



Top Shakespeare Scholar Writes for Britannica on “Double Falsehood”

Bevington explores the history of a play with Bardic roots, Quixotic inspiration

CHICAGO, April 23, 2010—The story of an obscure 18th-century play now thought to have been written in part by William Shakespeare is the subject of [a new article](#) in the Encyclopaedia Britannica by Shakespeare scholar David Bevington of the University of Chicago.

“[Double Falsehood](#),” a tragicomic play first produced in 1727, centers on the adventures of two women of different social classes and two gentlemen of divergent ethical character in a plot derived from a segment in Cervantes’s classic novel “[Don Quixote](#).” The story behind the play, however, contains drama, or at least tantalizing uncertainty, of its own.

That story revolves around one Lewis Theobald, the playwright, editor, and curious character who mounted the first production of “Double Falsehood” at London’s Drury Lane Theatre. Theobald wrote the script, but he claimed that it was based on a lost play written by Shakespeare and [John Fletcher](#) entitled “Cardenio.”

In the encyclopedia article, Bevington reviews what is known about the history and provenance of “Double Falsehood.” Was Theobald telling the truth, or did he fabricate the Shakespearean lineage to create what we would now call buzz for his play? It’s impossible to know for sure, and the poet [Alexander Pope](#), for one, doubted the claim and even made Theobald a target of ridicule in “The Dunciad.” Today, however, scholars generally believe that “Double Falsehood” — alternatively titled “The Distressed Lovers” — is indeed based on the original play authored by Shakespeare and Fletcher.

But, warns Bevington, “The alternative possibility — that Theobald perpetrated a hoax — is also plausible; Shakespeare’s reputation invited such flights of imagination.”

“Unlike Elizabethan drama, this story has no definitive ending,” said Kathleen Kuiper, a senior editor and manager of the arts and culture group at Encyclopaedia Britannica. “It’s

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another chapter in the endless and fascinating debates over who Shakespeare really was and who wrote the works attributed to him.”

Bevington directs readers interested in learning more to Professor [Brean Hammond's edition](#) of “Double Falsehood” in The Arden Shakespeare series.

David Bevington is a prominent Shakespeare scholar who has written or edited several books about The Bard, including “Action Is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture.” He is the Phyllis Fay Horton distinguished service professor emeritus in the humanities at the University of Chicago. Bevington has written extensively about Shakespeare for the Britannica. He is the principal author of [the encyclopedia's current Shakespeare entry](#) and has also written a number of articles for the reference work about individual plays.

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