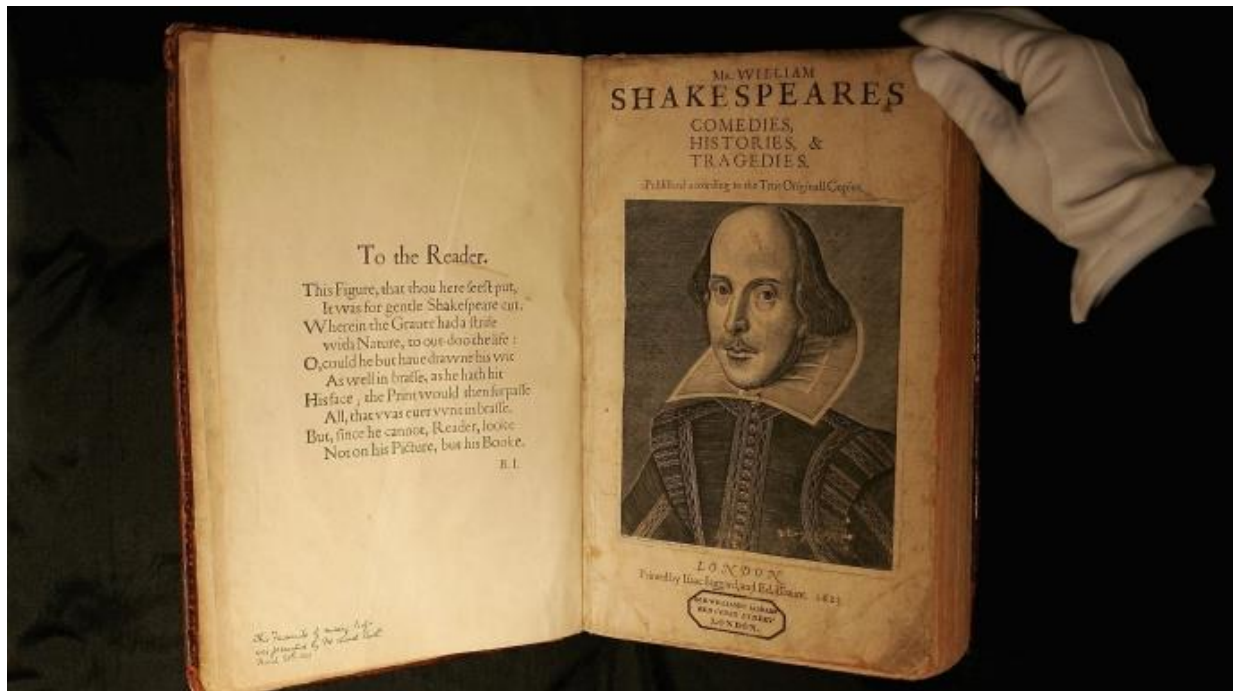


## Did Shakespeare really write his own plays?

BY SARAH PRUITT // JULY 15, 2015

Most scholars accept that William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, and spent time acting in London before returning to Stratford, where he lived until his death in 1616. But actual documentation of his life is pitifully scarce: little more than several signatures, records of his marriage to Anne Hathaway and the birth of their children, a three-page will and some business papers unrelated to writing. Above all, nothing has been found documenting the composition of the 37 plays and 154 sonnets attributed to him, collectively considered the greatest body of work in the history of the English language. In the absence of such “proof” of authorship, some skeptics have posed the question: How could a man of such humble origins and education come by such wealth of insight, wide-ranging understanding of complex legal and political matters and intimate knowledge of life in the English court?



Since the 19th century, a roster of famous people—Henry James, Sigmund Freud, Mark Twain, Helen Keller, Charlie Chaplin and many others—have voiced their doubts about the man from Stratford. Thousands of books and articles have been devoted to the subject, many of which propose their own candidates for the true author of the Shakespeare canon. Essayist Francis Bacon and playwright Christopher Marlowe may have their supporters, but for the last 90 years

the favored candidate has been Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. First proposed in 1920 by J.T. Looney in his book “‘Shakespeare’ Identified,” Oxford was highly educated, trained as a lawyer and was known to have traveled to many of the exact places featured in Shakespeare’s plays. Oxfordians—as those who believe in de Vere’s authorship of the Bard’s works are known—argue that he concealed his identity because his works were so politically provocative, and he wished to be avoid being outed as a lowly playwright.

But until hard evidence surfaces linking his plays to someone else, the man with the strongest claim to the plays of William Shakespeare appears to be...William Shakespeare. For one thing, Oxford died in 1604, and some of Shakespeare’s greatest plays (including “King Lear,” “The Tempest” and “Macbeth”) were published after that date. Shakespeare’s supporters—known as Stratfordians—emphasize the fact that the body of evidence that does exist points to Shakespeare, and no one else, as the author of his works. This includes the printed copies of his plays and sonnets with his name on them, theater company records and comments by contemporaries like Ben Jonson and John Webster. Doubts about Shakespeare’s authorship and attempts to identify a more educated, worldly and high-born candidate, Stratfordians contend, reveal not only misguided snobbery but a striking disregard for one of the most outstanding qualities of the Bard’s extraordinary work—his imagination.