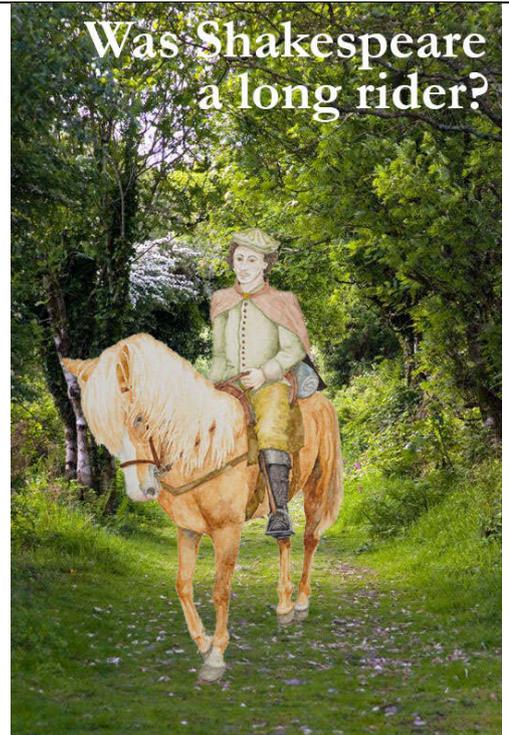


Shakespeare
and
Literary Long Riders
by
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Literature and Long Riders

Let me ask you a question.

What do these six men have in common: Jonathan Swift, Lord Byron, Charles Darwin, Oscar Wilde, William Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene?

If you answered, "They are all famous English authors" you would be partially correct.

If you neglected to add that they were all enthusiastic Long Riders whose equestrian journeys influenced their lives and literature, then you will have missed a vital historical fact.

[Jonathan Swift](#) rode extensively in Ireland in the early 1700s, journeying from Cavan to Carbery. The solitude and interaction with his horse laid the foundation for his famous book, *Gulliver's Travels* and was the inspiration for the talking horses in the [Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms](#).

[Lord Byron](#) explored the mountainous regions of Albania on horseback in 1809, a journey which inspired him to write his famous poem, "[Childe Harold's Pilgrimage](#)."

Though he is known today as "the father of evolution," English naturalist [Charles Darwin](#) was also an avid equestrian traveller. During the five years in which he made his scientific journey around the world in the ship *Beagle*, Darwin took every opportunity to explore the continents of South America, Australia and Africa on horseback. The scientist-turned-Long Rider wrote of "the pleasure of living in the open air with the sky for a roof and the ground for a table." Extracts from his round-

the-world [diary](#) provide clues about his equestrian adventures, beginning with his ride into the jungles of Brazil in 1832.

[Oscar Wilde](#) rode through the rugged terrain of the Peloponnesian Mountains to reach Olympia, Greece in 1890. In his prize-winning poem, [Ravenna](#), Wilde "galloped, racing with the setting sun, And ere the crimson after-glow was past, I stood within Ravenna's walls at last!" Wilde detested train travel, and told reporters, "The only true way, you know, to see a country is to ride on horseback."

[William Somerset Maugham](#) was among the most popular writers of his era and, reputedly, the highest paid author during the 1930s. His most famous books include "Of Human Bondage" and "The Razor's Edge." Yet prior to becoming a famous author, the twenty-three year old Englishman decided to seek adventure overseas. One of his earliest works dealt with the equestrian journey he made thorough Spain in 1898. In "The Land of the Blessed Virgin - Impressions of Andalusia" Maugham recounted his ride from Sevilla to Carmona and back.

[Graham Greene](#) was a prolific English novelist whose works explore the ambivalent moral and political issues of the modern world. Throughout his life, Greene was obsessed with travelling far from his native England, to what he called the "wild and remote" places of the world. A 1938 trip to Mexico resulted in the factual [The Lawless Roads](#) . During the course of that trip, Greene made an equestrian journey into the jungles in search of the ancient city of Palenque.

The influence of equestrian travel on world history and literature has largely evaded investigation. Yet these examples confirm how history and horses, like literature and Long Riders, have travelled together for centuries.

Let us then for the sake of objectivity imagine that we shall ask Swift, Byron, Darwin, Wilde, Maugham and Greene to judge the evidence which shall now be placed before you.

The question is simple.

If the majority of modern mankind has overlooked the fact that six of the most famous authors in English history were avid equestrian travellers, is it possible that William Shakespeare, the best-selling author of all time, could also have been a Long Rider?

Changing Perceptions

Before you jump to any conclusions permit me to remind you of how the majority of the world perceives Charles Darwin today. He is most commonly remembered as he appeared in a photograph taken soon before his death in 1882. It depicts a balding man in his seventies. A long white beard and weary eyes reflect the passage of time.

What is seldom appreciated is that Darwin was not always old. When he departed in 1831 on a five-year voyage around the world, Darwin was a vibrant, vigorous twenty-two-year-old horseman whose passion for riding continued until he was 65.

