Not without Mustard

Shakespeare and the Bassoonists

by [Peter Dreyer] (September 2023)

The Bassoonist, Harmen Hals, 1650

In 2014, John Hudson published a book titled *Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Amelia Bassano Lanier, the Woman Behind*

Shakespeare's Plays? The distinguished British historian A. L. Rowse (1903–97) had come up with the idea. Subsequently, in June 2019, Elizabeth Winkler, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, placed an article in the *Atlantic* magazine titled "Was Shakespeare a Woman?" Winkler now has an entertaining book out on the subject, with the subtitle *How Doubting the Bard Became the Biggest Taboo in Literature.* But in fact, as she herself shows, it's not a taboo at all—Shakespeare is doubted all over the map, often on the flimsiest evidence. Sigmund Freud even suggested, presumably joking, that he might have been a Frenchman named "Jacques Pierre."

Citing mind-numbing ciphers supposedly concealed in Shakespeare's works, believers contend that Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, solicitor general, attorney general, and, in the end, Lord Chancellor of England, was the actual author, not only of Shakespeare, but of the writings of Spenser, Marlowe, Greene, Peale, and Burton. Bacon, they argue, was the bastard son of Queen Elizabeth I, conceived when she was Bloody Mary's prisoner. The beheaded rebel earl of Essex had been his older brother. Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, was their father. Leicester and Elizabeth had fallen in love while held in the Tower.[1] To quote Eric Sams, this is "not just ordinary nonsense, but obvious and outrageous nonsense."[2]

Bacon is no longer the main contender, of course. Other, mostly aristocratic claimants to the title of Shakespeare are advanced by their supporters. Winkler uses up many pages in her book interviewing Alexander Waugh, grandson of Evelyn Waugh, who backs the candidacy of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The main problem is that de Vere died in 1604, twelve years *before* Shakespeare, and fourteen of Shakespeare's plays are reliably believed to have been written subsequently. Winkler quotes an epigram by Jeffrey Burghauser, "On Alexander Waugh" that ran in *New English Review* in July 2021:

Exhausted by the weight of heresies
I can't but feel reveal the Truth,
(How they have multiplied since youth!)
I now must find the space in which to squeeze
Another one. It brings me no delight
That Alexander Waugh is likely right.

It would bring me no delight either, were it so, but mercifully, I don't believe for a moment that it is. To come to terms with the proliferating claims to authorship, and with Winkler's book, I consulted the British musicologist and Shakespeare scholar Eric Sams (1926–2004), who demonstrates in vast detail, citing 634 documentary sources dating from 1500 to 1710, that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, "the Stratford man," is far and away the probable author of the plays and poems attributed to him.[3]

No one doubted that he wrote them until mid-Victorian times, a buttoned-up era perhaps even more psychologically different from Shakespeare's than our own. There is explicit testimony, after all, from the next three greatest British writers of his day, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton (though only a child when Shakespeare died, a contemporary nonetheless). We also have the account of the antiquarian and natural philosopher John Aubrey, who interviewed many people who had personally known Shakespeare, or whose relatives had.

Winkler dismisses Aubrey as "a gossip," in a couple of brief mentions, but he was actually one of the ninety-eight Original Fellows of the Royal Society (other Original Fellows included Robert Boyle, "the father of chemistry"; John Dryden, the poet laureate; the architect Christopher Wren, and King Charles II).[4] Aubrey grew up during the English Civil Wars (1642–51) and lived through the Cromwellian Protectorate (1653–58) and the Great Fire of London (1666), times when fanatical Puritan soldiers smashed ancient monuments, putting on any play

whatsoever was against the law, and innumerable historical documents went up in smoke.

After the Puritan "Long Parliament" banned theater in September 1642, an eighteen-year caesura followed, and by the time of the Restoration in 1660, the age of Shakespeare (d. 1616) and Ben Jonson (d. 1637) must have seemed even more remote to the public than the films of François Truffaut (d. 1984) and Hal Ashby (d. 1988) must now seem to Generation Z, let alone Generation Alpha.

In December 1660, after the Restoration, Margaret Hughes, the mistress of the famous Cavalier general Prince Rupert of the Rhine, appeared as Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* at the Vere Street Theatre, becoming England's first accredited professional actress.[5] British theater was back in business. But a great gulf had been created by the long Puritan ban. Memories had faded and theater's golden age receded into fable. Shakespeare in particular became a sacrosanct, almost mythological figure.

