

# The Shakespeare Forger Who Duped England

William Henry Ireland was born in London in 1777 (or 1775, records vary), the son of a British author and engraver.

Ireland came of age during what can be called a Shakespeare craze. Though he was considered a poor student—one teacher deemed him so stupid that he told Ireland's father, Samuel, not to bother bringing the lad back to school, lest he waste his money—Ireland's memoirs reveal an articulate and reflective man.

Though William Henry admitted as a young man he was "averse to every thing like study and application," he possessed a deep "fondness for theatrical pursuits." William's father possessed an even deeper passion for theatre, particularly the works of Shakespeare.

"There was no divine attribute which Shakespeare did not possess, [in his view]" Ireland wrote of his father. "In short, the Bard of Avon was a god among men."

At the age of 18, in an apparent attempt to gain the affections of this father, William Ireland began what was to become one of the greatest ruses of the century in England.

Shortly after taking a position at a legal office, he forged numerous documents which he claimed were authentic works of Shakespeare, then claimed he had stumbled upon them in his work. The deception [had the desired effect](#):

*"Samuel Ireland was ecstatic at what his son had found, and grew even more so when William continued to bring home other spectacular finds, including a love letter written by Shakespeare to Anne Hathaway [see below] and a previously unknown historical drama by the Bard titled Vortigern."*

As is often the case, the deception quickly snowballed. Per Mark Jones, in his 1990 book [\*Fake? The Art of Deception\*](#):

*“His father was completely convinced by these pieces and held an exhibition of them at his house in Norkfolk Street; the literary world flocked to see them... A facsimile of the ‘works’ was published in 1795.”*

The following year, on April 2, a performance of *Vortigern* was held to disastrous results at Drury Lane Theatre. The players themselves revolted and the performance was roundly jeered (though the box office brought in a hefty 206 pounds).

The jig was finally up when the foremost Shakespeare scholar of the day, [Edmund Malone](#), published a paper asserting that the works were fraudulent. William Henry eventually admitted his guilt, but the damage was done.

Samuel Ireland, who deemed his name tarnished, withdrew “the warm emotions of the heart” he had once displayed and severed all connections with his son.

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