

Appendix 3a: The Authorship Question in *Hamlet*

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There is an allegory in *Hamlet* which may illumine one facet of the Shakespeare Authorship Question and help reveal the general mode (concerning the authorship of the Shakespeare plays) which existed before 1623. It appears that the “authorship question” as posed during the early part of the sixteenth century (before 1623) was quite different from what it is today. At that time, everyone “in the know” seemed to know that some aristocrat (or highly educated person) was writing plays under the penname of “Shakespeare” but very few people knew who that person was. (William Shakspeare of Stratford was never considered to be the Author of the Shakespeare plays before 1623; thus the authorship question which circulated before that time never involved him. Certainly everyone who knew him, including Ben Jonson, would have thought it absurd to even consider him as being Shakespeare the Author.) The oblique reference to the authorship question referred to in *Hamlet* suggests that no one knew who wrote the seditious play, *Richard II*; it states that only a player (who we know to be Augustine Phillips) was called in for questioning and not the poet who wrote the play—and that is because no one knew who wrote the play. Clearly, had anyone assumed or suspected that William Shakspeare of Stratford wrote *Richard II*—which lists “By William Shake-speare” on the title page—or had anyone suspected that he had anything to do with the revised version of the play which was performed on the eve of the Essex revolt—he would have been brought in for questioning. Yet, he was never questioned.

The allegory in *Hamlet* suggests two things: a) that various acting companies from London were expelled from the city for their participation in staging *Richard II* on the eve of the Essex Rebellion (and helping to foment civil unrest), and b) no one knew who wrote this seditious play even though the name, “William Shake-speare” was listed on the title page. The allegory in *Hamlet* makes it plain that no one knew the identity of the play’s author, even after the Queen’s counsel had made an official inquiry; this suggests that the name which appeared on the title page of the second edition of *Richard II*, “William Shake-speare,” was recognized by everyone as a penname and that it did not refer to any known person, nor to William Shakspeare of Stratford.

What can be gleaned from the allegory in *Hamlet* is too vague to be conclusive; it can, however, be seen as yet another link in a long chain of possibilities. It is included here as a matter of interest for people investigating the Authorship Question. The insight of relating this allegory in *Hamlet* to the Authorship Question came from John Baker and more details with respect to this issue can be found on his website.

Hamlet (Q2), 2.2

[Q1 in blue]

Hamlet:

Why did you laugh then, when I said ‘man delights not me’?

Rosencrantz:

To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you: we coted them on the way; and hither are they coming, to offer you service.

Hamlet:

He that plays the king shall be welcome; his majesty shall have tribute of me; the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh gratis; the humourous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickled o' the sere; and the lady shall say her mind freely, or the blank verse shall halt for't.

He that plays the King shall have tribute of me,
The venturous Knight shall use his foil and target,
The lover shall sigh gratis [Q3: sing gratis],
The clown shall make them laugh
That are tickled in the lungs, or the blank verse shall halt for it,
And the Lady shall have leave to speak her mind freely.

Q1 reads: "And the Lady shall have leave to speak her mind freely." Both may be references to Mary Sidney, the lady Author. Q2 is more forceful: in Q1 the lady "has leave" or permission (from someone else) to speak her mind freely; in Q2, the lady "shall speak" her mind freely (or, in the case of the Author, she may write whatever she likes), else "the blank verse shall halt for it."

Hamlet:

. . . What players are they?

Ham: Players, what Players be they?

Rosencrantz:

Even those you were wont to take delight in, the tragedians of the city.

Ros: My Lord, the Tragedians of the City,
Those that you took delight to see so often.

Hamlet:

How chances it they travel? their residence, both in reputation and profit, was better both ways. [Why would they travel when it is easier and more profitable to play at the theater in the City?]

Ham: How comes it that they travel? Do they grow restie?

[Do they grow rusty?; Do they grow resty (lazy)?]

Rosencrantz:

I think their inhibition [poor situation] comes by the means of the late innovation [revolution, disturbance, commotion—i.e., the Essex rebellion and the particular role that many theater companies played in fomenting unrest by performing *Richard II* on the eve of the uprising.]

Hamlet:

Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was
in the city? are they so followed?

Rosencrantz:

No, indeed, are they not.

Hamlet:

How comes it? do they grow rusty?

Rosencrantz:

Nay, their endeavour [acting skills] keeps in the wonted pace: but
there is, sir, an aerie of children, little eyases,
that cry out on the top of question, and are most
tyrannically [enthusiastically] clapped for't: these are now the
fashion, and so berattle [shake up] the common stages (so they
call them) that many wearing rapiers are afraid of
goose-quills and dare scarce come thither.

Many men with swords—those wanting to incite revolt—are now afraid to go to the public theater (unlike before) because now they will be booed at; people only want their mindless entertainment, and no talk of change or revolt (which was the case with the Essex revolt when *Richard II* was performed on the “common stages” so as to incite political upheaval.) Now people want to keep the status quo, and their mindless entertainment, and will boot out anyone talking of change or revolution.