Amidst the chaos, John Aubrey kept notes, striving to preserve what record of things he could. An Oxford don named Anthony Wood planned to publish a book on the luminaries of that city,[6] and Aubrey, who seems to have known most everyone who was anyone in England's upper crust and literary and scientific intelligentsia, kindly gathered biographical details for him. Long after Aubrey's death, his vignettes were collected into a masterpiece titled *Aubrey's Brief Lives.* Here's some of what he has to say in it about Shakespeare:

> Mr William Shakespeare was borne at Stratford upon Avon in the County of Warwick. His father was a Butcher, and *I have been told heretofore by some of the neighbours,* that when he was a boy he exercised his father's trade, but when he kill'd a Calfe he would do it in high style, and make a

> Speech … This William, being incline naturally to Poetry and acting, came to London, I guesse about 18: and was an Actor at one of the Play-houses, and did acte exceedingly well … He began early to make essayes at Dramatique Poetry, which at that time was very lowe; and his Playes took well … *I have heard Sir William Davenant and Mr. Thomas Shadwell (who is counted the best Comoedian we have now) say* that he had the most prodigious Witt … beyond all other Dramaticall writers.
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> His Comoedies will remain witt as long as the English tongue is understood … He understood Latine pretty well: for he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country.
>
> *He was wont to say that he never blotted out a line in his life. Sayd Ben: Johnson [Ben Jonson], I wish he had blotted-out a thousand.* [emphasis added; some paragraphing omitted][7]

Sams contends that Aubrey was correct on almost all counts. Shakespeare did go to grammar school, did later work as a schoolmaster and a law clerk. His father was a yeoman farmer and butcher, who tanned and sold the hides of the animals he slaughtered, the raw material of leather goods, like gloves, as one of several sidelines. The attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was 14, had terrified the nation, and Shakespeare's family were Catholics, which was a dangerous thing to be in Elizabethan England—close to treason. John Shakespeare's Catholic last will and testament would be found hidden in the roof of the family house at Stratford half a century later.

Why on earth should we believe the inventions of modern academics and journalists living hundreds of years later rather than Aubrey and contemporary eye-witnesses? "Mr.

William Prynne's advice to me for the reading of our English Historie was to read the Authors, that wrote of their owne Time," Aubrey himself presciently notes. Prynne, "a learned man, of immense reading," and a fierce Puritan, wrote a swinging criticism of stage plays, with remarks construed as an attack on the king and queen, for which he was brought before the Star Chamber in 1634, fined £5,000, sentenced to life imprisonment, and had both ears cut off while pilloried. "His Eares were not quite cutt off, only the upper part, his tippes were visible," Aubrey says, scene-setting his interview—a professional touch that would surely please a *New Yorker* or *Wall Street Journal* editor *de nos jours*.[8]

The anti-Stratfordians' argument rests largely on the elitist claim that the mere yokel they contend "the Stratford man" to have been could not possibly have had the knowledge of aristocratic life, of French and Italian, of the law, and of classical Latin and Greek authors, demonstrated in the plays. Attempting to make Shakespeare's background a little more genteel, they make him the son of a glover rather than of a butcher—but in fact "stringent regulations kept the two trades apart," Sams notes.

What we might call the class case was effectively dismissed by Doctor Johnson in his *Preface* to the 1765 edition of Shakespeare, "building upon and in effect submerging earlier editions by the dramatist Nicholas Rowe (1709), the poet Alexander Pope (1725), the scholars Lewis Theobald (1734), Sir Thomas Hanmer (1743–44), and Isaac Reed (1785)."[9] None of these expressed any doubt that Shakespeare wrote the works attributed to him.

Shakespeare was no classicist, and he relied on translations. The *Comedy of Errors* is based on the only play by Plautus then in English, and Shakespeare does not copy other works by Plautus that were inaccessible to him because untranslated. "That his plays have some French scenes proves but little; he might easily procure them to be written, and probably, even

though he had known the language in the common degree, he could not have written it without assistance," Johnson notes. "In the story of *Romeo and Juliet* he is observed to have followed the English translation, where it deviates from the Italian."[10]

Humble origins in any case do not necessarily impede genius. Ben Jonson was the stepson of a bricklayer and is recorded as having built a wall himself. John Webster (ca. 1578–ca. 1632), another famous contemporary dramatist, whose work is still performed today, was the son of a carriage maker and a blacksmith's daughter.

