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Mark Twain's Comments on Shakespeare as an Author

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ABSTRACT

Throughout his career, Twain vacillated between belief and disbelief about whether the author of the distinguished plays was the man from Stratford. Twain's ambivalence, however, demonstrates that he does not seriously engage in the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy but instead presents a façade to mock literary scholars with the Mark Twain persona. This article investigates the role Twain plays in the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy and the questions of authorship it provokes in *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909) by exploring Twain's writing strategies. Whereas recent anti-Stratfordians often cite Twain's book to challenge the Stratford Shakespeare's claim to the authorship of the works under his name, Twain's essay insinuates his skepticism about idolatry and his reflections on the values of authorship. Drawing upon Roland Barthes's notion of authorship as provisional constructs responding to cultural pressures, this article scrutinizes Twain's career as a writer and argues that *Is Shakespeare Dead?* satirizes the contentions between the Stratfordians and the anti-Stratfordians in a mock autobiography. While Twain exploits the Shakespeare controversy to represent the conceit of writers whose success relies on readers' reception, he epitomizes his awareness, especially after his various exertions for his copyrights, that he shares with Shakespeare's problems concerning authorial identities and status.

Keywords: Mark Twain; Shakespeare; authorship; irony; persona; autobiography