Forgery on forgery

JAMES SHAPIRO

Published: 26 March 2010

Whether you get your facts from the Dictionary of National Biography or Wikipedia, the earliest documented claim that somebody other than William Shakespeare wrote the works long attributed to him dates back to 1785, when James Wilmot, an Oxford-trained scholar who lived a few miles outside Stratford-upon-Avon, began searching locally for Shakespeare's books, papers, or any indication that he had been an author - and came up empty-handed. Wilmot gradually came to the conclusion that someone else, most likely Sir Francis Bacon, had written the plays. Wilmot never published what he learnt, and near the end of his life burned all his papers. But before he died he spoke with a fellow researcher, a Quaker from Ipswich named James Corton Cowell, who later shared these findings with members of the Ipswich Philosophic Society. Cowell did so in a pair of lectures delivered in 1805 that survive in a manuscript (now housed in the Durning-Lawrence Library at the University of London’s Senate House), in which he confesses to being “a renegade” to the Shakespearean “faith”. Cowell was converted by Wilmot’s argument that “there is nothing in the writings of Shakespeare that does not argue the long and early training of the schoolman, the traveller, and the associate of the great and learned. Yet there is nothing in the known life of Shakespeare that shows he had any one of these qualities”. Wilmot is credited with being the first to argue, as far back as the late eighteenth century, for an unbridgeable rift between the facts of Shakespeare’s life and what the plays and poems reveal about their author’s education and experience.

Cowell’s lectures remained unknown until 1932, when Allardyce Nicoll announced their discovery in these pages (“The First Baconian”, TLS, February 25, 1932). Nicoll was, at the time, Professor of English Language and Literature at East London College, University of London, and a leading authority on English drama (he would later serve as founding director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon). Whether the lectures were brought to his attention at that time or he came across them in the course of his own research is unknown.

What Nicoll describes as a “thin quarto volume in manuscript” was one of the jewels of a great collection of materials touching on the life and works of Francis Bacon, assembled at considerable expense by Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence, and, after his death in 1914, by his widow, Edith Jane Durning Smith, who shared his keen interest in the authorship controversy. At her death in 1929, the collection was bequeathed to the University of London, and by 1931 the transfer of materials was complete.

Before announcing his discovery the following year, Nicoll investigated the backgrounds of both Wilmot and Cowell. Considerably more was known about Wilmot, since his niece, Olivia Wilmot Serres, had published his biography six years after his death: The Life of the Author of the Letters of Junius, the Rev. James Wilmot (1813). Serres’s account, while not mentioning her uncle’s meeting with Cowell or his Shakespeare research, nonetheless confirmed that Wilmot was a serious man of letters, had lived near Stratford, was an admirer of Francis Bacon, and had indeed burned his papers. Nicoll was less successful in tracing James Corton Cowell, concluding that he “seems to have been a Quaker” on the grounds that “he was in all probability closely related to the well-known Orientalist E. B. Cowell, who was born at Ipswich in 1828”. Others,
including Samuel Schoenbaum (author of the authoritative Shakespeare’s Lives), have examined the manuscript but have failed to add anything to Nicoll’s account.

All the evidence I had uncovered while researching a book on the authorship question made it hard to imagine how anyone before the 1840s could argue that Shakespeare did not write the plays - which couldn’t easily be reconciled with what James Wilmot reportedly wrote in 1785 or James Cowell recorded in 1805. Aware of this uncomfortable fact, I held off until the very end of my research from consulting the Cowell manuscript, which, it turned out, made for gripping reading - how Cowell began as a confirmed Shakespeareonian, how his fortuitous encounter with Wilmot changed all that, how Wilmot anticipated Sidney Lee’s topical reading of Love’s Labour’s Lost (first published in Gentleman’s Magazine in 1880) by over a century, and perhaps most fascinating of all, how Wilmot uncovered stories of “odd characters living at or near Stratford on the Avon with whom Shakespeare must have been familiar”, including “a certain man of extreme ugliness and tallness who blackmailed the farmers under threat of bewitching their cattle”, as well as “a legend of showers of cakes at Shrovetide with stories of men who were rendered cripples by the falling of these cakes”. I thought it a shame that Cowell had not taken even better notes.

