

Hide Fox and All After: the Search for Shakespeare

by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

In the second scene of Act IV, we find Hamlet alone in a room in Elsinore, where he's discovered by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They've been sent to bring him to the King who's just been informed of the death of Polonius. After taunting them with their servility, Hamlet agrees to go with them and, as they exit together, he mutters "Hide fox and all after." Footnotes tell us what we might have guessed, that this is the name of a children's game, the one we know today as *Hide and Go Seek*.

Why does Hamlet say this? What does he mean? He isn't saying it to his former schoolmates, nor to the 16th-century audience. They won't know what he means any more than we do. From this point on Hamlet talks in riddles a great deal of the time.

In Hide and Go Seek the child who is "it" plays the role of a hunted animal, a fox if you will, who is sought by the dogs, the other children. To evade the dogs the fox must be silent and crafty. When one of the hunters tracks him down, the hunter becomes the hunted, becomes the fox, becomes "it." This is only a game, of course, so the role of the fox is more glamorous than just being a dog, thus (unlike real life) there is competition to be "it." To be the best dog, the one who finds the fox the quickest, then to be the best fox, the one who can evade the dogs for the longest time—is the motivating force that drives the game. Hamlet is a prince, born to rule. Refusing to see himself as a victim, he finds a way to cast himself as a winner—in his own mind at least—one who can "outfox" the dogs.

Hamlet is no longer a child, but until now he has lived a pampered existence. Blissfully unaware of the murderous animal energies that drive the politics of his father's Court, he has, like Prospero, spent his life immersed in books and things of the mind. It has taken his father's murder to awaken him to the realities of power politics. Unwilling to believe the ghost without strong evidence of his uncle's guilt, he sets a trap, a play, to determine the truth. This works, yet it also puts him in serious jeopardy.

Once King Claudius knows that he knows, Hamlet, formerly just an irritation, has become a deadly threat. Further, by killing Polonius, Hamlet has given his uncle a legitimate reason to get rid of him. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he needs to get the hell out of his intellectual ivory tower and engage on the level of animal energies with all his wits about him. Knowing how fear can paralyze action, to encourage himself he summons up a game from his childhood so that he can act freely with the élan of a child at play. Thus it is to himself that he speaks when he murmurs "Hide fox, and all after."

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is full of clues about the author, but these have led nowhere since there's nothing to be found in Stratford. There was no prince in Stratford, living in an Ivory Tower. This author felt safe in childhood, and what does he do as an adult? How does he deal with the cruel realities of life? He plays. He plays the lute, and he writes plays, in which, as in children's games, the victims rise when the curtain falls, to

play again the following day in a world of make believe. This author was a man who felt powerless in the real world, but who found his strength and power in the world of the theater, the world of plays, of make believe.

The fox is safe as long as he remains hidden. There is nowhere Hamlet can hide his physical self from the King and his henchmen. But what he can hide are his *intentions*. From now on, Hamlet, who is of an open disposition by nature and inclined to reveal his feelings, hides them behind a mask of foolery.

Like Hamlet, his author too hides himself behind a mask—the one we call “Shakespeare.”

Why Shakespeare hid

Whoever he was, Shakespeare was a genius. We may not agree on who he was at this point, but surely we all agree that he was a genius. There’s something else we know about him now, something we didn’t realize until recently: he was not only a genius at writing plays and poetry, he was also a genius at *hiding*. We’ve been playing Hide Fox and All After with Shakespeare for roughly two hundred years, and still he remains elusive, dim, half—if no longer completely—hidden. But why?

Hamlet hid his intentions because he was in mortal danger. Is this a clue to Shakespeare’s hiding? Was he in some kind of danger?

Authors frequently hide behind pseudonyms when they publish works that might get them into trouble with the authorities. The list of famous writers who have done this is extensive. Is this why Shakespeare hid his identity? Would he have been in trouble with the authorities had they known who he was?

Writers often use pseudonyms when they branch out and try something different, so that they won’t turn away faithful readers used to a different style or genre. Again, the list of famous writers who have done this, and are doing it today, is too long to read here. Is this the reason Shakespeare hid his identity, so he’d have the freedom to change style and genre without disturbing his audience (or letting them disturb him)?

Many writers in the past have hidden their identities because they wished to protect their class status or another professional identity. Was this it?