Charles Darwin and his horse Tommy at his estate in Kent.



Darwin revelled in the horseback adventures he made in the jungles of Brazil, across the pampas of Argentina and through the Australian outback.

If the father of natural selection has been stereotyped as a geriatric with dyspepsia, then could the Bard of Avon likewise have been misinterpreted?

Most people have a strong mental image of William Shakespeare which is based upon the funerary monument located inside Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-upon-Avon, the church in which Shakespeare was baptised and where he was buried after his death.

Believed to have been created before 1623, it depicts the playwright as a middle-aged, balding, rotund pedestrian holding a quill pen and represents an idealized image intended to depict the author when he walked and worked in London's narrow lanes.



Yet is this entrenched depiction accurate? Was Shakespeare's younger life influenced by equestrian travel? Have established historians overlooked an important facet of Shakespeare's personal history? Was the world's most famous English author a Long Rider? And did the author enrich his 39 plays with numerous references to horses which have been largely forgotten?

Equestrian Eras

In order to explore Shakespeare's life story we must begin by understanding that two queens bearing the same royal name vastly influenced different equestrian worlds.

Shakespeare lived and wrote during the reign of Her Majesty, [Queen Elizabeth I](#) (1533-1603).

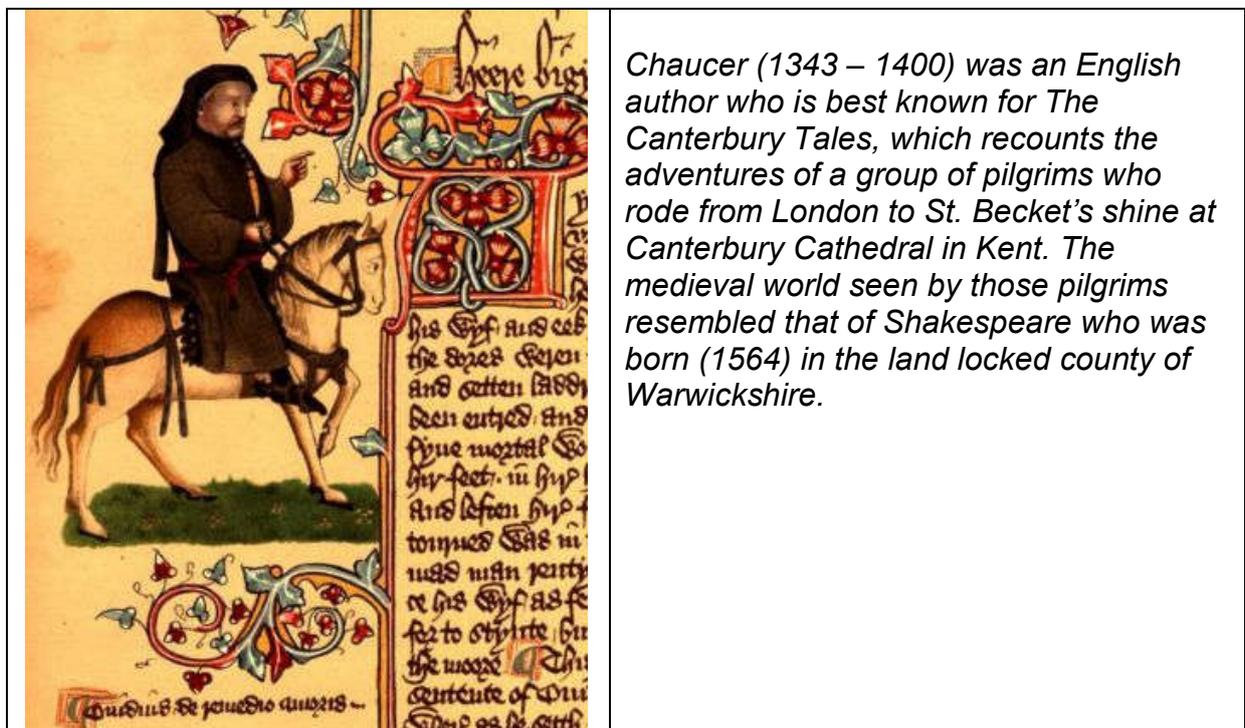
We live, ride and read in the era of Her Majesty, [Queen Elizabeth II](#), who was crowned in 1953 and is the longest-reigning-British monarch.

Though their names are identical their equestrian worlds differ dramatically.

Shakespeare marks a transition from the departing medieval age of Geoffrey Chaucer to the forthcoming reign of King Charles II.

Why is that important? Because the majority of humanity no longer interact with equines and the minority who ride probably assume that today's equestrian world essentially resembles that of Shakespeare.

It would be a mistake to compare the modern horse world of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to her royal predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I.



Several examples illustrate how Shakespeare unknowingly witnessed the closing of one equestrian era and did not live to see the dawning of the one we currently inhabit.

First, during Shakespeare's lifetime hunting not racing was regarded as the sport of kings.