Moving in Bohemian (avant la lettre) circles in Elizabethan London, an actor hobnobbing with slumming aristocrats and French and Italian immigrants like the Bassanos, an extensive family of Venetian musicians and instrument makers employed at the English court since the time of Henry VIII, it would have been easy enough for Will Shakespeare to drum up and fake the erudition that is the basis of the anti-Stratfordian argument. Let us imagine that Aemilia Bassano (1569–1645), "the first woman in England to assert herself as a professional poet" (Wikipedia), was indeed the Dark Lady (she was half-Italian) of the Sonnets, which is to say Shakespeare's muse, language mentor, *petite amie,* mistress, or what you will ("He was a handsome, well-shap't man: very good company, and of a very readie and pleasant smoothe Witt," Aubrey says). She or her cosmopolitan Bassano relatives, of whom there were a great many,[11] could have supplied most or all of the sophisticated knowledge Shakespeare's writings exhibit, if he lacked it.[12]

Ben Jonson parodied the motto in the coat of arms Shakespeare had applied for (and received) on his father's behalf, "Non sanz Droict" (Not without Right), with a character in his play *Every Man Out of His Humour* comically applying for the motto "Not without Mustard." In the "Battle of the Books" pitting the so-called University Wits (Greene, Nashe, Marlowe, and Lodge) against the "ill-bred" Grammar School boys Shakespeare

and Kyd, Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil* also trots out what was doubtless a popular joke at Shakespeare's expense at the time, exclaiming: "'Not without mustard, good Lord, not without mustard." Nashe also uses the term "kill-cow vanity," which would certainly seem to target Will Shakespeare specifically, probably the only playwright who had actually killed cows. The upper-class contemporary playwrights of the day unequivocally recognized, and resented, "the Stratford man" as the author of so many hit plays.

In *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury* (1598), Francis Meres, who wrote the first critical account of Shakespeare's work and listed his plays, calls him "the most passionate among us to bewaile and bemoane the perplexities of Loue." Nashe satirizes Shakespeare's membership of "an overtly Italianate circle" and charges that he and Thomas Kyd read "dubious French books." Shakespeare, like Kyd, had been a noverint, a lawyer's clerk, or scrivener. Both would thus have had to be able to write "a trained legal hand."[13]

Inevitably, there are mysteries. There are always mysteries to any life. Biographies of T. S. Eliot, who died in 1965, not 1616, skirt around seemingly unsolvable mysteries too. Sure, we may wonder, why didn't Shakespeare educate his daughters, who seem to have been illiterate? Why did he bequeath his wife only his "second-best bed"? Why doesn't he mention his writings in his will? Why isn't he buried in Westminster Abbey like Ben Jonson? But all of these questions, taken together do not remotely counterbalance the mass of evidence for the Stratfordian position.

The anti-Stratfordians, Sams points out, fail to notice the deep understanding of the agricultural world, country life, horses and cattle, leatherworking, and butcher's work exhibited in Shakespeare's writing. In the space of a review, I cannot go into more detail, but let me quote Sams merely on the latter point:

> John Shakespeare, as a Tudor farmer … was also a butcher … Of course an eldest son would lend a hand at need … in slaughtering; the young Shakespeare, constrained to kill a calf, might well do so "in a high style, and make a speech", just as Aubrey says … When Brutus [kills] Caesar in the Capitol "it was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there"; thus [too] Polonius is mocked by Hamlet (III.ii.106) … The effect on a sensitive child of killing a calf can readily be imagined … it takes a grown man's strength to pole-ax an ox. But calves though more amenable are also more appealing, as Shakespeare recalls in many a memorable image … Shakespeare has a whole rich vocabulary of blood … He knows how it forms into gouts[14] (*Macbeth*, V.i.46) … and how it darkens on coagulation … But his imagination flows with rivers … or even a sea of blood (*1 Henry VI,* IV.vii.14). He knows at firsthand how
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> > *the butcher takes away the calf*
> > *And binds the wretch, and beats it when it strays,*
> > *Bearing it to the bloody slaughter-house …*
> > *And as the dam runs lowing up and down,*
> > *Looking the way her harmless young one went …*
> > (*2 Henry VI,* III.i.210f.)

If that doesn't persuade you that Shakespeare was a butcher's son, frankly, I don't know what would!