Then I came upon the following words: “it is strange that Shakespeare whose best years had been spent in a profitable and literary vocation should return to an obscure village, offering no intellectual allurement and take up the very unromantic business of a money lender and dealer in malt”. The sentence seemed innocuous enough; scholars and sceptics alike have often drawn attention to these well-known facts about Shakespeare’s business dealings. But having long focused more on when than on what people thought what they did about Shakespeare, I remembered that these details were unknown in 1785, or even in 1805. Records showing that Shakespeare’s household stockpiled grain in order to produce malt were not discovered until the early 1840s (and first published in 1844 by John Payne Collier). And it was not until 1806 that the Stratford antiquarian R. B. Wheler made public the first of what would turn out to be several documents indicating that Shakespeare had engaged in moneylending (in this case, how in 1609 he had a Stratford neighbour named John Addenbrooke arrested for failing to repay a small sum). While an undelivered letter in which another neighbour, Richard Quiney, asks Shakespeare for a loan had been discovered in the late eighteenth century, Edmond Malone, who found it, chose not to announce or share his discovery and the letter remained unpublished until 1821. So Shakespeare’s grain-hoarding and moneylending didn’t become biographical commonplaces until the Victorian era.

The word “unromantic” in the same sentence should have tipped me off; though there was a recorded instance of its use before 1800, it was not yet in currency at the time Cowell was supposedly writing. Whoever wrote these lectures purporting to be from 1805 had slipped up. I was looking at a forgery, and an unusually clever one at that, which on further examination almost certainly dated from the early decades of the twentieth century. That meant that the forger was probably still alive - and had enjoyed a satisfied laugh at the expense of the gulled professor, Allardyce Nicoll. The forger had brazenly left other hints, not least of all the wish attributed to Cowell that “my material may be used by others regardless whence it came for it matters little who made the axe so that it cut”. And there were a few other false notes, including one pointed out by a letterwriter (the wonderfully named William Jaggard) responding to Nicoll’s article in the TLS: that Cowell had got his Warwickshire geography wrong.

The forger must have hoped that Cowell’s claim that he “laboured under the great disadvantage of having no antiquarian” with whom to consult in Stratford-upon-Avon would also pass without closer scrutiny, since Shakespeare scholars should have known that townsfolk would immediately have steered Cowell to the records office where he would have met the well-known R. B. Wheler, a year away from publishing his great finds about Shakespeare’s life. The forger also knew that investigators would look into the Ipswich Philosphic Society and discover that there indeed had been one - but not look closely enough to learn that it was not in existence in 1805. The forger must have also prayed that whoever read Serres’s biography in search of corroborative evidence would not read it closely enough to note that she describes Wilmot as having been “deprived of his sight seven years before his death” in 1807 - which would render impossible Cowell’s account of the time they spent together during these years.
It was worth the risk, for the real and sinister genius of steering researchers to Serres was that she herself was a forger and fantasist who wrote her uncle’s biography in order to claim that he was the unacknowledged author of the pseudonymous Letters of Junius (she also had to argue that Wilmot suppressed almost all traces of his authorship, which explains the story of how he came to burn his books and papers). One authorship controversy begat another as the fictional Cowell asks the members of a non-existent Ipswich Philosophic Society to swear never to reveal Wilmot’s identity (just like the oath that must have been exacted 200 years earlier of those in the know about the true authorship of Shakespeare’s plays).

Serres was a talented painter and poet (her first book of verse was called Flights of Fancy), who also “wrote learnedly on disguised handwriting” - knowledge that came in handy when she forged documents to support her claim that her uncle was Junius. She was adept enough at Life-writing to keep improving on her own life story. Her claims grew in boldness and imagination until she ultimately decided that, like a Shakespearean heroine, she was descended from royalty. She tried out a couple of stories, imagining that she was, first, the illegitimate daughter of King George III’s brother, the Duke of Cumberland (and, after the king’s death, Cumberland’s legitimate daughter), then the daughter of James Wilmot, who, she now argued, had secretly married a Polish princess.

Serres was soon claiming that she was a member of England’s ruling family, one cheated out of her rightful legacy, and she assumed the title of Princess Olive of Cumberland and dressed servants in her livery. People didn’t know what to believe. The evidence she produced seemed impeccable. Her claims were plausible. Bram Stoker, the author of Dracula, was like many others drawn to her story and writes of how her claims were supported by forged documents of so clever a conceit and such excellent workmanship, that they misled all who investigated them, until they came within the purview of the great lawyers of the day whose knowledge, logical power, skill and determination were arrayed against her.

Sir Robert Peel would denounce Serres in Parliament as a forger and fabricator. Her daughter Lavinia took up the cause after her death and matters eventually came to trial - for a good deal was at stake in the claim to be of royal descent and there was no other way to resolve the case. The attorney general argued that the stories of “both the Polish Princess and the charming daughter were pure myths; no such person ever existed - they were as entirely creatures of the imagination as Shakespeare’s Ferdinand and Miranda”. Fittingly, Olivia Serres was herself the pattern of a Shakespeare claimant: a writer and aristocrat mistaken for someone of humbler origins, whose true identity deserved to be acknowledged.