Though fox hunting has been regarded as essentially English for centuries, in Shakespeare's day it was regarded as a relatively unimportant method of vermin control. Deer hunting in vast royal parks was the preferred past time of a renaissance ruler. Boar hunting on horseback was the most dangerous endeavour a

horseman could undertake and the sheer terror of the event is described in Shakespeare's first work, *Venus and Adonis*, which was published in 1593.

The other dissimilarity is that Shakespeare died (1616) a century before the origin of the English Thoroughbred.

Horse racing as we know it today was encouraged by King Charles II (1630-1685), following the Restoration of the monarchy after the English Civil War. The king was a passionate jockey and is the only monarch to win the famous Newmarket Town Plate race which originated in 1665.

Charles was also responsible for importing Barb mares from Tangier and Arab stallions from the Middle East which helped develop the famous English Thoroughbred.

However in Shakespeare's day, even though a hundred years had passed since English knights wearing armour had ridden into battle, smaller foreign horses were seen as playthings for the nobility and were deemed unsuitable for war

Because racing for stakes played such a small part in the rural life of that time, Shakespeare made few references to the sport.



Though competitive jumping is a mainstay of the modern horse world, there was no reference to such an occurrence in Shakespeare's plays. The first dramatic example occurred during the Civil War when Prince Rupert jumped a great hedge during the battle of Chalgrove Field.

Thus Shakespeare's equestrian England had yet to win international prestige as a breeder of fine race horses.

And there were other important differences.

A Mounted Monarch

Because modern mankind is addicted to motorized transportation, it is difficult to imagine living in an age dependant entirely on the horse for mobility. Nor can the symbolic political power of the horse be underestimated.

Horses and horsemanship were pervasive in Shakespeare's sixteenth-century England. But scientific knowledge of equine anatomy was unknown and superstitious practices were commonly practiced in the home and stable. For example it was believed that the sex of a foal was determined by breeding the mare during either a male or female sign of the zodiac.

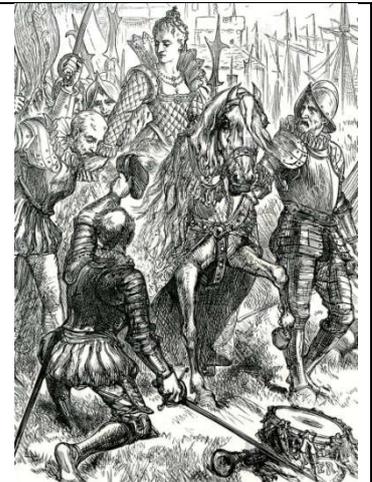
Witchcraft was highly feared in Shakespeare's equestrian world. A spell might cause the horse to stumble, causing injury to the rider. A stallion might be rendered impotent or a mare barren. To offset such curses, owners placed a sprig of rowan over the stable door.

Ruling the country was Queen Elizabeth I, a regal horsewoman who journeyed across her kingdom riding astride, often venturing as far afield as Suffolk or Devon.

Elizabeth was the daughter of King Henry VIII. Like her father, she was an excellent rider and a ferocious foe. In 1588 the ruler of Spain dispatched an armada of 130 ships to invade England, their task being to overthrow the Protestant queen and restore Catholicism.

When notified of the attack, Queen Elizabeth rallied her troops at Tilbury, where she made a dramatic appearance on horseback. According to tradition the monarch appeared wearing armour. What she wore may be in question. Her determination to defend her kingdom was never in doubt.

"I know that I have the body of a weak, feeble woman but I have the heart of a king of England," Queen Elizabeth told her troops in a rousing speech.



Searching for Answers

Despite being one of the world's most famous authors, William Shakespeare remains an enigma. His mutability about his personal life has perplexed and fascinated scholars. More than 400 years after his death, academics continue to search for overlooked clues.

One such equestrian discovery was recently found. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, came from a rich farming family who were devout Catholics. Michael Wood is an English historian who undertook an investigation entitled [*In Search of Shakespeare*](#). During his search, Professor Wood discovered a rare legal document.

Dated 1579, it bears the equestrian wax seal of Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden.



The equestrian clue discovered by Professor Michael Wood.

A tiny bit of wax on an ancient document may not weigh much but its implication tips the scales of history.

Do we really know who William Shakespeare was? Or do we rely on the well trodden paths that take us to familiar interpretations of this prolific but mysterious man?

Was Shakespeare, like his literary descendants Swift, Byron, Darwin, Wilde, Somerset Maugham and Greene, a Long Rider?

Do not be quick to judge!

Remembering that the man in question wrote, "Some glory in their birth, Some in their skill , Some in their wealth , Some in their bodies' force , Some in their garments, Some in their hawks , *and some in their horse.*"

Was Shakespeare a Long Rider?

The search for an answer has just begun.

What is recognized is that the publication of the *Shakespeare Equestrian Collection* has revealed a previously unsuspected definition of the man we thought we knew.