



William Fortyhands: Disintegration and Reinvention of the Shakespeare Canon

Samuel Crowell

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Who wrote the plays and poems attributed to William Shakespeare? This simple yet provocative question has long bedeviled Shakespearean studies. According to traditional scholars, the canonical texts can only trace to the singular genius of a glover's son from the small town of Stratford-on-Avon. But dissident voices have disrupted this consensus for more than 150 years, and while skeptics who engage the "authorship question" have often been dismissed as marginal cranks or elitists (or, in contemporary parlance, as "deniers"), their ranks have included such luminaries as Mark Twain, Henry James, and Sigmund Freud—as well as such acclaimed Shakespearean actors as Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance.

The counterweight to the claim that "Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare" typically hinges on the promotion of a single alternate candidate. Popular contenders have included Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and more recently, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. In *William Fortyhands*, Samuel Crowell argues that this is the wrong way to approach the problem. The real problem, according to Crowell, rests in our fundamental perspective on the First Folio—the inaugural collection of Shakespeare published seven years after his death. Drawing on the history of Shakespearean scholarship, literary criticism, philosophy, and even science fiction, *William Fortyhands* seeks to show not only how our understanding of Shakespeare has been distorted, but how analytical tendencies have allowed the plays to be parceled out to other authors, only to find Shakespeare's hand, even today, throughout Elizabethan literature.

William Fortyhands is also a memorial—without a tomb—for Shakespeare's many gifted and highly educated peers, whose contributions have been scanted in favor of simplistic narratives pitting the Bard of Avon against some single rival claimant. Among those profiled are the prolific bohemian Robert Greene, the brilliant satirist Thomas Nashe, the learned sailor and doctor Thomas Lodge, the outrageous and supremely poetic Christopher Marlowe, the whimsical and humane Thomas Dekker, the encyclopedic Michael Drayton, and the earnest historian Samuel Daniel. *William Fortyhands* throws a light on the creative efflorescence that was Elizabeth's London—but from which only one name has emerged.

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