Writers hide from family, friends and fans behind unmarked doors and unlisted phone numbers because they need extended periods of unbroken time to get into the creative zone and stay there long enough to make something happen. Is this why he hid? To protect his privacy?

As so many great writers have agreed, the best writers create out of their own experience, some of it potentially scandalous and embarrassing to their families, friends and lovers. Did Shakespeare hide to protect his family and friends from an audience that might

connect their private secrets with the plots of his plays? With his villains and fools?
With the passion of his sonnets?

The early modern period was a time when poets were ashamed to put their names to the poetry they published. In Shakespeare's day, poetry, particularly love poetry, was regarded as a "toy," a foolish pastime that healthy-minded adults gave up with maturity. Is this why he hid? Because, once past his twenties, he was ashamed to be known as *just a poet*?

This was a time of fierce criticism of all innovations in word usage, spelling, syntax. The messy experiments of a language getting born led to ferocious condemnations of all attempts to do something new. Is this why he hid? Because he didn't care to hear himself condemned by critics he considered ignorant fools?

Another reason was suggested recently by the Czech novelist Milan Kundera in an article in *The New Yorker* magazine titled: "What is a Novelist?" In an effort to explain what motivates a serious novelist, Kundera makes the very interesting point that great writers are haunted by a demon unique to their craft, the awareness that their true audience may well be posterity. If they're really good their name, unlike that of mere generals and tyrants, may last forever, and in fact, the fame of generals and tyrants depends on them, for no one will remember the greatest hero unless some writer preserves his deeds in words on paper.

Every Achilles needs his Homer, every Napoleon his Emil Ludwig. Shakespeare was certainly aware of this when he promised the Fair Youth that so "great was his pen," that the young man's memory would continue to live "when tyrant's crests and tombs of brass are spent." By separating himself from his name, did he wish to keep his inspiration free from the psychological burden of having to consider this vast, unknown future audience?

Finally, feeling bad about himself, as we know he did from the *Sonnets*, did he hope to preserve for posterity the brilliance and beauty of his works without any taint from the sordid reality of himself, from his own bad reputation?

Are any of these the reason? Are none of them the reason? Are all of them the reason? Why do we do anything important in life, marry, start a family, divorce, move, change career paths, go back to school? Isn't it always for *more than one reason*?

Barriers to understanding the period

To find the fox it is necessary to understand him, how he thinks, what motivates him. Those of us who reject the Stratford biography are forced to deal with a number of problems that complicate the search for Shakespeare, problems that we must address before we can understand him, before we can feel certain that we've found the man himself and not just another one of his colleagues, rivals, imitators, or proxies. Many of these problems are rooted in the immense differences that separate our time from his.

We all know that there are a great many differences between our time and earlier times, and most of us know what they are, but what we don't always consider is the source of these differences and the effect they must have had on all aspects of life. When concentrating on some particular point we can't help but begin by seeing it through the lens of the familiar attitudes of our own time. To see it the way Shakespeare and his audience saw it, we must work to keep a number of things in mind.

For instance, despite the lack of newspapers and broadcast media, more people knew each other percentage-wise than now for the simple reason that there were far fewer people then and for the most part they never went very far from home. There was only one real city, still consisting of well under 200,000 residents, while the larger towns were more like what we consider villages today, and the villages were hamlets. Most people tended to stay in one community and keep to one occupation for their entire lives, usually the same one their parents knew. Most people lived in much smaller and more stable communities than we do today, with far fewer natural opportunities for change or advancement. Even aristocrats, who moved around more than any other social group, going from one estate to another, taking trips to the Continent, tended to move according to an itinerary that changed very infrequently, and within a community that was just as small as that of any yeoman farm family.

What opportunities there were arose chiefly because somebody died, more often from disease or accident than old age, there being no real medical science as yet, but often enough because they were murdered or executed, frequently without anything like a fair trial. With no official police as yet, murder or death by violence was a constant concern. To feel secure, people formed groups for protection and stayed within those groups. They traveled in groups, and when offended by some individual or group, more often than not took it on themselves to right the wrong through violence.

