

The Shakespeare Authorship Controversy: The Case Summarily Stated

Who wrote the works of Shakespeare? Tradition reports that the author was a tradesman from provincial Warwickshire who was baptized Gulielmus Shakspere, a man who, to the best of our knowledge, never had a day's schooling, and yet we are told - and are expected to believe - that, in his twenties, this man began to publish (having written nothing before in the whole of his life!) the most erudite works of literature the world has ever seen. We are told by traditionalists that this man (who literally could not spell his own name the same way twice) wrote poems and plays that are dense in their reliance on the literature of classical antiquity as well as Continental verse and narrative which had not even been translated into English in Shakespeare's day. We are told that this man, who never owned so much as a single book, wrote, without any education or apprenticeship in the literary and dramatic arts, poems and plays that invoke the legends of hundreds of figures from Greek and Roman mythology - poems and plays that demonstrate the writer's easy familiarity with and competence in Latin, Greek, Italian and French - poems and plays demonstrative of a linguistic facility so agile and confident that he sometimes would compose (as in scenes such as *Henry the Fifth* III. iv) in languages other than English.

When, where and from whom did this man who never traveled farther than London from his hometown, and who reputedly spent the years prior to his early marriage in apprenticeship to a butcher, supposedly learn all of this? In what educational domain did he acquire the ability to become the rarest of men: the chief wordsmith of the English language - a linguistic creator whose fecundity humbles Milton and overrides the Bible? How was it that he appeared in London, suddenly and with no preparation - like a genie from a lamp - an urbane, cultivated, accomplished, knowledgeable and unrivaled poet; a masterful practitioner of rhetoric; a scholar of his own and other nations' literatures, histories, customs, painting and sculpture; a man intimately versed in the character of many ages' political and religious disputes - both foreign and domestic? Where did he study astronomy, read Copernicus, become capable in the field of medicine, and demonstrate remarkable competence in and familiarity with English case law as well as Continental civil law? Where did he learn the arcane jargon of aristocratic sport and military command if all he did for the first half of his life was chop meat in a provincial and virtually bookless burg of perhaps forty families' size (none of which families, incidentally, although they knew him well, ever acknowledged their townsman as a poet, playwright or even a writer)?

Can anyone truly think the scenario likely? Is this - a process that defies everything we know about the development of literary creativity and skill - a credible explanation of how Shakespeare attained the highest achievements in literary art? Are we seriously to believe that a man of no education, who wrote no letters (nor received any from anyone [they must have known he couldn't read]), who wrote absolutely nothing - not so much as a mundane shopping list (and who, though wealthy, owned no books even at the end of his life) - who had no journeyman experience in the literary arts, no apprenticeship or tutelage in the classics, no foundation in music, law, statecraft, theology, aristocratic sport or courtly custom - would sit down at a desk in his mid-twenties and, in his first foray into writing, compose the works of Shakespeare? Would

such a man - the world's greatest wordsmith and lover of language - not have taught his own family to read and write rather than leave them gaping illiterates? Would the only literate member of his extended family (his son-in-law) praise, in print, fellow Warwickshire poet Michael Drayton but never write a line acknowledging that his own father-in-law was England's most accomplished poet-dramatist (or even a writer)? Would this Shakespeare not have been feted and received tributes like his peers-rather than fail in his own lifetime to be acknowledged as a poet or playwright by anyone in letters, memorandae, dedications or diary entries?

If the writer who called himself Shakespeare were this rustic from Stratford-Upon-Avon, he is the most improbable person ever to have lived, and his story is the most implausible tale in history - one that, as Concordia University professors of psychological and educational theory Drs Kevin Simpson and Steven Steffens have demonstrated, utterly defies rational explanation and overthrows everything that learning theorists and psychologists of cognitive development know about how creative talents are cultivated and mature.

How likely, therefore, is it that this man from Stratford-Upon-Avon - this man who, in his own day, no literary figure (not even Phillip Henslowe, the age's chief diarist of the theatre) acknowledged as so much as an acquaintance - was the author of the works that bear the name of William Shakespeare? More scholars, each year, swell the ranks of those of us who say that whoever Shakespeare was, he was not this pedestrian merchant from Warwickshire for which there is no evidence of any kind of literary career - let alone any evidence for his being, in A.L. Rowse's words, "the best-known dramatist" of the age.