“This observation cuts to the chase. Armed men, meaning gentlemen of rank, such as those who might have followed Essex or even protected the Queen, are “afraid of goose quills,” meaning plays. So much so they “dare scarce come thither,” meaning to the playhouses. This line simply has to be an allusion to the jittery political milieu in London following the Essex coup. Armed men were afraid of attending a public theater.” (John Baker)

Gil. No my Lord, their reputation holds as it was wont.

Ham. How then?

Gil. In faith my Lord, novelty [people wanting something new] carries it away; [takes the day; carries the attention of the masses]

For the principal public audience that

Came to them, are turned to private plays

And to the humour [disposition] of children.

Hamlet:

What, are they children? who maintains 'em? how are
they escoted [funded]? Will they pursue the quality no
longer than they can sing? will they not say
afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common
players—as it is most like, if their means are no
better—their writers do them wrong, to make them
exclaim against their own succession?

Hamlet: What, are they children [Has a children's acting group replaced the regular acting company]? Who maintains 'em [Who sponsors them? Who pays to see them]? How are they escoted [funded]? Will they pursue the quality [their acting] no longer than they can sing? [until such time as their voices change and they can no longer act the part of children?] Will they not say afterward, if they should grow themselves to common players [when they have grown up and become adult stage actors]—as it is most like if their means are no better [which is most likely to be the case if they continue to be low-paid players]—their writers do them wrong to make them [the children] exclaim [act, in their play] against their own succession [against their own self interest, because, by putting on such poor plays they jeopardize their own succession into adult acting—because with such poor plays the theaters are likely to close down].

Rosencrantz:

'Faith, there has been much to do on both sides; and the nation holds it no sin to tar [hold] them [the actors] to controversy: there was, for a while, no money bid for argument [i.e., no one would put up any money in a wager as to who wrote *Richard II*], [and no one would know who wrote the play] **unless the poet** [the one who wrote the play] **and the player** [Augustine Phillips] **went to cuffs in the question** [unless both appeared before the Queen's court for questioning; for only in the case where both the playwright and the player appeared together—where the player could positively identify the playwright—would anyone put up money as to who wrote the play.]

Hamlet:

Is't possible? [that one could bring in the writer along with the player? It is possible that no one knows who wrote the play? And who has been writing under the penname "Shakespeare"?]

Guiltenstern:

O, there has been much throwing about of brains. [There has been much questioning and "racking of brains" with respect to who wrote the play—yet no one can figure it out].

Hamlet:

Do the boys carry it away? [Carry the audience, sufficiently entertain the audience? Carry the stage at the playhouses?]

Rosencrantz:

Ay, that they do, my lord; Hercules & his load too [and also at The Globe].

Hamlet:

It is not very strange; for mine uncle is king of Denmark, and those that would make mows [speak poorly] at him while my father lived, give twenty, forty, fifty, an hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little. s'blood ['tis in my blood, I truly feel], there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.

Ham: I do not greatly wonder of it [It is not surprising that the masses have changed the object of their affection so easily]

For those that would make mopes and moes

At my uncle when my father lived,

Now give a hundred, two hundred pounds

For his picture:

The Poet and the Player

Rosencrantz:

“**Faith** [in faith, truly], **there has been much to do** [debate] **on both sides, and the nation** [general public] **holds it no sin to tar** [stick] **them** [the actors and their companies] **to controversy** [a] involving the controversy over who wrote *Richard II*, b) involving the controversy surrounding the Essex revolt and their playing of *Richard II* on the eve of the uprising]. **There was for a while no money bid for argument** [no person knew, and therefore no one would place a bet, as to who authored the play *Richard II*] **unless the poet** [the one who actually wrote the play] **and the player** [Augustine Phillips, an actor-shareholder of Globe, whose company performed the play] **went to cuffs** [together] **in the question.**” (*Hamlet*, Q2, 2.2. 352-356)

When the Queen’s court wanted to find out about *Richard II*, Augustine Phillips, the player, was handcuffed and brought in for questioning. He could only talk about the circumstances involved in performing the play, but not offer anything with respect to the play’s author. Thus, being that no one knew who wrote the play, the playwright could not be brought in for questioning.

Clearly, the name affixed to the title page of *Richard II*, “William Shake-speare” was recognized by everyone as a penname. Shakespeare had written many plays before *Richard II*, including *Romeo and Juliet*, yet none of the early plays listed his name (or any name) on the title page. The last play anyone would want their name on was *Richard II* yet, curiously, this was the first play listed the full name of “William Shake-speare” on its title page.