The extremely high death rate meant that, despite the fact that divorce was not allowed, most men and women who lived longer than thirty had at least two and often three marriage partners. The extremely high death rate among infants caused a set of very different attitudes towards children than what we know today, which in turn affected the attitudes towards life of those who managed to reach adulthood. It also caused women to have as many children as they could so that at least some would live to maturity, which had a great effect on the lives, the health, and the attitudes of women that must have been very different from how they think and feel today. With mates and offspring so subject to removal by death, and advancement in life so dependent on death, we may ask ourselves what effect this had on how people felt about each other and what they meant by the word "love."

Another result of the high death rate was to make religious tolerance next to impossible. With death a factor in everything, it was simply too important to feel secure about what happens to one's loved ones after death to allow any room for opinion. Today most of us are existentialists who accept uncertainty as the price of living in peace with neighbors of differing beliefs, but that was not yet the case in Shakespeare's time. With so much uncertainty here below, certainty about the afterlife becomes an emotional necessity.

Apart from religion there were other things we routinely question today that were not yet matters for discussion—at least, not open discussion, including the need for strongly-defined social classes, that prestigious bloodlines should be the determining factor in choosing a leader, and that the political system should reflect, and be part of, the chosen religious reality.

These as well as others affect all efforts to understand the past, including questions about the identity of authors, making it difficult to come up with an answer when someone asks, “Why in the world would anyone want to hide his identity as an author?” Most people want something they can understand immediately. Most haven’t the patience for a lesson in history or cultural anthropology. Unfortunately, that’s where the answers lie.

A period of rapid change

One aspect of the period that may be easier for us to understand was the rapidly changing worldview. It was a different worldview than ours today; the similarity lies in how fast it was changing. There are plateaus in history, long periods where change occurs very slowly. Sooner or later these give way to periods of extremely rapid development, often triggered by discoveries. This was one such period. For several hundred years following the fall of Rome, change had occurred at a relatively slow and even rate, but with the discoveries and inventions of the European Renaissance, change began to pick up speed. In our own time, immense leaps in technology continue to shrink our planet while expanding our concept of the universe. Similarly the Elizabethan era saw leaps in technology that brought about an equally rapid, changing and expanding world view.

What’s different about us is that we’re a little more used to it. Considering how long their world view had remained at the level it held at the beginning of the Middle Ages, there is no doubt that this process was a psychic shock of immense proportions. The stable, dependable world of generations of forbears was turning upside down, quite literally.

At the same time, a broader awareness of these changes than was ever possible before was being spread by another great change, the expansion of literacy. The combined effects of the Reformation and the Renaissance, from the mid-1540s through the 1570s, an upsurge in the creation of grammar schools and colleges at the universities, an expansion of their teaching programs and rapid increase in their student populations, plus the addition of Renaissance humanist subjects to the medieval curricula, created a supernova of learning. People of all ranks and both sexes were learning to read and write in far greater numbers than ever before while at the same time, the language itself was experiencing rapid change and expansion.

This supernova of learning was intense, but lasted at that level of intensity for only a short period of time, roughly fifteen years. This becomes apparent when we correlate the pertinent records with the relevant dates. Change and growth in education continued, of

course, but at a slower rate. Then, shortly after it began to slow, it was followed by another equally intense and only slightly longer period of language development, the period when Shakespeare was writing.

Since Shakespeare is *the* great creator of modern English, the timing of these two surges must be taken into account as we seek his identity. Surely he was both a benefactor and a contributor to these supernovae, first of education, then of language development, a perception that should help us to locate him, for he would most likely have been a student during the surge in education, and a contributor during the following surge in language development. His seminal influence on the English language requires his central presence during both these phases.

Poetry and prose

Finally, because this authorship question concerns the writing of poetry and poetic prose, we need to consider the place that poetry occupied in European minds at that time. Poetry, so important to antiquity, has lost its significance today because it's no longer a necessity. In Shakespeare's day, although the need was already gone, centuries of habit caused scholars and writers to regard it with respect as the legacy of the past, the eons that today we rather dismissively term the "oral tradition." Before people knew how to read and write, poetry and song were the means by which they preserved their cultures in memory, the vehicles whereby they passed them along from one generation to the next.

Poetry came before writing because it makes use of mnemonics, tricks of sound that make things easier to remember. There are three major mnemonics (plus dozens of minor ones): rhythm (or meter), rhyme, and alliteration. These, with the addition of repetition and song, are the means by which all peoples who do not write keep their cultures alive in memory.

