

# **Shakespeare a Barber? The Secret of the Bard's Private Life Revealed**

Charles Veatch



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The versatility of the greatest of all dramatists is conceded by every one familiar with his plays. The many-sidedness of that masterful genius who "walked in every path of human life, felt every passion," is the world's wonder.

Students have devoted much valuable time and consumed many gallons of midnight oil in efforts to prove that Shakespeare followed most of the vocations open to mankind. It has been shown that he was a finished actor — not a "strutting player whose conceit lies in his hamstring," but an artist competent to hold the mirror up to nature. His attainments as an attorney, "versed in strict statutes and most biting laws," have been ably set forth.

That he was a warrior, a "manifold linguist, and incomparable soldier," can scarcely be doubted; while his achievements as a physician, his knowledge of anatomy, and his profound accomplishments as an alienist and neurologist have been duly exploited by many writers. He was, moreover, a gardener cunning in the lore of plants as well as a subtle discerner of the secret springs of emotion; an ardent angler, who could sit all day upon a rock in the hot sun, like Patience on a monument, waiting to See the fish Cut with her golden oars the silver stream And greedily devour the treacherous bait.

Shakespeare, too, was a skilled metaphysician and an expert logician. He was a courtier of rare grace, a diplomat, a man of the world, a lawyer's clerk, a pedagogue with a rod in pickle for the youngster "creeping like a snail unwillingly to school." Some investigators in this fertile field have proved to their satisfaction that the poet was a butcher; and it has even been suggested that he conducted an intelligence office, from Pistol's remark in "Henry IV": Have we not Hiren here?

In fact, Shakespeare seems to have been not only a jack of all trades but complete master thereof. A character in "Macbeth" remarks: I had thought to have let in some of all professions.

Undoubtedly, when those words were penned, the poet must have had the barber's trade in mind. For I shall now proceed to prove that if internal evidence counts for anything, Shakespeare was a barber of skill and experience, possessing a thorough knowledge of his craft.

### AN HONORABLE CALLING

My revelation will in nowise lower this "myriad-minded man" in the just estimation of the world. The mystery of shaving is not only ancient but honorable. In the poet's time it was counted as one of the learned professions, inasmuch as the barber was often called upon to perform the duties of a surgeon, such as bleeding a customer — apart from any accidental slip of the razor — and occasionally extracting a troublesome molar. That Shakespeare was familiar with both these operations may be shown by countless citations from his plays, such as the famous line in "Julius Caesar": This was the most unkindest cut of all —

and the following from "Much Ado About Nothing": I have the toothache, draw it.

Nor does the calling of a barber offer any obstacle to the exercise of the poetic faculty. On the contrary, it may develop and foster the divine afflatus, as witness Jacques Jasmin of Gascony, Folez, the German poet, Burchiello, the Italian sonneteer, and Allan Ramsay, all reputed barbers whose effusions shed a golden glory over the tonsorial gild.

Shakespeare must have spent much of his time in a barber-shop. His plays are so full of allusions to the craft, and his dramatis personae exhibit such familiar knowledge of hair and whiskers, that it is difficult to avoid the thought that the "sweet swan of Avon" learned to shave before he began to sing. As he was not indifferent to those "attributes of awe and majesty wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings," it cannot be urged that he would consider barbering beneath his dignity, especially when royalty set the example. Note this passage from "Henry V": It is no English treason to cut French crowns, and to-morrow the king himself will be a clipper.

In considering the theory that Shakespeare was a barber, it should be borne in mind that his father was a wool-comber — manifestly a calling closely akin to that of the hair-cutter. Here we have strong circumstantial

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evidence; for in early times trades commonly descended from sire to son. Perhaps the poet was articed to his father, for he says somewhere: Must I not serve a long apprenticeship?

Among the almost innumerable ways of spelling the poet's name we find "Shaxberd" and "Shakberd," variants possessing peculiar significance in the present discussion. Nothing could be plainer, even to a wayfaring man, that in the unsettled orthography of the period these are simply forms of "Shakebeard" — a descriptive appellation needing no comment. It points as directly to the barber-shop as does "Smith" to the smithy.