It is true Shakespeare’s name appeared on a later title page (Q2, 1598) but this is the whole point: No one associated with the Queen, or with Essex, seems to have thought the player was the author. As this is the only reasonable explanation for Augustine Phillips and not William Shakespeare being called to answer questions in this matter. If Shakespeare had simply been absent, say in Stratford, the long arm of the law would certainly have fetched him back to London for an issue of this magnitude.

Why didn’t the troop just point their finger at the Author? If the actor and the author had been the same person, it would have been Shakespeare and not Augustine Phillips who would have been called in to answer questions about the presentation of *Richard II*, preceding the Essex Rebellion. I should say widespread use of *Richard II*, since the Queen was under the impression that it was played “40tie times in open streets and houses,” (Short Life, 177) rather than just once, as Stratfordians believe. I might ask why Stratfordians persist in this belief when the Queen, who was there at the time and much better informed about these matters than they are, is on record stipulating otherwise? Schoenbaum attempts to sweep all this under the door by claiming that a playwright was so low on the social order in that age that they simply escaped notice. (Documentary Life) But this will not wash, since we all know what happened to Jonson, Marston and Chapman over *Eastward Ho!* (1605) Not to mention the authors of *Isle of Dogs* in 1597. They were all promptly jailed. (John Baker)

Conclusions

From an analysis of the allegory found in *Hamlet* we come to the following conclusions:

a) The target audience was aware of the major controversy (the Essex rebellion), and also of the minor controversy, or ‘question,’ concerning who wrote *Richard II*—a play which was intended to foment civil unrest. People were aware that an actor in the company, Augustine Phillips, was brought in for questioning, ‘in cuffs,’ but nothing came of it since he was not the writer of the play (nor did he know who wrote it).

b) Nothing was accomplished by questioning Augustine Phillips—and so no one knew (nor was in a position to place bets on) who the author might be. The only way the truth could be found (as to who wrote *Richard II*) would be to drag in the author of the play, in cuffs, for questioning. The fact that they dragged in Phillips for questioning demonstrates that they did not know the play’s author. (The claims that the author of the play was ‘too insignificant’ to drag in for questioning, is a point that is lost, since Jonson and other playwrights were jailed for plays). No one ever associated Shakspeare of Stratford, with the play, and no one ever thought to bring him in for questioning.

c) Due to their participation in the Essex Rebellion, the acting companies were banned from play-acting in the city and forced take their show on the road, which was a less profitable and esteemed venture than acting to full houses in London. Accordingly, all such play-acting was replaced by ‘brainless’ entertainment put on by children—none of which would stir the general public into civil unrest. Yet the masses received these plays with ‘tyrannical’ applause.

Marlowe

According to some scholars, Queen Elizabeth considered Marlowe to be the author of *Richard II* [and did not associate the pen name, “William Shake-speare,” as affixed to the title page of *Richard II*, to be the name of the true author or of an actual person]. This is evidenced by her remarks, as quoted by William Lambarde (in August 1601): “her Majestie fell upon the reign of King Richard II saying, ‘I am Richard II. know ye not that? . . . He that will forget God, will also forget his benefactors; this tragedy was played 40tie times in open streets and houses.” (From, Sir E.K. Chambers, *Short Life*, 176/7).

The identification of Marlowe, is not obvious, but upon inspection stands as exclusive because Marlowe was the only playwright of the period who had been accused of forgetting God. Moreover he was the only playwright of the period who on the 18th of May 1593 was suspected of being about to “forget his benefactors.” Some Stratfordians have clung to the hope that the Queen had Essex in mind, as Lambarde himself seems to have thought, but this assumption proves impossible since Essex wasn’t merely suspected of being about to “forget his benefactors,” he had forgotten them. And he was never accused of forgetting God. So it was exclusively Marlowe who fit this description. (John Baker)

Queen Elizabeth suspected that Marlowe wrote *Richard II*; thus, any suggestion made in *Hamlet* that Marlowe wrote *Richard II* would be playing upon the Queen’s suspicion (and that of the

general public) but not making any clear statement that Marlow was the Author of the play. If the true author wanted to remain anonymous he or she would have every reason to implicate Marlowe as the author of the play thus displacing all attention away from him or herself onto Marlowe (and thus helping to insure that his/her true identity remained a secret). This was the very ploy enacted by Ben Jonson and William Herbert (in the publication of the First Folio): they fabricated a would-be author, in the person of William Shakspere of Stratford, in order to put to rest all inquiries about the true identity of the Author (and as a means to help keep the Author's true identity a secret). Had no such "straw man" been put in place, and the name "Shakespeare" simply been left as a penname, then there would be "much throwing about of brains" and a flood of inquiry concerning the true identity of Shakespeare, the Author. As such, the true identity of the Author would eventually be discovered. Having a real person stand in for the Author (and a person who was conveniently dead and forgotten) was the only way to effectively "put to rest" all inquiry about the true identity of the Author—at least for a century or two.