I have not been able to discover who forged the Cowell manuscript; that mystery will have to be solved by others. What is increasingly clear is the lengths to which he or she (or perhaps they) went to maintain the deception, including acquiring old paper on which to write Cowell’s lectures. Peter Bower, an expert on paper history analysis, has examined the manuscript and was able to identify the paper as, in his words, “a handmade off-white wove drawing cartridge, typical of a type made by Robert Edmeads & John Pine at two mills, Great Ivy Mill and Little Ivy Mill, in the Loose Valley near Maidstone, Kent”. According to Bower, this kind of paper first appeared in the mid-1790s, and the pages on which the Cowell lectures appear were probably made not long after that (the absence of watermarks precludes more precise dating). But Bower also noted that this was drawing paper, not writing paper, and that he knew of no instances where someone would use paper of this type and thickness for writing out a long lecture. So while it was possible to find old paper, the forger must have hoped that nobody, a century or so later, would have been able to tell that it was the wrong sort of paper. Ink and handwriting analysis, which have not yet been conducted, may well cast additional light on the forgery. Dr Karen Attar, Rare Books Librarian at Senate House Library and an expert on the Durning-Lawrence collection, will soon publish an edited text of the Cowell lectures, bringing the forgery to wider notice and perhaps enabling further insight into its composition. The forger’s motives may never be known, though it is worth hazarding a guess or two. Greed perhaps figured, for there is an irregular record of payment for the manuscript of the not inconsiderable sum of £8 8s - though this document may have been planted and we simply don’t as yet know when or how the Cowell manuscript became part of the Durning-Lawrence collection. The record of payment further notes that “Lady Durning-Lawrence holds the Receipts”, though no such receipts are to be found in the collection.

Given how much time and care went into the forgery, a far likelier motive was the desire on the part of a Baconian to stave
off the challenge posed by supporters of the Earl of Oxford, who by the late 1920s threatened to surpass Bacon as the more likely “author” of Shakespeare’s works, if in fact he had not done so already. A final motive was that it backdated and reassigned the “discovery” of Francis Bacon’s authorship from Delia Bacon, that “mad” American woman (who published her findings in The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere Unfolded in 1857), to a true-born Englishman, a quiet retiring man of letters, an Oxford-educated rector from the heart of England. Wilmot also stood as a surrogate for the actual author of Shakespeare’s plays: a well-educated man believed to have written pseudonymously, who refused to claim credit for what he wrote and nearly denied posterity knowledge of the truth.

All of the major elements of the Shakespeare authorship controversy come together in the tangled story of Wilmot, Cowell, Serres and the nameless forger: fabricated documents, embellished lives, calls for trials, false claimants, concealed identity, pseudonymous authorship, contested evidence, and bald-faced deception. I have no doubt that James Wilmot’s entry in the DNB will quickly be emended; but with so much invested in extending the history of recorded doubts about Shakespeare’s authorship, I am less confident that those consulting Wikipedia will see much altered in the many entries on that site devoted to the fantasy that Shakespeare did not write the plays.
Forgery is a white-collar crime that generally refers to the false making or material alteration of a legal instrument with the specific intent to defraud anyone (other than themselves). Tampering with a certain legal instrument may be forbidden by law in some jurisdictions but such an offense is not related to forgery unless the tampered legal instrument was actually used in the course of the crime to defraud another person or entity. Copies, studio replicas, and reproductions are not considered Recorded since 1574; from the verb to forge, from Middle English forgen, via Anglo-Norman forger, from Old French forgier, from Latin fabricari (â€œto frame, construct, fabricateâ€œ), itself from fabrica (â€œworkshop; constructionâ€œ), from faber (â€œworkman, smithâ€œ). (Received Pronunciation) IPA(key): /ˈfÉ“dʒəɹ.ɪ/. (US) IPA(key): /ˈfÉ“dʒəɹ.ɪ/. forgery (countable and uncountable, plural forgeries). The act of forging metal into shape. the forgery of horseshoes. â€“The basis of this action was forgery, fraud and perjury on the part of IAC.â€™ â€“The application to strike out was based on the admitted acts of forgery by Nigel of documents later produced on disclosure in the proceedings.â€™ â€“When women are convicted it is more likely to be for offences involving theft and handling stolen goods, fraud, and forgery.â€™ â€“The second basis upon which the documents were rejected was that document forgery in Albania was endemic, if I may term it that way.â€™