### TWO STRIKING CRYPTOGRAMS

At this juncture it will be necessary to allude momentarily to the well-nigh moribund and altogether tiresome Bacon-Shakespeare controversy — not to establish any truth of history, but to point a way out to misguided enthusiasts who, in their efforts to filch the poet's good name, find themselves deeply floundering in cryptogrammic mire.

Remembering that surnames were in many instances derived from occupations followed by their owners, we find the King in "Hamlet" saying: You must not think That we are made of stuff so flat and dull That we can let our beard be shook.

Again, this is from "King Lear": If you did wear a beard upon your chin, I'd shake it upon this quarrel.

These fateful lines contain two transparent cryptograms, wherein the real author's name is so thinly veiled that he who runs may read, swift Baconite though he be. It requires no arbitrary juggling with figures, no biliteral alphabets, no devious approaches by ways that are dark and tricks that are vain to show from these two passages that "Shakebeard" (Shakberd-Shaxberd-Shakespeare) is the only genuine "concealed poet," the mighty master who was not of an age but for all time.

Here is a revelation that shines like a good deed in a naughty world. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, the foundations of the flimsy Baconian structure are swept away, and the edifice, built up with so much care by its ingenious architects, vanishes like the baseless fabric of a vision, leaving not a rack behind.

After reading George Meredith's "Shaving of Shagpat," Dante Gabriel Rossetti declared that he was strongly reminded of Shakespeare. No doubt the suggestive alliteration of the title had something to do with the remark, but Rossetti had probably been already convinced that Shakespeare was a barber, after carefully studying the cumulative evidence of the plays. It is significant that "Shagpat" so closely resembles "Shagsper," one of the variant spellings of the poet's name.

### TONSORIAL PHRASES IN THE PLAYS

Although — perhaps owing to the great dramatist's personal modesty — no barbers appear in the throng of people who crowd Shakespeare's stage, there is no lack of the lingo of that profession. Kings and queens, lords and ladies, knights, fools, and country louts all use tonsorial phrases with an ease and gusto attainable only through expert knowledge.

"Did I not pluck thee by the nose?" says Lucio — a familiarity common to the fraternity at the present day. In "Coriolanus," Marcius exclaims with professional yearning, "Oh, let me clip ye" — whereat one is reminded of Petruccio's "Here's snip and nip and cut and slit and slash."

"Comb down his hair," suggests Cardinal Beaufort, and Antonio, of "The Tempest," longs for the day when newborn chins be rough and razorable." The gay gallant in Shakespeare's time, "trimmed like a younker," went "prancing to his love, while his chin, new-reaped, showed like a stubble-field at harvest home."

There must have been shampooing in Shakespeare's shop. To prove it, there is Iago's boast: I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense.

Hamlet's "Aye, there's the rub," expressed his satisfaction in the soothing process. As the barber hastened his knotted and combined locks to part, mayhap he fell asleep, "perchance to dream," under the soporific touch of nimble digits. Yet even in a simple shampoo the poet points a moral, as when he makes the poor Queen in "Richard III" say: The world is full of rubs.

It is generally believed that singeing the ends of the hair or beard, to stimulate growth, is a modern invention; yet this seems to have been a common practise in Shakespeare's shop. Hamlet tried it, for he speaks of "singeing his pate," and Lear exclaims: Singe my white head.

On one occasion, at least, the operation met with a disastrous ending; in the "Comedy of Errors" mention is made of one "whose beard they have singed off."

### EVIDENCE HEAPED ON EVIDENCE

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As an expert craftsman, Shakespeare assuredly took a laudable pride in, his trade, but he was not blind to certain foibles of the profession. For instance, one of his characters thus refers to the barber's well-known penchant for putting the shaving-brush in a patron's mouth: I will not ope my lips so wide that a bristle may enter,

As for hair-dye, Buckingham remarks: That dye is on me which makes my whitest part black.

It was no doubt with full technical knowledge of dyes and restoratives that Henry V declared: A black beard will turn white, and a curled pate will grow bald.

As it is now generally conceded that there is nothing new under the sun, the "lady barber" is of course an old story. Shakespeare mentions several, among them Helen of Troy. Pandarus, happening into the shop one day, noticed that famous damsel scrutinizing the fifty-two hairs in the sparse beard of Troilus, and he "could not choose but laugh to think how she tickled his chin with her marvelous white hand."

