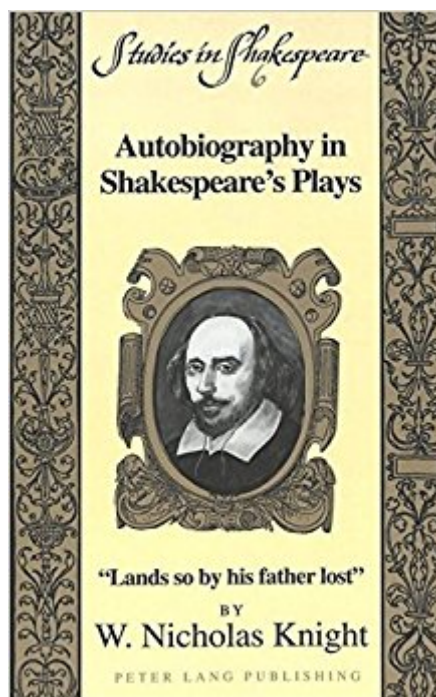




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Autobiography In Shakespeare's Plays: "Lands So By His Father Lost" (Studies In Shakespeare)



Synopsis

Shakespeare's authorship of his plays can no longer be in doubt with this book's clear identification of autobiographical passages throughout his work from his legal documents in Stratford and London courts. Shakespeare refers to the loss of his inheritance, by his father mortgaging it to his uncle, from early works such as *Taming of the Shrew* to the late *Lear*. His mother is referred to in *As You Like It* and *Coriolanus*; his twins in *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*; and the loss of his son from *Merchant of Venice* to *Macbeth*. His daughters, as recipients of his accumulated wealth, are subjects of his concern from *Lear* to *The Tempest*. More important, the knowledge of the law in his personal pursuits is revealed as a source for the legal content in his works, which found fit audiences among jurists at the Inns of Court law schools and in King James's Court. Shakespeare pleased the king on these matters enough to have him command his plays to be repeated on an occasion. For himself, Shakespeare learned from his own writing how to deal with the language of law theoretically and conceptually with such concepts as equity and mercy in Chancery. He used his own family life, personal documents, and legal problems to give impetus to his version of borrowed characters, plots, plays, and history. These personal events, from the placement of the references, give his plays, which sometimes end with a fictionalized, wish-fulfillment, or literary compensation, an autobiographical initial compulsion.

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Customer Reviews

“From November 1604 until Shrove Tuesday 1605 the Master of the Revels chose to stage seven of Shakespeare’s plays, all dealing with justice and law, equity and mercy, courts and jurisdiction: Othello, Merry Wives of Windsor, Measure for Measure, Comedy of Errors, Loves Labours Lost, Henry V, and Merchant of Venice. W. Nicholas Knight argues this was no coincidence: Tilney used the plays to teach the proper use of law to the new King James. In this pioneering study of Shakespeare’s life and work, Knight discovers new sources for the plays – the lawsuits and family concerns of Shakespeare himself, matters which may well have inspired Shakespeare then and heighten certain fresh thematics now. This is a unique work of legal history and theater criticism showing how each may illuminate the other.” (Arthur F. Kinney, Director, Massachusetts Center for Renaissance Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) “W. Nicholas Knight has made exciting discoveries where law and literature intersect in Shakespeare’s plays. This book persuades me that the allegory Shakespeare made of his life carries important and dynamic traces of the troubles, legal and familial, that beset the playwright’s daily thoughts in the 1590s and beyond. This is a pioneering work of scholarship and detection in the field!” (Tony Connor, Department of English, Wesleyan University, Connecticut)

The Author: W. Nicholas Knight is Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Rolla where he has served as Chairman of Humanities. He received his B.A. in English from Amherst College, Massachusetts, his M.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and his Ph.D. in English from Indiana University-Bloomington. His post-doctoral research was conducted at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London. He has taught at Wesleyan University, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, University of Missouri-Columbia, and Imperial College, London. Knight is the author of Shakespeare’s Hidden Life as well as numerous Shakespeare articles in British, Canadian, and American journals. He has been a Ford Foundation, Newberry Library, Wesleyan Center for the Humanities, Warburg Institute, and NEH Fellow. His play on the Kennedy assassination, *The Death of J.K.*, was performed off-Broadway as well as in London and the Inns of Court.

I am not a PhD at a university, a university wit, but I do know something about Shakespeare’s plays and his life. The premise of this book, it seems to me, is way off base. If we assume that Shakespeare was writing the autobiography of his life in his plays, then we are making the same subjective interpretive mistake that the Oxfordians are. Shakespeare borrowed his plots, placed

them in different countries. He sought to entertain audiences with his plays, not teach them. The only teaching he did was about ourselves as human beings. And he did it better than any other writer. His characters grab a place in your heart, and are unforgettable. He probably brought much of Stratford with him to London, he stayed there for 23 years, married had kids there, his sisters and brothers were there his parents were there....his father probably introduced him to many characters, and he ran into many characters in his years at Stratford, who finally made their way into his plays. In 1603, the horror of the plague kept the theaters closed. King James had just taken over for Elizabeth I. Shakespeare's troupe was renamed "The King's Men" and they became his favorite troupe of players. The group of plays that were shown in 1604-1605 were very different in theme and dates. Elizabeth had seen many of these plays and they probably would not have been presented if she were still Queen. But the new king hadn't seen them. So some of the older plays were performed: Comedy of Errors, Love's Labor's Lost. The Last of the Historical plays, Henry V was performed. A new tragedy, Othello the Moor of Venice, and a new comedy The Merry Wives of Windsor were performed. And the tragic comedy Measure for Measure was performed. On SrovSunday, an older play, The Merchant of Venice was performed, after that The Tragedy of the Spanish Maz, of which we have no surviving manuscript and its author is anonymous. The King liked Merchant so much that he requested a repeat showing the next day, but it was never performed for unknown reasons. It does not seem to me that Shakespeare or his troupe were trying to teach the new King law, ethics or any such thing with these plays. They were entertainments "to keep a drowsy Emperor awake." Those University Wits wrote with such scholarly stuff...and we know Shakespeare did not attend a University, but had only his own wit.

What a wonderful book! And there was I, in my ignorance, believing for all these years that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote the canon. That Polonius caricatured his father-in-law William Cecil, Lord Burghley; that Ophelia represented Oxford's wife, Ann Cecil; that the three daughters in King Lear were based on the fact that Oxford had three daughters; that Hamlet was captured by pirates, just like--you guessed it--Oxford; that an uncle was the first to write sonnets that had the same rhyme scheme as Shakespeare's; that another uncle translated Ovid's Metamorphoses, universally accepted as a major source for Shakespeare. Oxford was lame, like the writer of the sonnets; the author of the sonnets wrote "I am that I am" as Oxford wrote to Cecil in a letter, and so on and so forth. Oh what a fool am I to have believed until reading your evidence for Shakespeare of Stratford that Oxford was the genius who wrote the canon. At last, I have seen the light!

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