The Mystery of Shakespeare’s Tomb

Special Report: A radar scan of William Shakespeare’s supposed tomb in a Stratford church came up empty, fueling the old debate about who really wrote the famous plays and sonnets, writes ex-CIA analyst Peter W. Dickson.

By Peter W. Dickson

The 400th-anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare — to be observed in late April — was supposed to be a moment for global celebration of the literary genius long believed to have been from Stratford-on-Avon. But, in a classic case of “unintended consequences,” a reluctant decision by Anglican Church officials to permit scientists to use modern technology to study his presumed grave inside the local church has backfired because the inconclusive results of this investigation — the apparent failure to confirm conclusively the presence of any human remains in the tomb — is casting a shadow over the celebration.

Indeed, the fiasco may cause more people to doubt — or even reject — the longstanding claim that the man with this famous name from a market town in the British Midlands was the true author of the Shakespearean works.

That concern may explain, in part, why the scientists who conducted a radar scan of Shakespeare’s alleged tomb have been busy obscuring the curious results of their inspection and refusing to admit the possibility that no one was buried in the floor tomb. Instead, the scientists have been distracting a media with a dubious suggestion that the Bard’s skull is missing from the tomb and perhaps was stolen.

The serious shortcomings in this scientific investigation of the spot traditionally believed to be Shakespeare’s final resting place validates the need for a closer, meticulous examination of the entire historical context surrounding his death and burial, including what those facts say about whether the wealthy businessman from Stratford-on-Avon actually penned the Shakespearean dramas and the famous sonnets.

Many are well aware that there has been, for more than 150 years, an often bitter debate about the true authorship of the extraordinary body of work attributed to the name Shakespeare. Given this longstanding dispute, the deepening of the mystery surrounding Shakespeare’s supposed tomb — what we might call “Tomb-gate” — further erodes the traditional narrative.

Unwittingly, the tomb project has drawn public attention to arguably the most
dubious part of the official Shakespeare narrative, that the esteemed author was buried unceremoniously and anonymously under a slab of stone in a small church in Stratford. The ultimate damage to the Stratford orthodoxy may prove profound.

Nonetheless, the true believers, including those in a media deferential to the Stratford orthodoxy, will still gather in the town (about 100 miles northwest of London) in late April to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Bard’s death. The celebrants will pay homage at this grave where their attention will be drawn to a floor tomb containing only a maledictory epitaph, a curse warning others not to move his bones. The core problem with this grave site is that there is not now and never has been a person’s name carved on this gravestone.

Furthermore, there is no record of any reaction in 1616 to Shakespeare’s passing, despite the astonishing fact that he died only a few weeks after the less distinguished and much younger dramatist Francis Beaumont was given a high-profile burial in the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey – next to Chaucer and Spenser. Shakespeare’s interment could not have been more dissimilar.

The notion that the remains of this literary genius, supposedly the senior dramatist at the royal court for almost 20 years, whom Ben Jonson declared the greatest since the ancient Greek dramatists in the First Folio collection of Shakespeare’s works in 1623, would have been dumped into an anonymous tomb, with no surviving tribute to his memory at the time of his death in 1616, is not only counter-intuitive; it is totally preposterous.

Along with the absence of a personal literary paper trail for this man during his own lifetime, this bizarrely obscure burial has helped to keep alive persistent doubts that the wealthy William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon really was the author of the great literary works that carry this name.

The Nameless Tomb

Embarrassed Shakespeare biographers tend to deflect attention from this nameless tomb – and what it might signify – but the Shakespeare Trust in Stratford, along with a British film company, nonetheless persuaded reluctant officials at the Holy Trinity Church to permit a radar scan of the floor tomb to “learn more” and in the process prove to the skeptics that the Bard really was buried in that anonymous tomb.

This was a risky decision by the church and the Shakespeare establishment for a number of reasons, not the least of which are the limitations of ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to detect human remains (bones) beneath solid material like concrete or in this case a limestone gravestone slab.

And no matter what the results, the bottom line is that there is no way to prove
to whom any bones belonged, especially those beneath a nameless tomb, without
direct physical access to conduct DNA analysis of the kind in 2014 that helped
prove where Richard III was buried after he lost his crown following defeat at
the famous battle at Bosworth Field in 1485.

Ironically, it was the stunning discovery of Richard’s remains – a monarch whose
historical legacy Shakespeare did so much to disparage – that built pressure on
the church officials to investigate Shakespeare’s tomb. The examination
proceeded despite the doubts about how conclusive it would be and despite other
credible indications that it was likely to backfire on the Shakespeare
establishment and the Anglican Church.

For instance, there was a published account of an earlier direct visual
inspection of the contents of Shakespeare’s supposed tomb in the church floor.
During a visit to this church in late 1815, American author Washington Irving
spoke with an elderly sexton who told Irving that a few years earlier that he
had an opportunity to see beneath the gravestone in the floor when an excavation
was underway to create another vault adjacent to this gravestone.