With the development of writing, they were no longer forced to store everything—their history, their traditions, their stories, their wisdom—in their minds, they could simply write them down and refer to them when necessary. Thus mnemonics, and eventually poetry itself, were no longer needed, although they continued to remain a tradition for the centuries preceding printing.

Today we think of poetry as purely a vehicle for personal and emotional themes, but for thousands of years all works of philosophy, religion, history, science, and medicine were written in poetry, up to and including the period of the Renaissance. It wasn't until Shakespeare's time that, due to the Reformation, negative attitudes towards art and the rapid increases in printing and education, saw the need for poetry seriously questioned for the first time. (Many had questioned "poetry" over the ages, among them Plato, but that was not about rhyme or meter, but about what today we call *fiction*.)

Renaissance vs. Reformation

The great cultural revolution known as the European Renaissance, imported from Southern Europe, came late to England, and when it did, met head on with another great cultural revolution, the Protestant Reformation, imported somewhat earlier from Northern Europe. They reinforced each other in some respects, particularly in encouraging education, but in others they clashed, creating a tension that continues to exist in the English-speaking culture today. This tension was at high voltage during Shakespeare's time. While the Renaissance craved art, music and poetry, the Reformation tended to frown on the arts as, at best, a waste of the Lord's precious time, at worst, tools of the Devil. For the Puritans, the Devil was everywhere, and he was never more tempting than when he wore the mask of Beauty.

Following the period of the most intense growth of education came a second period of rapid change, one that also lasted a fairly short period of time, roughly the two decades that spanned the 1580s and 1590s. During this period language and style developed at a breathless pace, but this development was forced to take place within the constraints of a puritanically restrictive attitude towards the arts.

To understand what the writers of imaginative literature were up against in the 1560s and '70s, try reading a few pages of Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation of Castiglione's famous book *The Courtier* (available online at: <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/courtier/courtier.html>) Hoby's attempt to turn this masterpiece of Italian style into English is so turgid, so stilted, so convoluted, and basically so afraid of the true message that Castiglione intended, that over and over, one editor finds it necessary to translate so today's reader can understand what it was that Hoby was trying to say. Or try some of the jog-trot poetry of Thomas Churchyard or George Whetstone. C.S. Lewis's term for this period says it all: "the drab era." But by 1600, two short decades later, the standard had climbed to perhaps the highest level it has ever reached, one that set the bars for every writer of English since.

This is a bell curve of change so steep it's almost vertical. While the previous generation saw a supernova of education, the era of Marlowe, Sidney, Bacon, Shakespeare and Raleigh saw a supernova of culture. What caused this abrupt and rapid change? Certainly the preceding upsurge in printing and education had a great deal to do with it. But was there more to it than that?

Birth of the commercial media

This cultural supernova was fueled by an extremely important event in History, not just English history, but world history. This momentous event was the birth of the commercial Stage and the commercial Press in London in the mid-1570s.

Possibly because our views of the past have become compartmentalized by divisions into Departments of English and Departments of History, that this was the first functional step towards freedom of speech and true democracy has fallen between two academic stools.

History notes the importance of Parliament in the long reach towards democratic government, but Parliament, at this time, was still dependent on the patronage of high government officials. Although there was talk of freedom of speech and religion from radical members of Parliament, this was talk only, most of which ended up behind bars.

Far more important is the fact that, as the people of London began to make their will known by the plays they supported and the pamphlets they read, a new branch of government was born, one that was not born into office, nor appointed by wealth and rank. This was the Fourth Estate, what today we call the Media, *vox populi*, the voice of the people, something that simply did not exist before the mid-1580s. Before this, plays and books were dependent on wealthy patrons to get produced.

Following the Edwardine Reformation when printing took off, roughly 90 percent of everything published were sermons or translations of religious tracts, with five percent how-to books or other works of self-improvement. But with the popularity of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine* on the public stage and of Robert Greene's romances in the bookstalls in Paul's churchyard, a wealthy patron was no longer necessary—for these paid for themselves. Now theater owners and publishers could produce works based purely on their appeal to the public. From this point on, writers began to write what they believed readers would *want to read*, playwrights and actors what they thought audiences would *want to see*, rather than what some authority thought they *ought* to read or see.

I can hardly make this emphatic enough. This development, the birth of the commercial Stage and Press, was a revolution. It was the *true beginning of democracy*, not just in theory, but in action. And it was, relatively speaking, a bloodless revolution, which may be the reason why it hasn't yet been seen in its true light.

