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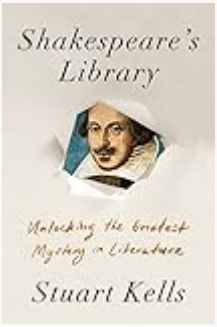
Ex libris

by *Paul Dean*

A review of Shakespeare's Library: Unlocking the Greatest Mystery in Literature, by Stuart Kells.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Stuart Kells
Shakespeare's Library: Unlocking the Greatest Mystery in Literature
Counterpoint, 336 pages, $26.00

The title of Stuart Kells's new book, Shakespeare's Library: Unlocking the Greatest Mystery in Literature, leads to false expectations.1 For most of the book, the author presents the fact that we have no authenticated volumes from Shakespeare's library as a profound enigma, and the search for them as a thrilling quest, before shrugging the matter off, in the last few pages, as perfectly understandable. After all, he reminds us, Shakespeare was a practical man of the theater, with a working library; later conceptions of the bibliophile would mean little or nothing to him. It would not occur to him that his autograph signature, or marginalia, in a book would someday be considered a treasure beyond price. The First Folio, published only after his death, began the process by which he became a hallowed author; nobody was clamoring to buy his books at auction in 1616. Moreover, the absence of books from his will, viewed with suspicion by Baconians and their ilk, is no surprise; such items, if thought worth recording at all, were commonly listed separately in an inventory, which, if it existed in this case, has disappeared. If, as is likely, the books passed to his family, they have simply not survived. That is, of course, regrettable, but, after all, if we want to know what books Shakespeare read—some, but not necessarily all, of which he would have owned—we can find out with the aid of the abundant scholarly work on the sources of

his plays.
Kells has been poorly served by his editors. The unwary reader will be led astray by inaccuracies, distortions, and unsupported hypotheses (it's a long time since I read a book with so many conditional tenses). The suggestions for "further reading" are inexcusably scrappy; no modern editions or reliable literary-critical works are listed, and there are no references to plays in the index. There are no source notes, and although we are told that these are available on the author's website, stuartkells.com, that seems to me inadequate, especially when so many contentious claims are made.

Apart from the spurious detective-story element, much of *Shakespeare's Library* turns out to be yet another narrative of the disputes about the authorship of the plays, rehearsing arguments we have read dozens of times. It was at Monash University, Kells tells us, that he first encountered the outer reaches of Shakespeare conspiracy theory. There were cryptographers, mathematicians, philosophers, musicologists, historians, and others, all advocating some author for the plays other than the man from Stratford. Most of the candidates he mentions are all too familiar, but one, at least, was new to me: Sir Henry Neville (1562–1615), an Oxford graduate, member of parliament, ambassador to France, and friend of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (another contender for the Shakespeare authorship), with whom he was involved in the Essex Rebellion of 1601. Rehabilitated under James I, Neville fell from favor again by supporting greater parliamentary influence over the Crown. The case for Neville-as-Shakespeare was first made by Brenda James and William Rubinstein in *The Truth Will Out* (2005). Kells comprehensively demolishes their arguments, concluding that their book does "great harm" to the Nevillian party for which it is intended as a manifesto. Neville's library contained some books which we know to be sources of Shakespeare's plays: the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed, or Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, for example. But these were hardly difficult to obtain. All other possible candidates for being Shakespeare (including Shakespeare) would have had to have them. Moreover, as a Puritan, Neville would hardly have thought playwriting a suitable leisure occupation.

The extent of Shakespeare's collaboration with other dramatists, a long-neglected issue, is now fiercely debated. Kells treats this complex matter with notable lack of finesse. The computerized statistical and stylometric tests which are now widely used to determine multiple authorship are often viewed with skepticism, and I am uneasy about them myself, but they certainly can't be dismissed as "a massive methodological sidetrack," as Kells supposes. They raise genuine questions. I checked his views against the most extreme "disintegrationist" positions, represented by the essays in *The New Oxford Shakespeare Authorship Companion* (2017), edited by Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan. Increasing attention is being paid to Marlowe's putative role. Kells calls him Shakespeare's "occasional collaborator" and says that Shakespeare "is probably also credited with plays that Marlowe largely wrote." Marlowe's only known collaborator is Thomas Nashe, on *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, where he is named on the title page, and possibly *Doctor Faustus*, where some scholars have detected Nashe's presence; William Bird and Samuel Rowley were paid for

