

How Shakespeare could write Shakespeare

BY HOLGER SYME NOVEMBER 1, 2011



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I don't think Keir Cutler ("[There is method in this madness](#)," Opinion, Oct. 27) and others who believe Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare are certifiably mad. They are, however, demonstrably misguided.

Let me focus on Cutler's two central tenets: that Shakespeare's works display "vast learning" and familiarity with "more than 200 different works, mostly untranslated;" and that Shakespeare "added more than 3,000 new words to the English language."

Geoffrey Bullough's [eight-volume authoritative anthology](#) of all texts the playwright may have used only identifies about 70 books as probable sources. And Shakespeare could have read all but a dozen (eight in Latin, four in Italian) of them in English. Most of his sources were popular romances – and, unsurprisingly, plays.

That he could read those books is virtually certain. [Shakespeare's father married a gentleman's daughter](#) and was a Stratford alderman, which entitled William to a free education. Although Stratford's grammar-school records do not survive, there is no reason to think he didn't attend.

His parents couldn't write – few women and few Englishmen of the class into which John Shakespeare was born could – but William's younger brother, [Gilbert](#), his daughter, Susanna, and his granddaughter, Elizabeth, all signed their names – as did William, though in a less fashionable hand than his female descendants or his brother. Shakespeare was not surrounded by illiteracy. He benefitted from the great expansion of middle-class education in Reformation England.

None of this is extraordinary: historians estimate that most of Shakespeare's social equals were fully literate. Nor is it surprising that the playwright's will didn't list any books. Books aren't mentioned in 90 per cent of the wills of scholars, clerics and professionals analyzed by the [Private Libraries of Renaissance England](#) project. Such items would have been catalogued in a separate inventory, and Shakespeare's, like many others, is lost.

Neither is it a sign of illiteracy that none of his works seem to survive in an authorial manuscript. Of the approximately 3,000 plays written for professional actors between the 1570s and the 1640s, only 19 are extant in manuscript, a mere six written in an identifiable author's hand – 0.2 per cent of the total that once existed. Survival rates for more ephemeral documents are even lower. Even so, two sheets – [165 lines – of one of those manuscripts](#) may in fact be by Shakespeare; all available manual and computer-based analyses show that no Renaissance playwright's writing style matches that of the unidentified author as closely as Shakespeare's.

There is no evidence that Shakespeare was illiterate. But Cutler is also misguided in calling him a "brilliant scholar." His contemporaries certainly didn't think of him that way. [Ben Jonson](#) felt he "wanted art," i.e. lacked erudition; Francis Beaumont considered his best lines "clear" of "all learning." And that view prevailed: later, John Milton praised Shakespeare's "native wood-notes wild" – the opposite of scholarship.

The notion that Shakespeare was extraordinarily erudite is a 20th-century fiction, an effect of historical distance. Even now, though, it is easy to identify a truly learned writer: just read Jonson. His *Sejanus* bursts with classical footnotes; the Venice of his *Volpone*, unlike Shakespeare's, is pieced together from a meticulous study of authoritative sources; his scenes debating literary theory are incomprehensible to modern readers. (Jonson was a bricklayer's son who hadn't gone to university.)

Jonson's learnedness, however, makes his works a hard sell nowadays. Unlike Cutler, I would identify Shakespeare's very lack of erudition, his limitations, as the qualities that make his works enduringly powerful; his thoughts, and especially their expression, can be startlingly simple. Shakespeare's language shows more familiarity with rural England than with any field of learning, although he clearly could reference the worlds of law, of alchemy, or of sports like hawking and tennis – he lived in London for most of his life, after all, cheek by jowl with courtiers, and performed for aristocratic audiences every year.

This takes me to Cutler's second assertion: the idea that Shakespeare invented thousands of words. Such claims are nearly always badly inflated. They are based on the [Oxford English Dictionary](#), a monument to Victorian scholarship. The OED, however, was compiled without computers; its editors focused on "the great writers" and favoured texts for which concordances were available: Shakespeare's, Milton's and the Bible. Consequently, the dictionary lists a distorted number of words as Shakespeare's – though only 2,200, not Cutler's 3,000. As more old texts are digitized, these estimates are being revised downward.

Current research suggests that Shakespeare may in fact have only introduced about 700 words.

Experts now think that some of his contemporaries, like [Gabriel Harvey](#) and [Thomas Nashe](#), might have coined more words than Shakespeare. And new computer-based analyses reveal that, contrary to popular belief, he did not command a larger vocabulary than many other playwrights, and in fact had a much smaller one than educated writers of modern English. Dramatists less celebrated today, such as Thomas Dekker or John Webster, used more words than Shakespeare.

It may thus not be surprising to learn that most of Shakespeare's contemporaries didn't think of him as a once-in-a-millennium genius. There is even evidence that some of his plays flopped as books. Renaissance Londoners would have been more likely to nominate Jonson as their greatest writer: he

had a veritable entourage of younger authors, the Tribe of Ben, hanging on his every word. Without such a fan club, who would have felt compelled to collect scraps of Will's handwriting?

What the intervening centuries have done to his reputation makes it hard to comprehend that Shakespeare in his own time was one among a number of famed writers – highly praised but not unique. Anti-Stratfordian skepticism depends on the notion that Shakespeare was a historical singularity. But if we want to understand him as a historical figure, we first need to shrink him down to size again. Otherwise, Shakespeare and his contemporaries' reactions to him will indeed remain a maddening riddle.

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