But why did it occur at this particular moment in time?

A hunger for entertainment

For centuries throughout the Middle Ages the Church filled all the entertainment needs of the public at large. Almost every week some Saint's Day provided an excuse for a feast, while at least once per season there would be a full blown festival lasting for several days, offering an excuse to dress up, feast, drink to excess, play games, dance and make elaborate processions to the local parish church. Vagabond minstrels and troupes of itinerant players made use of these to pass the hat. This continual procession of events gave the common folk something to look forward to throughout the days and weeks of the year. With the Reformation, most of this came to an end. Such carryings-on were seen by the reformers as papistic pandering to pagan disorder. Yule logs were banned—may poles burnt.

For centuries certain inns in London and the larger towns had doubled as theatres when acting companies came to town. With the loss of the Church calendar, people began to spend more time and more money in the theater inns, to the point where eager business

entrepreneurs like James Burbage and his sons thought a building dedicated solely to plays might be able to support itself. The Burbages at the Globe and Philip Henslowe at the Rose, just barely managed to do this until the mid-80s when two plays in particular, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine*, showed that with the right play and the right performers, significant profits could be made from an audience enthusiastic enough to pay its penny, not once, not twice, but every single time the play was performed. *Tamburlaine* was the *Star Wars* of its time, the first superhit in English history.

As for the commercial press, the same scenario held, though on a considerably smaller scale, since pamphlet sales were limited to the reading public, which at that time was at best 20 percent of the adult population. (Actually a more likely figure for the beginning of this period would probably be 10 percent.) And while a pamphlet might reach 500 readers, a play could reach thousands. According to Thomas Nashe, by 1592, 10,000 people had seen an early version of *Henry the Fourth*, a figure backed by modern theater historians.

Later historians may have missed the significance of this revolution, but the evidence is clear that the Crown, the City and the Church did not. Throughout this period they made continuous and frantic efforts either to stop the growth of the commercial theaters or to control them. But as some poet put it, “stop running water and it will rage”—once a popular revolution has been launched there’s no stopping it.

The first professional writers and actors

By the end of the 1590s, the booming commercial theater and press began to produce a small corps of professional writers. By *professional* we mean that they could live, or at least hope to live, on the proceeds of their writing—something that is difficult at any time, but was, until then, so impossible that no one bothered to try. Point being, there simply were no commercial writers at the beginning of this revolution. There were scribes who made their living acting as secretaries to the illiterate, but this trade was not an art and no genuine writers emerged from it. Ultimately it would be from the small community of university-trained secretaries and tutors to the well-to-do that capable professional writers would emerge, but this would not occur until the very end of the 90s.

As for the actors, until the 1580s most performers had to have a trade to keep them going between holidays. Once the stage went commercial, and there was work year-round, talented actors simply gave up their “day jobs” as successful actors do today. But the situation was different for the writers who had to provide the material that actors and theater directors must rely on. Until the professional writers began to appear in the early 17th century—Jonson, Chapman, Daniel, Drayton, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher—who was doing the writing on which the actors and theater owners and audiences relied for their entertainment? Truth to tell, we really don’t know.

In fact, the so-called Shakespeare mystery is only part of a much larger mystery. Who wrote all these early plays and pamphlets? Who kick-started the revolution we call the English literary Renaissance? If we listen to Steven May, whose focus is the Courtier poets, it’s all due to Philip Sidney. If we go solely by the records, it’s all due to

Christopher Marlowe. By the time the records have Shakespeare entering the scene, it was already well underway. There must have been several hundred plays written by the beginning of the nineties for the various boy companies, the Queen's Men and the Lord Strange's Men, but apart from the occasional one-timer like Udall or Wilson, Sackville or Norton, for all of these we have authors for no more than 17 plays and for these, only four authors: 4 plays from Christopher Marlowe, 9 from John Lyly, one from Thomas Kyd, and 3 from Robert Greene—and two of these, Kyd and Greene, are no more than conjectures. Since pamphlets required names on the title page, we do have a few of these, but for genuinely literary pamphlets, we have only two, Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe.

