nation and culture not his own without having been there to steep himself in its ways first hand. It is easy to theorize, in the abstract, that it might have happened, but how *did* it happen?

Prof. Wells: “Sir Derek says that an author ‘writes about his own experience, his own life and personalities.’ Has he never read ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’, ‘Alice in Wonderland’, or ‘The Lord of the Rings’? Not to speak of ‘I, Claudius.’”

Our reply: Even the most fanciful works of fiction are never made up out of whole cloth. The raw material must come from a writer's personal life experiences, not out of nothing. Lewis Carroll reportedly had a specific girl in mind when he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*. Tolkien's creations are based on a great variety of ancient myths and legends he studied, but also reflect the influences of people and situations he experienced during his lifetime. Robert Graves based *I, Claudius* not just on Roman histories, but also people he knew.

How can Wells know that "A Midsummer Night's Dream" isn't based on Shakespeare's own life, and that none of its characters is based on the personalities of people he knew? He just assumes that it is so because he cannot connect that play to Mr. Shakspeare's life. Scholars have no difficulty accounting for how Carroll, Tolkien and Graves wrote the works attributed to them. Their works are part and parcel of the lives they lived. Only in Shakspeare's case are we asked to accept an enormous chasm between author and works.

As the declaration says, quoting orthodox scholar Sam Schoenbaum, "Perhaps we should despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record." (*Shakespeare's Lives*, 2nd Ed.) It would be hard to find a better statement of the central problem in the authorship issue. Why would a scholar like Schoenbaum express "despair" at the difficulty of connecting Shakspeare's life to his works if there is no reason to think his life *should* reflect them?

Prof. Wells: "No one doubted Shakespeare's authorship until the late eighteenth-century,"

Our reply: No one had any reason to doubt the Stratford man's authorship of the works during his lifetime because apparently nobody thought he wrote them in the first place! As the declaration says, "Several people who knew the man, or knew who he was, seem not to have associated him with the author, including his son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, poet Michael Drayton and prominent historian William Camden." Further, ". . . when he died in 1616, no one seemed to notice. Not so much as a letter refers to the author's passing."

Not until seven years after he died did a document appear pointing to him as the author. Nobody seems to have known who "Shakespeare" was, and most probably did not care. There is little reason to think that the author was a prominent person during his lifetime. The Stratford monument is so ambiguous that Stratford's residents had little to question. Some think it was originally erected as a monument to William's father, John Shakspeare.

Also, we tend to forget that Shakespeare fell out of fashion and was then long neglected. The theaters were closed for at least a generation, during and after the English Civil War. The theater tradition from the Elizabethan-Jacobean period was interrupted, and died out. The earliest attempt to write a biography of the Stratford man was Rowe's effort in 1709. By then people would naturally have assumed that the traditional attribution was correct. It took time for people to recognize the gap between the official biography and the works. If there had been no good reasons for the doubts, they would hardly have lasted this long.

Prof. Wells: ". . . and the first serious investigator was Delia Bacon who spent a night in Holy Trinity Church in 1856 intending to open the grave, presumably thinking it might

contain a slip of paper saying ‘It wasn’t me, try Christopher, or Francis, or de Vere.’ Poor thing, she lost her nerve, came to believe she was the Holy Ghost surrounded by devils, and died in a lunatic asylum. So beware, Mark and Sir Derek!”

Our reply: Stereotyping all authorship doubters as being at risk of descent into madness, based on a single observation, and an anecdotal one at that, is methodologically unsound. Prof. Wells has no expertise in mental illness that we know of, nor, apparently, in statistics. Ms. Bacon is hardly representative of the many outstanding people who have questioned the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays and poems, and even she completed a book on the works sufficiently worthwhile that Nathaniel Hawthorne, no less, helped get it published.