The inimitable Bill Bryson sums things up: "One really must salute the ingenuity of the anti-Stratfordian enthusiasts who, if they are right, have managed to uncover the greatest literary fraud in history, without the benefit of anything that could reasonably be called evidence, four hundred years after it was perpetrated."[15]

P.S. I like the idea of Aemilia Bassano as Shakespeare's Dark Lady—especially because she might be a distant relative of mine! To wit:

A contemporary of Shakespeare's named Thomas Basson (1555–1613) fled from England to the Continent, apparently to escape Puritan persecution, and settled in Leiden, becoming a prominent printer (1585–1612), bookseller, English schoolmaster and active Familist and Rosicrucian.[16]

Subsequently, in the mid-1660s, a man named Arnoldus (Arnout) Willemsz Basson (1647–98) emigrated from Wessel in the Rhineland—less than a hundred miles from Leiden, the hometown of Thomas Basson's descendants—to the Dutch East India Company settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, where he acquired the nickname "Jagt," short for "Jagter" (hunter). On December 15, 1669, Jagt Basson married the manumitted Bengali slave Engela van Bengalen at the Cape. He died in 1698, but Engela lived into the 1720s and was the foremother of a host of South Africans, some black, some white, all obviously "mixed," if that means anything. I am one of them myself, since I descend in a direct line from Engela and Jagt (see "My Slave Foremother Engela van Bengalen," *New English Review,* August 2023).

Basson, be it noted, is neither an English nor a Flemish/Dutch surname. In French, it simply means "bassoon."

[1] See, e.g., Arthur M. Young, *The Shakespeare/Bacon Controversy* (San Francisco: Robert Briggs Associates, 1987).
[2] Sams, *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564–1594*, xiii.
[3] Sams does not appear in Winkler's index, and she provides no bibliography.
[4] Aubrey, the pioneer British archaeologist, escorted King Charles to view the great stone circle at Avebury, wider in

circumference than Stonehenge. Much of the Avebury henge was later destroyed by locals, and Aubrey's plan of it has thus been invaluable. The Aubrey holes at Stonehenge are named after him.

[5] King Charles issued a royal warrant in 1662 mandating that female roles should be played *only* by actresses, and not by beardless boys, as in the golden age of British theater. Women had been appearing on stage in France since the early years of the century.

[6] Anthony à Wood. *Athenae Oxoniensis: An Exact History of all the Writers and Bishops who have had their Education in the University of Oxford from 1500 to 1690* (2 vols., London, 1691–92). After Wood was successfully sued for libel by the son of one of his aristocratic subjects, his book, or at least the relevant part of it, was burned by the common hangman at Oxford in 1693.

[7] *Aubrey's Brief Lives. Edited from the Original Manuscripts and with an Introduction by Oliver Lawson Dick* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 275–76.

[8] Ibid., Introduction by Oliver Lawson Dick, cviii; Aubrey on Prynne, 250–51. While in the Tower, the unrepentant Prynne sent a letter to William Laud, the archbishop of Canterbury, accusing him of injustice and illegal acts, and wrote and anonymously published tracts attacking the Anglican episcopacy. In 1637, he was in consequence again fined £5,000, lost the rest of his ears, and was branded on the cheeks with the letters S.L., standing for "Seditious Libeller."

[9] Samuel Johnson, "Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare," in *Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose,* edited by Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 15. I copyedited this book.

[10] Ibid., 317–18.

[11] See David Lasocki, with Roger Prior, *The Bassanos: Venetian Musicians and Instrument Makers in England, 1531–1665* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1995). *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1952) says of the family: "They were so numerous and their names were

entered so carelessly in court records that it is impossible to establish a genealogy for them. Among the instruments they played were lutes, trombones, recorders, hautboys, flutes and violins, and some were singers." The family had a house until at least 1571 at Bassano in the foothills of the Alps, about forty miles from Venice, of which the town was a dependency. The Italian word *bassone* (French *basson*) surely derives from it, signifying the double-reed musical instrument called a "bassoon" in English, albeit *fagotto* is now the common term for it in Italian.

[12] As I am sure Ms. Winkler is perfectly aware, writers often fly by the seat of their pants. I have no professional knowledge whatsoever of plant breeding, for instance, but after reviewing my biography of Luther Burbank, Stephen Jay Gould, a distinguished Harvard professor, debated the subject with me in the *New York Times Book Review*—and time has shown, I believe, that I was basically right and he was wrong.

[13] Sams, *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564–1594,* 92–93.

[14] "Macbeth hallucinates a dagger with 'gouts of blood,' casually using the French word for drops," Winkler writes. But the French word for drop is *goutte*, and "gout" is attested as early as 1503 as meaning in English either a "drop, esp. of blood" or, later, usually, a "large splash or clot" (OED). "On thy Blade, and Dudgeon [hilt], Gouts of Blood," Shakespeare writes. The English derives from the Norman French, of course, but was naturalized by Shakespeare's time with the wider meaning of "splash or clot."

[15] Bill Bryson, *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* (New York: Atlas Books, 2007), 96.

[16] See J. A. van Dorsten, *Thomas Basson, 1555–1613: English Printer at Leiden* (Leiden: Published for the Sir Thomas Browne Institute by the Universitaire Press Leiden, 1961).

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