Groups or coteries

First: Marlowe did not create this revolution alone, nor did Shakespeare. No lasting revolution was ever engineered by a single individual, or even by two. Revolutions are always created by groups. They usually center around an inspiring leader, but it requires a group to accomplish any set of common goals or to create an accepted standard, one that lasts. Alternately, great artists, who are almost always revolutionaries in more ways than one, do not create out of a vacuum. Invariably they have colleagues and rivals, patrons and imitators, who, if not equal in genius, are good enough to stimulate them to reach higher. That this is true takes only the most cursory glance at the history of art.

Second: nothing is so powerful in stimulating human action as competition, whether for food, power, or recognition, even if the recognition comes only from a handful of others of like mind. I could give dozens of examples of this if I had the time, but I leave it to you to consider based on your own experience and reading.

Third: writers and performers need audiences. And no artist finds a better, more stimulating, audience than that provided by his or her peers. That we see almost no evidence of any documented connection between the artists who stand out from this period: Shakespeare, Philip and Mary Sidney, Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh, and Marlowe, not to mention Nashe, Greene, Jonson, Peele, Kyd, etc., does not mean, as the academics seem so strangely willing to accept, that they had no connection with each other. Of course they did. Birds of a feather flock together. Do we *need* evidence for this? Think of Bob Dylan tracking down Woody Guthrie. Think of the Beat Poets seeking each other from East Coast to West Coast and back again, thousands of miles of road trips. And these Elizabethan writers lived within miles, sometimes yards of each other, in a tight-knit, unchanging community. Do we need an affidavit?

Actually the fact that there is no evidence of what common sense demands should tell us something else: namely that the connection was *hidden*—that concern with each other or time spent together was not, for whatever reason, something to spread about or refer to in print, at least not openly. Nashe is the only one who refers frequently and openly to other writers (but who was Nashe?). Nor was this a “conspiracy,” as least not as the Stratfordians term it. Is it a conspiracy when former lovers who now are married to other partners have lunch together in some out of the way bistro, and then simply don't tell

anyone about it? Or when politicians from opposing parties get together in private to discuss a sensitive issue and neglect to inform the newspapers? Very little of what was done and said in those days wound up in the records if the letters that survive with the legend “burn this” inscribed at the bottom are any indication.

There’s no reason why writers who were members of different and sometimes opposing coteries would leave any record of their connections with each other, or why those who worked for them would reveal relationships that their employers preferred to remain hidden. Not only was there no yellow journalism in those days, there was no journalism, period. At least not what we call journalism today.

Point being, there was not just one fox in this game of Hide and Go Seek, but several. Why? Because *this was a revolution* and the stakes couldn’t have been higher. Were they aware that they were creating a revolution? No doubt, to some extent, they were, although if this was a conspiracy it was the kind that kids create to fool adults into allowing them to play forbidden games. What they were certainly aware of was that as soon as the fox was caught the game would be over.

Academics tend to be a serious lot. What they’ve most failed to understand about this literary phenomenon is its source in a common tradition of the period, one that’s been lost in our time, the tradition of communal merry-making.

Holidays: a time apart

To banish his fears of the horrors of an adult reality, Hamlet strives to return in his mind to a childhood world of play. In the effort to understand his creator, one of the prime factors that has been missed by the so-called experts is this quality of *playfulness*, this quality of—to use an old English term—“merry-making.” In English we call dramas “plays.” Sixteenth-century audiences called actors “players,” playwrights were called “play-makers,” theaters were called “play-houses,” all terms that reflect the source of modern theater in the games and rituals of holiday “merry-making.”

Merry-making was the English term for the age-old response of the human animal to the changes in the seasons. At particular moments during the year, the English of all classes and callings donned costumes and masks and stepped out of their humdrum workaday world into a holiday time of fantasy ritual, a time that was felt to lie outside of ordinary time. These moments occurred most significantly on May Day, on Midsummer Night’s Eve, and on several occasions during the winter holidays from November 30th, All Hallows’ Eve, to January 6th, Twelfth Night, then to Shrovetide in early February, also known as Fat Tuesday or, on the Continent, Carneval, the last big blowout before the beginning of Lent.

But, though they were loosely connected to Christian holidays, these festivals were not Christian in origin. They had grown over the centuries out of pagan festivals, which themselves had grown during even earlier ages out of deadly serious tribal rituals—Stone Age rituals whose original purposes were long forgotten by the Elizabethan era.