The shrewish Kate ranks high as a barberess. Especially is she noted for the introduction of certain novelties in the business, such as combing Hortensio's noddle with a three-legged stool, a proceeding well calculated to make each particular hair stand on end "like quills upon the fretful porpentine." Another, less famous, was Bianca, but the poet throws little light upon the lady's professional qualifications. The only hint to show that she was connected with the trade is her expression in "Othello": Come, you are next.

If further evidence should be needed to establish the theory herein advanced, it can be found in Shakespeare's requirements for a first-class shop. "Have napkins about you" is the advice in "Macbeth," and Grumio's command is: Let the heads be sleekly combed and the blue coats brushed.

Every barber has an "oily palm," of course, and, like Richard III, is often "at charges for a lookin — glass." Other specifications for the poet's shop are "best water brought by conduits" and "all the perfumes of Arabia," together with unguents with whose sweet smell the air shall be perfumed." Emblazoned upon the walls might be seen Perdita's friendly greeting: You are welcome to our shearing.

### THE BARD AND THE LABOR QUESTION

In these days of industrial unrest it will be of interest to learn Shakespeare's position on the labor question. Not only do the dramas testify to the fact that he was a barber, but they contain evidence of his membership in a barbers' union. In "Richard III" a disgruntled party asks: Shall I strike?

Hamlet's query, "Is thy union here?" and old Polonius's mention of a "walkout" are significant indications that organized labor had secured a foothold in the poet's time. Moreover, in addition to many other corroborative passages in the plays, one of the speakers complains of a "sore injunction," and another declares: At these injunctions every one doth swear.

The big commentators have unaccountably missed a point here. "To these injunctions" is the reading in most texts, and probably would have remained so but for an erudite member of a local union, who suggested the emendation as above. The ingenious substitution of "at" for "to" lends new force to the lines, and will doubtless be adopted as a happy rendering of an otherwise obscure statement.

Such forceful expressions make it reasonably apparent that the attitude of the unions toward this legal process has not changed since Shakespeare's day, and are curiously prophetic of present conditions. Even the matter of Sunday closing did not escape the poet's attention, for he avows a, brotherly sympathy for the barber "whose sore task does not divide the Sunday from the week."

Truly, "the barber's chair fits all," and many of the great bard's immortals have reclined therein. "I must to the barber-shop," says the peerless Bottom, "for methinks I am marvelous hairy about the face." We have Falstaff's word for it that Bardolph was shaved at least once, "and lost many a hair." His face, all whelks and knobs, would have been a grievous task for an artist even of Shakespeare's skill. It is pleasant to think of that arrant rogue with basin beneath his chin, his wonderful nose shedding a lurid glare, like a Pharos, over the wide expanse of snowy lather, and wincing under a dull razor amid the ribald gibes of Fat Jack and bombastic Pistol.

### THE SHAVEN AND THE UNSHAVEN

Marc Antony was a steady patron of the shop, and a stickler for a close shave, being "barbered ten times o'er" prior to a call upon Cleopatra. "I could not endure a husband with a beard," said Beatrice, whereon Benedick hiked to the shop, and the "old ornament of his cheek" went to stuff tennis-balls.

For the most part, Shakespeare's characters were well-groomed in this respect, but some of them exhibited a marked antipathy to razors and shears. There is no evidence that Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whose excellent head of hair hung like flax from a distaff, was ever tonsured. Pericles, too "swore never to wash his face nor comb his

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hairs," nor must we forget our old military friend, "the soldier, bearded like the pard," who was so busy seeking bubbles that he had little time to think of a barber.

Another was a certain lover whose "browny locks did hang in crooked curls," while a most persistent offender was Young Gobbo, who sported "more hair on his chin than Dobbin had on his tail."

In his own shop Shakespeare was urbane and obliging to every patron, and so generous that he would not "quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard." This would be high praise for a journeyman working by the day, but when it can be said of an artist doing piece-work it is strong evidence to show that the confidence of the ages in Shakespeare's nobility of mind has not been misplaced. And in this respect what a marked contrast between the poet and the impatient Hotspur, who stood ready to meet all comers, even to cavil over the ninth part of a hair."

We may rest serenely confident that Master Will Shakespeare had a good and lucrative business. As for his customers, he could say, with Marie, in "Twelfth Night": I have them at my fingers' ends.