"additions" to *Doctor Faustus* in 1604, but this does not imply that they worked with Marlowe, who died in 1593. He, in turn, could not have worked with Shakespeare on any play after that date, and, in any case, Shakespeare was quite capable of writing parody-Marlowe himself. Kells asserts that Shakespeare and Marlowe revised "original versions of the three parts of *Henry VI*" by Robert Greene and George Peele. Gary Taylor and Rory Laughnane, writing in the *Authorship Companion*, ignore Greene and Peele, arguing that Shakespeare revised and adapted plays originally written by Nashe (parts of *Henry VI, Part 1* only), Marlowe, and possibly another author. To adapt someone else's work, however, is not collaboration, which implies joint composition of an original. Thomas Middleton, for instance, collaborated with Shakespeare on *Timon of Athens* but cannot be called a co-author of *Macbeth*, which he seems to have adapted for later performances. Most bizarrely of all, who are the "mainstream scholars" who, according to Kells, believe that Marlowe wrote *The Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar*? If any such exist, they should seek medical help.

Greene's professional connection with Shakespeare, if any, is very shadowy. As Kells is aware, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, published anonymously in 1592, may be, in whole or part, the work of both Nashe and Henry Chettle; whoever wrote it, there is certainly no evidence that Shakespeare "had the last laugh" on Greene for the attack on him in the *Groatsworth* by putting him on stage as Sir Toby Belch. With regard to Thomas Kyd—another dramatist whose name is frequently linked with Shakespeare's by the ultramontane collaborationist party—Kells presents their joint authorship of the anonymous *Edward III* as an established fact, whereas the latest edition, by Richard Proudfoot and Nicola Bennett (2017), finds the evidence inconclusive. (Recurring to the "library" theme, if Shakespeare really did work with all these people, it would surely make sense for him to have borrowed *their* books.)

On yet another contested area of scholarship—chronology and revision—Kells is prone to misstatements. That the "chronology of Shakespeare's plays is still unsettled" is strictly true, but agreement within a year or two for the original composition of most plays is more widespread than this suggests. What is less clear is whether, and when, some of the plays were later revised, by Shakespeare or others. Where that happened there are implications for performance history. It is not true that Much Ado About Nothing "was registered" as Benedick and Beatrice; it was registered, and published in 1600, under its present title. It is true that "The comical part of A Midsummer Night's Dream was separately printed in quarto, and was acted under the title Bottom the Weaver"—but in 1661; what bearing has that on anything? Kells argues that the few lines of dialogue from Othello recorded by Edward Pudsey in his commonplace book of 1600, before the first known edition in 1622, indicate a now-lost printing, but their fragmentariness would be better explained by a memory of performance. In relation to the lost Cardenio, by Shakespeare and John Fletcher, readers should be referred to Brean Hammond's 2010 edition of Lewis Theobald's Double Falsehood, which is thought to contain remnants of that play. Since the pre-Shakespearean Hamlet, possibly by Kyd, is lost, nobody can know that it "contained nearly all of what we appreciate in the Shakespearean version"; all we know, from a reference in 1596, is that there was a ghost crying "Hamlet, revenge." (Kells magnanimously allows that "Shakespeare did add a few things"!) It is not true that the "diary" (actually an account-book) kept by Philip Henslowe, the theatrical

impresario, in the 1590s, "records him buying and staging plays with Shakespearean titles—such as Henry VI and The Taming of the Shrew—but with non-Shakespearean attribution and payment." The "harey the vi" mentioned by Henslowe may indeed be Henry VI, Part 1, but the other play is named as The Taming of a Shrew, a different play from Shakespeare's, of unknown authorship, printed in 1594; and Henslowe does not give any author(s) for these two plays. hat of Shakespeare's biography? Breathlessly described by Kells as "a fun guy moving in a fun circle . . . a kind of punk poet, a proto-rockstar, a sixteenth-century Russell Crowe," he certainly sounds like the kind of person you want to avoid, but it is surely going a bit far to infer, from the fact that one William Saksper was hanged for robbery in 1248, that the later William "had credentials" for criminality. (In any case, it is most unlikely that the robber was "an ancestor," as Kells asserts; Samuel Schoenbaum, his presumed source here, reminds us that Shakespeares "were thick on the ground in Warwickshire and the adjoining counties.") Not everyone may know that "Willie Hughes, the beautiful boy-actor" and supposed referent of "Mr W. H." in the dedication to the Sonnets, is an invention of Oscar Wilde's, whereas the others in Kells's list are real people. No one, to my knowledge, has ever produced evidence for Kells's belief that Shakespeare is the subject of Jonson's poem "On Poet-Ape"; the editors of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson (2012) note that Jonson elsewhere described Dekker as a "poet-ape," but still feel no specific target is meant.