Shakespeare's early plays reflect their origins in these rituals. Authorship scholars are proving that the sexual greenwood adventures of May Day, as reflected in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the traditional wedding chivaree, as in *Taming of the Shrew*, were, in fact, written for two such occasions.

The teasing and tormenting of authorities or obnoxious neighbors through satires, burning of effigies, breaking of windows, chanting of naughty jingles, which, stimulated by a hearty consumption of ale could lead to violence and the destruction of property, were refined by Shakespeare into the vicarious tormenting of stage characters like Malvolio and Falstaff. Thus were the crude animal energies that were so feared by the reformers sublimated into a genteel theater event. And so welcome to the modern age.

In other words, for the first decade of this revolution, the 1580s, this uprush of expression through plays and pamphlets was done, most of it, in the age-old holiday spirit of merrymaking, which, bursting through the bondage of Calvinist reform, was spilling indiscriminately over those ancient time boundaries that had kept it contained within the traditional holiday periods, much to the horror of the very Church that had created the problem.

These folks whose identities we are tracking did what they did in a spirit of merry-making, of game-playing. Brilliant minds met to create the exhilaration of hilarity by which the tensions and fears of the regime could be released through laughter, first among themselves at Court gatherings, then spreading to the public theaters and bookstalls. That we can still hear that laughter echoing in the scenes with Falstaff, Nym and Pistol, with Hal and Poins teasing Francis the drawer, is due to Shakespeare's genius. And when Sir Toby confronts Malvolio with the ringing riposte: "dost think because thou art virtuous there will be no more cakes and ale?" we are hearing Shakespeare confront the rising tide of humorless puritans that half a century later would shut down his brilliant, funny, witty theater, leaving it cold and shuttered for two long decades. He must have seen what was coming when he gave Malvolio the last word: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!"

These young Court writers were not out to change the world, not at first. Like kids in school, they were just out to have a good time and were not about to let anyone stop them—a conspiracy of gifted mischief-makers out to torment the self-righteous, a conspiracy among the real Marias, Sir Tobys, Fabians and Festes.

So who were they?

None of them are unknown to us. All are known to us today, at least for their reputations if not for their actual works. Most of them were courtiers. Courtiers were the only people in Elizabethan society with the leisure to play such games, games that, like cards, dice, dancing and singing madrigals, could only be played by a group, and in this case, only by persons with expensive educations. They were also the only ones with an awareness of what was being done by their counterparts at the Italian courts, by Ariosto, Machiavelli, and Tasso.

How did they do it? By using proxies, like William Shakspere of Stratford.

Why did they do it? Because it was fun. Because it made use of their talents, talents that had no other outlet at the time. Because their counterparts in France and Italy were doing it. Because with it they could exercise their age-old prerogative to, as Jaques put it, “Cleanse the foul body of the infected world” with ridicule and laughter. And chiefly because they had nothing better to do. At least, this was how it began.

Then who was a proxy and who was a real writer?

We can tell the real writers because each has a genuine writer’s biography, their works match their life experiences insofar as we know something about them, and because we know them today, not (just) for their works, but also by the fact that they were acknowledged by their own communities as talented writers. Basically, we can distinguish the real writers from their proxies because the record shows only that the proxies lived and died; they give no evidence of a writer’s life; their purported works do not match what the records suggest about their life experience; and, unlike the writers they “shadowed,” they were men for whom a small amount of money would have meant a great deal.

There were five major figures in this revolution that came from the Court community: Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, his “cousin german,” Francis Bacon (we don’t call him Sir because he wasn’t yet a knight during this early revolutionary period), Philip Sidney (for most of this period, Philip was not a knight yet either), Philip’s sister Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (she *was* a countess during this period), and Sir Walter Raleigh. There was also a commoner who belongs in the top category of major forces in this revolution—Christopher Marlowe, the shoemaker’s son from Canterbury.

Who were the proxies then, the men who lent or sold the use of their names so the Court writers could publish anonymously?

The men who, I believe, rented their names to the Court writers for cash or other forms of remuneration were (in rough chronological order): Richard Edwards, Edmund Spenser, George Pettie, John Lyly, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Watson, William Shakspere, and John Webster. There may be others, but of these we can be fairly certain, for all of them show similar problems with their biographies. In addition, there were several genuine writers who, for reasons of friendship or fealty, lent their names for one or two publications: among these were: George Gascoigne, Barnabe Riche, and Thomas Lodge.