The sides of the excavation collapsed and in the process created a hole
permitting a view of what was underneath the alleged floor tomb for Shakespeare.
Irving states in his Sketch Book, published in 1819, that the sexton “told me he
had made bold to look in at the hole, but could see neither coffin nor bones,
nothing but dust.” For his part, Irving lamented his inability “to have at least
seen the dust of Shakespeare.”

Some two centuries after Irving’s visit, the documentary film, entitled “Secret
History: Shakespeare’s Tomb” (shown on Britain’s Channel 4 on March 26),
endeavored to take a modern scientific peek beneath the stone. Like the sexton,
it found no evidence of Shakespeare’s skeleton. The radar scan also found no
signs of a coffin, such as metal nails for sealing a coffin shut.

The Missing Skull?

The scientists who conducted the scan did claim there are hints in the radar
imagery of the location where they speculate one might expect to find a skull
that suggest some “disturbance” of the soil. That led to their curious theory
that perhaps the tomb was opened by grave robbers who took the skull.

The problem with that analysis is that ground penetrating radar did not detect
any part of a human skeleton which means that this claim of a missing skull is
unsubstantiated speculation and “spin” coming from scientists who seem eager to
show that they had produced some meaningful – or at least newsworthy – results.

Under pressure to prove the value of the project, they tried to defend their
claim about a missing skull by citing an article in a magazine called Argosy in 1879 that alluded to an oral tradition that some grave robbers stole Shakespeare’s skull, or perhaps someone did that during an effort to repair the gravestone in the mid-1790s. But this claim was called into question by Shakespeare scholars, especially after the same scientists were permitted to study an alleged stolen Shakespeare skull kept in a parish church 13 miles north from Stratford and determined that it was the skull of a woman.

Nevertheless, the senior supervisor of the radar-scan project – Kevin Colls of Staffordshire University – seems undeterred. He insisted that this project “should open up a whole new line of research for us. We believe that his skull is probably located somewhere else, and further research is required to figure out where that might be.”

But the bottom line is that you cannot speculate about a missing skull without radar imagery clearly proving that the rest of a human skeleton is present below this nameless tomb. And even if some remains were ultimately recovered, you would still have to match the DNA to Shakespeare’s descendants to establish that the skull or bones belonged to Shakespeare – and that still wouldn’t help prove whether the wealthy Stratford merchant named Shakespeare was, in fact, the Bard.

For these reasons, it should not come as a total surprise that the rector of Holy Trinity Church, the Reverend Patrick Taylor, issued the following statement tinged with some regret about having permitted this radar scan:

“We are not convinced that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that his skull has been taken. We intend to continue to respect the sanctity of his grave, in accordance with Shakespeare’s wishes, and not allow it to be disturbed. We shall have to live with the mystery of not knowing fully what lies beneath the stone.”

Taking everything into account, there is little doubt that this embarrassing outcome will fuel legitimate skepticism about the Stratfordian tradition as the 400th anniversary approaches in late April to be followed by the World Shakespeare Congress in London in late July.

Indeed, it is a huge embarrassment and a major setback for the orthodoxy because the unintended consequence of this attempt to learn more about the alleged author’s grave has drawn public attention to what is essentially a clandestine tomb – one with no proper personal identification and quite possibly no human remains inside.

What About the ‘Other’ Tomb?

Arguably, however, the most devastating and damaging consequence of this attempt
to prove where Shakespeare was buried is that this mindless attachment to a dubious oral tradition that he was buried in an anonymous floor tomb flies in the face of a clear and emphatic declaration about where the body may have been buried inside this same church.

Most Shakespeare biographers mention — but pray that others do not pay close attention to — the expensive, huge memorial with a bust of Shakespeare mounted high on the church wall overlooking the altar and the nameless tomb. They hope others will ignore the fact that the eulogy — an inscription beneath the bust — signals *twice* that the remains were interred within the church wall. The inscription asks visitors to the church:

Stay Passenger Why Goest Thou By So Fast.

Read If Thou Canst, Whom Envious Death

Hath Plast With In This Monument Shakespeare.

With Whom Quick Nature Dide Whose Name

Doth Deck this Tombe.

Burials within walls are unusual but not unknown. One Medici prince arranged for that and apparently this practice happened in some monasteries. The Vatican once issued an edict to prohibit any burials inside churches because of the health and other risks, especially if the tomb was not properly sealed, but the practice continued.

Samuel Schoenbaum, arguably the preeminent Shakespeare scholar until his death in 1996, insisted in his famous book, *Shakespeare’s Lives* (1970), that the eulogist (whom he suggests was in London where the bust was made) made a mistake because he was not informed that (inexplicably) Shakespeare’s remains were to be placed in an anonymous floor tomb. This was a rather pathetic theory which Schoenbaum dropped from the second edition of his book in 1991.

A floor tomb right in front of the altar rail involved a substantial fee and the wall memorial with the bust was even more expensive. So why not spend a little more to have “William Shakespeare” inscribed on the floor tomb?

For his part, Shakespeare curiously left no instruction in his will concerning his burial. But why should his wife (Ann Hathaway) and daughters pay big money for anonymity or (if the real tomb is in the wall) want any confusion to persist? But nothing was done.

