

MARK TWAIN'S EVIDENCE: THE NEVER-ENDING RIVERBOAT DEBATE

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The Shakespeare authorship controversy has largely neglected the evidence presented in the works of Mark Twain. That evidence comes from two sources: an essay Twain wrote in 1909 entitled Is Shakespeare Dead? and his 1894 novel Pudd'nhead Wilson. Taken together, these two pieces of evidence, in addition to being greatly entertaining and provocatively probative, are highly relevant to the debate. In the 1909 essay, in which Twain directly confronts the question of authorship, he concludes, based on the many legal references in the plays and on statements by eminent jurists, that the playwright was not the Stratford Shakespeare but someone else—a lawyer, probably Francis Bacon. By contrast, in his little known preface to Pudd'nhead Wilson, an early legal thriller, Twain undercuts his Shakespeare authorship theory by confessing that all the legal details in Twain's own book were reviewed for technical accuracy by a lawyer. Could not Shakespeare have done the same? Consistent with this tension found in his own works, this prominent American author calls for the competing discourse to carry on, like a never-ending riverboat debate.

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