

SHAKESPEARE *v.* SHAKESPEARE

or the orthodox Stratfordians, and unless actual documentary evidence turns up to decide the matter, the question of authorship will doubtless continue to be argued happily—or otherwise—by opposing groups for a long time to come.

In whichever direction one turns, one is met with what appears to be an impossibility. Here are these plays, acknowledged to be the finest things of their kind, not only in English literature, but in any literature, full of allusions to the work of classical and European writers, their ideas clothed in a magnificence of words which no other of our poets can equal—words and phrases so fitting that they have passed into our English speech, and people ‘talk Shakespeare’ without knowing that they are doing so. How could they have been written by a man born into an illiterate household, of whose education there is no record whatsoever (though it may be presumed that he had some), whose only known activities were acting and business dealing? On the other hand, supposing they were written by a well-known man of the time, or a group of men, how could the secret be kept? The more one examines the question the more impossible the first alternative seems. The difficulties of the second largely disappear when one realises the lack of publicity of those days, and the Elizabethan’s love of mystery in their writings—how fond they were of assumed names, and anagrams and ‘emblems’, and how they peppered their work with initials, like the ‘T.T.’ and ‘W.H.’ which have given students of the sonnets so many sleepless nights, and with decorations and devices which might mean anything or nothing. To those in the secret all allusions would be perfectly clear; they would not think it either desirable or necessary to make any other record, and the mass of the people neither knew nor cared who were the authors of the plays they flocked to see.

With the exception of five of the items mentioned—the books of Lawrence, Wilmot, Hart, Delia Bacon, and W. H. Smith—all the works referred to in the article are in the Library, most of them in the Harold Large collection. Lest it be thought that the Library’s interest is partizan, one should understand that this section is dwarfed by other material on editions of Shakespeare of Stratford. There