Much is yet to be puzzled out, much reading of early works is left to do, many word studies created that may now give us some real results since we have better questions to propose, much time spent in thought, yet I believe that it’s fair to state that the most important hidden Court writer was responsible for, in chronological order: the two plays by George Gascoigne that put his name in the record books, the two books of George

Pettie, the two novels of John Lyly, all but one or two of the works of Robert Greene, including his plays, poems and pamphlets, and all the works of Shakespeare—apart from some minimal additions by later editors and additions to the weaker plays by later playwrights.

I believe that the second most important of these hidden writers is responsible for most of the works of Edmund Spenser, the plays of John Lyly, and everything by Thomas Nashe. The third hidden Court writer is responsible for the plays and other works of John Webster and perhaps of other works as well. That they are grouped this way can be shown, I believe, first, by noting similarities of approach, basic habits of expression, and unchanging personal concerns that transcend all efforts to alter style and genre. Second: a close attention to dates. For instance, it is of utmost significance that the appearance of Shakespeare follows so closely on the demise of Robert Greene. And third: the way in which, for each of these three, these works reflect the events and issues of their personal lives.

Finally, the point must be made, that while three of these five seminal writers published under other names than their own, the works of two were published under their own names. Philip Sidney himself wrote everything—with a few minor exceptions—that was published under his name, while Marlowe's works, the plays at least, are all his own (but not the posthumously published poems and translations). It should also be noted that both Sidney and Marlowe died young, well before they were published, while the three who published under proxies all lived fairly long lives and published long before they died.

Where Raleigh fits into this picture is hard to tell at this point. Perhaps the few poems that we can be certain are his, plus his lively reports on naval events and the history of the world that he wrote towards the end of his life, are, in fact, all he ever wrote. Hopefully his contributions will become more clear as we investigate his compatriots. He deserves far more attention in this regard than he's been given by the history of literature, due perhaps to his place in mainstream history: the story of England's rise to power through command of the seas and, not least, the abysmal shame of his destruction by King James.

There may even be another writer that we haven't yet identified that will rise to claim some peripheral works, but these are the main players, the authors of most of the important works of this era, works of the imagination. Others there were without doubt, with possibly equal talent, who chose, for reasons that reflect the reasons these three hid their identities, not to develop it in later life. But the six writers who kick-started the English literary Renaissance had a passion for writing that could not be silenced, even for their own good. It is this passion, plus talent, that leads to greatness.

Are there ways to check these attributions? I don't have enough time tonight to present the full case, and since I don't want to make too many assertions without backing them up, I don't want to get any more explicit than I have already. Some of this I've published in pamphlets. The rest will have to wait for the time to put it into book form. Tonight I'll share just this one tidbit: for centuries scholars have managed to ignore the obvious clues that the death of Robert Greene was a joke. Of these clues, the most glaring is that he

was said to have died of an overdose of “pickle-herring.” Now “Pickle-herring” at that time was a traditional name for a clown or a comedian, similar to “Harlequin” or “Punch.” So the reader is being told, of course, that Greene’s “death” was due to an overdose of *foolery*. You would think that this would alert the scholars to the game-playing nature of Robert Greene, and the fictional nature of his death, but so far as I know, for over four hundred years it has failed to alert a single one.

What then do I leave you with here tonight? First, that the English literary Renaissance was launched by, not one, not two, nor by twelve or fifteen, but by six individuals, five courtiers and one commoner, five men and one woman, and that they knew each other, inspired each other, and through the desire to impress each other and outdo each other, were stimulated to reach for the heights. Second, that a number of important and not so important works attributed to other writers are, in fact, the work of three members of this group. Third, that their impulse to write and publish grew, at least at the beginning, out of a game-playing spirit of holiday merry-making, and that the hiding of their identities grew out of the same tradition, that of holiday mumming and disguising. Fourth, a subject that there was no time for tonight, that the game turned deadly roughly halfway through this period with the assassination or transportation of Marlowe, is a factor that deserves a lecture all its own. From that point on the mumming became serious and the disguising a necessity.

Finally, we will not know the truth about Shakespeare until we unravel the truth about all the writers of this period, both those who did the writing, and those who took, or have been given, the credit for it. This is the story of, not just one individual, however great that one may be, but a group. It’s a darned good story, and well worth the telling.

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