Kells's account of the composition and publication of the First Folio of 1623—a book, we learn, having "a sexy label bursting with bibliographical glamour"—is more contentious still. He rightly says that John Hemmings and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow-actors who wrote the preface to the volume, can't be called its editors; the modern concept of textual editing didn't emerge until the eighteenth century. But when he refers to them as "named editors" and takes this to be a joke, he is distorting the facts. All that Hemmings and Condell say, in the dedicatory epistle to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, and in the address "To the great variety of readers," is that they have "collected" the plays. The word "editor" is never used. "They were comedic actors," Kells remarks patronizingly: yes, and they were also professional men of business—Hemmings, indeed, oversaw the finances of the King's Men. To quote Emma Smith, in her authoritative *The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio* (2015)—which Kells doesn't mention—these two men "were vitally important to the First Folio project since they were the connection between the publication and the theatre: without them, there was no access to the unpublished material" (eighteen plays out of thirty-six). Their address to the readers frankly admits a commercial motive: "whatever you do, buy." Kells's loftiness about "a commercial exercise in branding" is absurd; what does he expect the promoters of a book to do? I don't suppose he is going to disapprove of the marketing people at his own publisher, Counterpoint.

Who, then, Kells wonders, were the "editors" (apparently once more a valid concept)? There are "numerous hints" of Jonson's involvement, he claims, and "a good case" that John Florio "performed an editorial role." These are baseless speculations. Jonson contributed two poems to the prefatory matter of the Folio; Florio has never been linked with the publication of the volume, to my knowledge, although Shakespeare used his translation of Montaigne's *Essays*. If he "may

well have worked alongside Jonson as co-editor," how come the text is so notoriously riddled with errors? Jonson and Florio were learned men—Jonson, in particular, who had overseen the publication of a folio edition of his own works in 1616, and kept a beady eye on it down to the last comma, might well consider Kells guilty of libel here. Some errors in the 1623 Folio seem to have been caught during the printing process (undertaken by several compositors possessing varying levels of accuracy), but there's no evidence of what we would understand by copyediting or proofreading by a single controlling hand. The mechanics of book production in this period, handily summarized by Emma Smith, hardly figure in Kells's account.

The omission from the Folio of *Pericles*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Edward III*, all collaborative plays, is explicable on copyright grounds (and perhaps, in the last case, by the fact that Shakespeare's contribution to the play was thought too slight); the omission of *Love's Labour's Won*, the Holy Grail of Shakespeare studies, known only by its title, is a dreadful loss but hardly suspicious. Kells blames Hemings and Condell and their associates for omitting the plays known as the Shakespeare apocrypha, but this might surely be for the good reason that they knew them not to be by Shakespeare. He describes the presence of eighteen previously unpublished plays in the Folio as "an enigma." It is nothing of the sort. The earlier publications, as Hemings and Condell stated in their preface, were unauthorized and inaccurate, and are here presented in their "official" form (even though they are, as we know, still not perfect); the rest were unpublished because the company wanted to hold on to their copies. This is far too simple for Kells, who speculates that "Shakespeare had no role" in these eighteen plays and that the men behind the Folio "simply selected, from a cache of available plays, texts that would fit in to the First Folio and could plausibly be passed off as Shakespeare's." That category would have to include *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, among others. Why has more not been heard of the genius(es) who wrote these plays?

For, according to Kells, Shakespeare was no genius. By the end of the book, the erstwhile "proto-rockstar" cuts a sad figure. He was, we're now told, a middleman, capitalizing on previous work by others, "a workaday dramatist with a talent for converting prior content into performable and enduring plays." He was only "accidentally talented," driven by commercial imperatives, "not what we think of today as a 'literary' man"! This amazing view at least explains why his library has disappeared; he probably wasn't much of a reader. But it has the odd effect of making the Authorship Question all the more baffling: why would anyone want to claim to be such a commonplace dullard? It seems to me that if anything can be called, to borrow Kells's subtitle, "the greatest mystery in literature," it is how on earth this person came to write the plays we have. The answer is not, as the conspiracy theorists have it, that he didn't, but that he was not the sort of person Kells imagines him to be.

On the very last page, Kells springs a sensational surprise. A fellow book dealer has in his possession the first known letter from Shakespeare. It is brief, but "provides spectacular confirmation that primary Shakespearean material . . . remains to be found." Of course, it may not be genuine, and experts at the Folger Shakespeare Library are investigating the document. We await further developments. Meanwhile, have another look in your attic. Some of Shakespeare's

books might be languishing there. I'm afraid I don't think he would have bought this one.

1 *Shakespeare's Library: Unlocking the Greatest Mystery in Literature*, by Stuart Kells; Counterpoint, 322 pages, $26.

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