But if Shakespeare were not this man from Stratford-Upon-Avon, who was he? I would propose that the most probable candidate is Edward de Vere, the Lord Great Chamberlain of England and the 17th earl of Oxford - a brilliant poet and playwright who also was a favourite of the Queen as well as her ward and the son-in-law of her chief minister of state, William Cecil, the first Baron Burghley, Lord Treasurer of England.

Unlike the butcher from Stratford, Edward de Vere was nurtured in the arts of poetry and stagecraft from his youth. Steeped in the art of the theatre, Edward and his father were the patrons of one of England's earliest acting companies that performed under aristocratic patronage. Following his father's death, the Queen directed that Edward be raised in the home of the man who owned the largest library in England. He was tutored by England's finest scholars - men such as Lawrence Nowell (owner of the world's only copy of the *Beowulf* manuscript) and Sir Thomas Smith (Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge University and Ambassador to France); he was multi-lingual, a fluent speaker and writer of Latin, Italian and French. He traveled extensively on the European Continent (and to almost [and perhaps] all the Italian sites recorded in the Shakespeare plays - sojourns that, as Richard Roe has meticulously demonstrated in his book, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy: Retracing the Bard's Unknown Travels*, the Shakespeare writer had to have undertaken); he owned a house in Venice; John Lyly, the playwright, was his personal secretary (as was the dramatist, Anthony Munday). He received degrees from both Oxford University and Cambridge University before he was 17 years old. To study law, he matriculated at Gray's Inn - one of the revered Inns of Court - and the Inn, incidentally, that was one of the principal sites of theatrical performance in late sixteenth-century London. He created lavish entertainment for the Queen and her Court, was a patron of writers

and playwrights, and he held the lease to the Blackfriars Theatre, the principal private theatre in London. He was an acclaimed writer, poet and playwright in his own lifetime; indeed, he was recognized as the foremost writer of his age by Henry Peacham, declared the "most excellent" of all Elizabethan court poets by William Webbe and acknowledged by George Puttenham as the best of those Elizabethan writers who, as Puttenham revealed in *The Arte of English Poesie*, were publishing without appending their own names to their works.

Oxford also received a host of literary dedications that distinguished him as pre-eminent among writers of the Elizabethan Age; Angel Day, for example, hailed him as a writer "sacred to the Muses"; Edmund Spenser praised him in *The Fairie Queene*, and John Brooke congratulated Cambridge University for its special recognition and commendation of Oxford's "rare learning." By contrast, to the man who supposedly brought the Renaissance to England - butcher-turned-poet and playwright Will Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon - no one in his own lifetime ever dedicated a thing. Moreover, when Stratford Will died, he was buried in a grave that did not even bear his name but chewed out, instead, some doggerel curse against anyone who would disturb his corpse. His passing was not marked with any of the mourning and ceremony that attended the passing of far less notable (and now all-but-forgotten) writers of the day. Despite possessing wealth that, as Stratfordian Professor Stanley Wells has noted, made him the equivalent of a modern millionaire, he created no fellowships and (unlike the actor, Edward Alleyn, who founded Dulwich College), he endowed no colleges or universities (let alone the grammar school that stood directly across the street from his home); he founded no libraries nor supplied them; he patronized no scholars or writers, nor did he fund any legacies in arts or letters.

The case for Edward de Vere as the pseudonymous author of the Shakespeare canon, of course, is one that requires more than a few summary statements for an adequate presentation. Massive and detailed scholarly investigations by some of America's, Britain's and Europe's best scholars are available for study by those who may wish to join their efforts with others in order to help us attain a definitive resolution to the Shakespeare Authorship Question and impart to the true author of the works of Shakespeare the long-neglected distinction that is his due. To the pursuit of this end, an international convocation of scholars gathers each year to explore and share the latest research on the Authorship Question at Concordia University's Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference - an annual assembly, convened by the university's Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre, to which all who are interested in seeing the Shakespeare Authorship Question debated, studied and resolved are invited.

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