**Making Excuses**
Stanley Wells, Schoenbaum’s successor as dean of Shakespeare scholars, speculated in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (2001) that an altar step was later extended outward and covered up Shakespeare’s name originally inscribed on the floor tomb. But who would ever allow this immortal name to be hidden? And this theory still does not get around the fact that the wall inscription clearly asserts Shakespeare’s remains are to be found inside the church wall.

Orthodox scholars are well-aware that Shakespeare’s wife (Hathaway) was buried in the floor almost flush to the church’s north wall and just below the wall memorial with the bust of her husband. But this arrangement makes no sense if we are asked to accept without question the oral tradition about where her husband was buried.

Also, why should her tomb bear her name, give the date she died and her age at death with a nice Latin inscription in honor of motherhood, when her husband (supposedly the most illustrious literary figure since the ancient Greek dramatists) had his remains (in stark contrast to those of Beaumont a few weeks earlier) dumped into a nameless tomb?

This storyline is quite absurd. The chronology and the contradictory pattern of evidence reeks of a later attempt to concoct the visual impression of a tomb, the one in the wall with Hathaway buried as physically close to her husband’s wall tomb as possible. It is significant that Hathaway died in August 1623, only four months before the massive folio of Shakespeare’s 36 dramas went on sale in London bookstores, establishing the permanence of the playwright’s fame.

Yet, Ben Jonson, the renowned poet, playwright and literary critic who helped complete this folio, astonishingly asserted in his grand dedication that Shakespeare was “a moniment without a tomb.” Meticulous about editorial precision, did Jonson insist that the “i” in monument be put into bold type to emphasize that “moniment” can also mean a collected body of work as opposed to a physical monument?

Hard to know exactly what Jonson meant in referring to the Bard’s lack of a tomb. But the curious “i” in bold type was conspicuously changed to a “u” for the Second Folio edition in 1632 which is a strong hint that something was afoot to clear things up. But that has never really happened because the glaring contradiction between the Stratford man’s floor tomb and wall monument/tomb persists.

In any case, Jonson should have known that Hathaway had just died and would be buried close to her husband. Yet he speaks disrespectfully because the only persons denied a proper burial — meaning “without a tomb” — were persons who had committed suicide and were buried below intersections of roads.
Evidence of a Pen Name

Also disrespectfully, in the main dedication of the folio to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, the Bard’s fellow royal actors say: “In that name, therefore, we most humbly consecrate to your Lordships, these remains of your servant Shakespeare.”

“In that name”? Why not say “In his name”? These remains? Why not say “these immortal works of your servant”? This strange impersonal language suggests that the Bard’s “remains” are to be found only in his plays and poems and that this immortal literary name “William Shakespeare” did not refer to a singular, physical Shakespeare, but was rather a pen name used by whoever wrote or collaborated on the famous works.

It was also false to assert that the Bard’s patrons were these two Earls, the oldest of whom was only 13 when Shakespeare became famous overnight with the publication of Venus and Adonis in 1593. His patron was Queen Elizabeth and then King James to whom the publishers and the royal actors – known as “the King’s Men” – curiously refused to dedicate the First Folio in 1623.

In my book, Bardgate: Shakespeare and the Royalists Who Stole the Bard (2011), I called for a non-intrusive scan of both tombs in Stratford to test Professor Wells’s absurd claim about a possible extension of the altar’s floor that covered up of Shakespeare’s name and whether Shakespeare actually rests in the church wall behind or near the memorial and his bust.

Since the radar scan of the floor tomb has not proven there are any human remains beneath the gravestone, it makes sense now to take the next step and scan the church wall behind and around the wall memorial to see if there is a cavity in the wall large enough to have placed some human remains.

However, given the Shakespeare establishment’s investment in the oral tradition of an anonymous floor tomb, there probably will be resistance to any proposal to scan the church wall, because if it shows the church wall is solid, then this would be prima facie evidence that the inscription beneath the Shakespeare bust is fraudulent, constitutes an act of deception and indicates that the true author was another person not from Stratford-on-Avon.

There is no doubt that a solid church wall, coupled with an anonymous floor tomb with no conclusive evidence that it contains human remains, would deepen the larger Shakespeare mystery.

The Reverend Taylor’s press statement suggests that church officials will not take that the risk and approve anymore high-tech research, nor is the Shakespeare establishment likely to roll the dice again on a wall scan.
After all, the stakes would be enormous. There are many professional reputations invested in protecting the Shakespeare orthodoxy that the Stratford businessman named William Shakespeare was the famous playwright.

Yet, I believe that, as the situation stands, the argument now favors those anti-Stratfordians who have challenged the orthodoxy and maintain that the businessman and the actual author are not one in the same person.

Taking everything into account, there is no credible reason to accept the claim that the literary genius (whoever that was) for whom “Shakespeare” or often “Shake-speare” appears on title pages of published quarto edition of these dramas was buried in the Stratford church in 1616 or in 1623 or any later time.

In his original folio dedication, Jonson surely revealed the truth behind Bardgate when with the revealing assertion — “thou art a moniment without a tomb” — he signaled that Shakespeare was not an identifiable person with a known resting place, but instead a pen name for a collection of dramas composed by a person or persons who wanted or needed to remain incognito.


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