The list of those who have doubted the traditional attribution of the works to Mr. William Shakspeare of Stratford is long and distinguished. The *Declaration of Reasonable Doubt* lists twenty, including Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, William and Henry James, Sigmund Freud, John Galsworthy, Charlie Chaplin, Tyrone Guthrie, and two U.S. Supreme Court Justices: Harry A. Blackmun and Lewis F. Powell, Jr. None died in a lunatic asylum. Prof. Wells surely knows this. It is disingenuous to ignore all of them and focus on Ms. Bacon.

We would also point out that Mark and Sir Derek are hardly alone among Shakespearean actors, contrary to the impression one gets from Wells. Others include Sir John Gielgud and Orson Welles, plus Jeremy Irons and Michael York, both of whom have signed the declaration. Many other outstanding Shakespearean actors are also authorship doubters.

Even Shakespeare professors are not unanimous in supporting the traditional attribution. A survey instigated by the *New York Times* last year found that of the 265 Shakespeare professors surveyed, 17 percent were either on the fence (11%) or agreed that there is good reason to doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford wrote the plays and poems. Yet Prof. Wells would have the public think that anyone who disagrees with him is crazy.

The *Declaration of Reasonable Doubt* has now been signed by more than 1,200 people, including more than 200 current or former faculty members at colleges and universities. Several of these are either mental health professionals, or behavioral science researchers. None seems to think that harboring doubts about Shakespeare is a sign of mental illness. We certainly hope not, because otherwise there seems to be quite an epidemic underway.

Prof. Wells didn’t question the point in the declaration which says that, “Academic experts on characteristics of geniuses see little reason to think that Mr. Shakspeare was a genius.” Neither, in our view, should he be questioning the mental health of authorship doubters, as he does in his article in *The Stage*, and as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has long done on its website, unless he is able to back up his claim with solid scientific evidence.

We doubt that he can produce any such evidence, and we hereby challenge him to do so. If he cannot, we would ask him to take down all such allegations from the SBT website.

Prof. Wells: “Of course there’s a lot we don’t know about Shakespeare, of course there are questions we should like to ask, but we know far more about him than about some of his great contemporaries, such as John Webster and John Ford.”

Our reply: The issue is not *how much* we know about Mr. Shakspere, but *what* we know. As the declaration states, “. . . seventy (documents relate to him), but all are non-literary. They reveal a businessman of Stratford, plus a theater entrepreneur and sometime minor actor in London.” We’ve also pointed out that his detailed will is entirely consistent with this portrayal. If he had a literary career, then something from his lifetime should say so.

Oxford University history professor Hugh R. Trevor-Roper apparently thought so, too. Trevor-Roper wrote that he found Shakespeare's elusiveness “exasperating and almost incredible . . . After all, he lived in the full daylight of the English Renaissance in the well documented reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I and . . . since his death has been subjected to the greatest battery of organised research that has ever been directed upon a single person. And yet the greatest of all Englishmen, after this tremendous inquisition, still remains so close to a mystery that **even his identity can still be doubted.**”

Prof. Wells: Actors have much to thank him for, and Rylance and Jacobi are two of the finest Shakespearian actors of their generations. The proper reaction to the fact that Shakespeare of Stratford portrayed a great gallery of people of all kinds and ranks, that he wrote vividly about countries he probably didn’t visit, and that he had a supreme understanding of the human heart is not ‘How could he have done it?’ but ‘How wonderful that he did!’

Our reply: Mark and Sir Derek are obviously very grateful to William Shakespeare, whoever he was, for writing the plays. But we think it is also appropriate that they share a sense of wonder, and curiosity, about the nature, and, yes, the identity, of the author who has given us so much to ponder. We believe that the “proper reaction” is not for actors, or anyone else who loves Shakespeare, to suppress their natural curiosity, but, rather, to adopt the attitude that the author himself expressed in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*:

Berowne: What is the end of study? let me know.

King: Why, that to know which else we should not know.

Berowne: Things hid and barr’d, you mean, from common sense?

King: Ay, that is study’s godlike recompense.

Berowne: Come on then; I will swear to study so,
To know the thing I am forbid to know

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