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SHAKESPEARE: ACTOR. PLAYWRIGHT. SOCIAL CLIMBER.

Shakespeare biography has long circled a set of tantalizing mysteries: Was he Protestant or secretly Catholic? Gay or straight? Loving toward his wife, or coldly dismissive?

By Jennifer Schuessler, June 29, 2016, The New York Times, Online Edition

That the man left no surviving letters or autobiographical testimony has hardly helped, ensuring that accounts of his life have often relied on “one halfpenny worth of fact to an intolerable deal of supposition,” as the scholar C. W. Scott-Giles once lamented.

Only a few scraps of new material relating to Shakespeare in his lifetime have surfaced over the past century. But now, a researcher has uncovered nearly a dozen previously unknown records [Ed. — An extensive listing of these documents and analysis thereof may be found at <http://shakespearedocumented.org/highlights/recent-discovery>] that shed clearer light on another much-discussed side of the man: the social climber.

The documents, discovered by Heather Wolfe, the curator of manuscripts at the Folger Shakespeare Library in

Washington, relate to a coat of arms that was granted to Shakespeare's father in 1596, attesting to his and his son's status as gentlemen.

Considered with previously known records, Ms. Wolfe argues, the documents suggest both how deeply invested Shakespeare was in gaining that recognition — a rarity for a man from the theater — and how directly he may have been drawn into colorful bureaucratic infighting that threatened to strip it away.

The new evidence “really helps

Bottom right corner, a recently discovered, if tattered, depiction of the Shakespeare coat of arms. Credit Via the New England Historic Genealogical Society

us get a little bit closer to the man himself,” Ms. Wolfe said. “It shows him shaping himself and building his reputation in a very intentional way.”

James Shapiro, a Shakespeare scholar at Columbia University who has seen Ms. Wolfe's research, said her dis-

coveries help illuminate what mattered to Shakespeare. “It's all about trying to figure out, what was he like?” Mr. Shapiro said. “Anytime we can substitute something solid for speculation, that's significant.”



From left, the Shakespeare coat of arms from about 1600, and an arms from around 1700. Credit From left: via the College of Arms; via the Folger Shakespeare Library

The new documents, Mr. Shapiro added, also come with a nice bonus: they clearly refute skeptics who continue to argue — to the deep exasperation of most scholars — that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was not actually the author of the works attributed to him.

“It's always been clear that Shakespeare of Stratford and ‘Shakespeare the player’ were one and the same,” Mr. Shapiro said. “But if you hold the documents Heather has discovered together, that is the smoking gun.”

Ms. Wolfe's discoveries began in the archives of the College of Arms in London, home to 10 heralds who are still charged with researching and granting coats of arms — arcane territory where many literary scholars might fear to tread.

“Looking through the minutiae of the College of Arms is, even for Shakespeare scholars, almost unbearable,” Mr. Shapiro said. “We really owe Heather a debt of gratitude for wading in.”

Ms. Wolfe said she began wondering if there wasn't fresh material to find there when she looked through a book edited by Nigel Ramsay, a historian at University College London, with whom she curated an exhibition on heraldry at the Folger in 2014. On one page, she was startled by something she had never seen before: a sketch of the arms with the words “Shakespeare the player,” or actor, dated to around 1600.

A similar image with the same text — a copy dating from around 1700 — has long been known to Shakespeare scholars (as well as to authorship skeptics, who generally

dismiss as unreliable any evidence dated after 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death). But this earlier one, from the College of Arms, seemed to have gone unremarked on.

Ms. Wolfe started digging there and in other archives, and so far has gathered a dozen unknown or forgotten depictions of the arms in heraldic reference works called alphabets and ordinaries. "I just started finding them everywhere," she said.

Scholars have long known that Shakespeare's father, John, a businessman and justice of the peace in Stratford, had first made inquiries about a coat of arms around 1575. They have speculated that it was William who renewed the effort in 1596, on his father's behalf.

The new depictions Ms. Wolfe has gathered are all from the 17th century. More than half associate the arms with "Shakespeare the player," or with William, not John.

This material not only proves "that Shakespeare was Shakespeare," as Ms. Wolfe wryly put it. It also, she argues, underlines the degree to which contemporaries saw the coat of arms as, in effect, being for William.

"It makes it abundantly clear that while Shakespeare was obtaining the arms on behalf of his father, it was really for his own status," she said.

Mr. Shapiro said he agreed. "All evidence suggests this was not about the father," he said, "but about how Shakespeare wanted to be seen."

Alan H. Nelson, a retired professor at University of California, Berkeley, who has contributed to Shakespeare Documented, an online project curated by Ms. Wolfe, said he also found her case persuasive.

The new material, he added, "helps to confirm everything we know about the arc of Shakespeare's career and the way he understood himself in the context of his society," he said.

But not all of Shakespeare's contemporaries took his newly minted status at face value. Ben Jonson mocked his arms in his 1598 play "Every Man Out of His Humour," in which a country bumpkin is advised to purchase arms with the motto "Not without mustard," a dig at Shakespeare's motto "Not without right." (Shakespeare's arms were yellow.)

A more threatening

attack came in 1602 from Ralph Brooke, a herald in the College of Arms who had long been at war with his archrival, William Dethick, who held the title Garter King of Arms. (At one point, Brooke reportedly warned Dethick, himself a notoriously violent man, that the Star Chamber would punish him by cutting off his ears.)

That year, Brooke, drew up for submission to the queen a list of 23 "mean persons" who had wrongfully been granted arms by Dethick, including "Shakespeare the player," as Brooke put it disparagingly. (Shakespeare was not the only one given a lowly job description: a man derided by Brooke as a mere "bookbinder," Ms. Wolfe noted, was actually master of the Stationers' Company, the prestigious body that regulated the publishing industry.)

Among Dethick's records, Ms. Wolfe found letters from outraged people whose arms had come under attack, as well as notes indicating that some had withdrawn their claims.

While no record of Shakespeare's response survives, Ms. Wolfe argues that the others' intense reactions suggest that he must have known about the controversy, and likely took action to defend his status.

Some whose letters survive lived outside London, she noted. "They couldn't just approach Dethick, as Shakespeare could have."

Shakespeare may have held onto his arms, but the glory didn't last. His son, Hamnet, had died in 1596. His last direct descendant, a granddaughter named Elizabeth Barnard, died in 1670.

Ms. Wolfe said that a colleague at the Folger recently pointed out something she has not seen any scholar discuss: the wax seal on Elizabeth's last will shows a fragment of the Shakespeare arms, just barely visible.

"She's dying, she's the last in the direct line, and the arms have faded," Ms. Wolfe said. "It just seems touchingly symbolic."

[Ed. – The article itself has numerous additional links that may be of further interest to readers. It may be seen here - <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/theater/shakespeare-coat-of-arms.html>]



Heather Wolfe, of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, who has discovered new documents relating to the playwright's life. Credit Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times



A manuscript at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington that shows Shakespeare's coat of arms. Credit Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times