Did Shakespeare Really Write His Plays? A Few Theories Examined

By Paul Hechinger | 5 years ago

If the Kennedy assassination doesn’t interest you, and you’ve got a few extra years on your hands, you might want to look into the debate over who wrote William Shakespeare’s plays.

Welcome to the morass.

Though the Shakespeare authorship question has been a topic of lively controversy for nearly two centuries now, it’s likely to generate some renewed debate this week. That’s because of the release of the new movie Anonymous (in theaters October 28), a period historical thriller, directed by Roland Emmerich (The Day After Tomorrow, Independence Day) and based on the theory that someone else wrote the plays normally attributed to Shakespeare.

In the case of the new movie, that someone is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (played by Rhys Ifans), a cultured aristocrat in the court of Queen Elizabeth I (played variously by Joely Richardson and Vanessa Redgrave).

There are websites and even whole societies devoted to the proposition that the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare’s plays. And among those who believe that Shakespeare didn’t write his own plays, de Vere can be said to be the leading contender to unseat the Bard, but he’s far from the only one – there have been dozens of candidates proposed and thousands of books and articles written on the so-called Shakespeare authorship question.

As in the plays themselves, there are many warring factions and charges of dark conspiracies to suppress the truth, so it’s with some trepidation that we enter these waters at all.

But let’s start with a little history.

Other than the plays themselves, we have precious little documentary evidence about Shakespeare. Among the meager items: a few signatures, a record of his marriage to Anne Hathaway, a strange three-page will, some papers detailing business transactions totally unrelated to writing, and just two portraits. No record of his schooling. Not one single manuscript in his own hand of even a fragment of his amazing body of work.

History abhors a vacuum, especially when it’s in the form of a lack of written evidence about one of the world’s greatest writers. Although scholars desperately searched for documentation to flesh out Shakespeare’s biography in the decades after his death, they found very little, and, to make matters more confusing, much of what they found was fraudulent.

But it’s especially interesting to note that for a span of more than two centuries after his death, no one even suggested that the Shakespeare of Stratford was not the author of his own plays.

In fact, the first person to make the argument did it as a joke, as Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro points out in his book Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare? In 1848, a young Lutheran scholar from Pennsylvania named Samuel Mosheim Schmucker, dismayed about the academic trend of using historical and biographical evidence to doubt the existence of Christ, argued that the same approaches could be used to argue that Shakespeare never existed. But he meant it all as a parody.

Shapiro says that Schmucker’s forgotten book, Historic Doubts Respecting Shakespeare: Illustrating Infidel Objections Against the Bible, foreshadows all the major themes of the Shakespearean doubters: the lack of documentary evidence, a distrust of disputed texts, the improbable success of an unlikely individual, and the notion that the “official” story can only be perpetuated by general ignorance and conspiracy by the establishment.

“Schmucker has a great time of it,” writes Shapiro, “mostly because it never entered his head that his readers could seriously imagine that Shakespeare wasn’t Shakespeare.”

But, if anything, the joke was on Schmucker.

A mere few years later, the suggestion that Shakespeare’s biography just didn’t jibe with his amazing body of work was all the rage. How could an untraveled, poorly-schooled commoner have written so widely on topics about which he would have had no first-hand knowledge – court intrigue, the legal process, life in other countries, even stories and information that had never been translated into English?

The great minds who have asked these questions are legion.

Mark Twain, one of the most famous doubters, author of the essay “Is Shakespeare Dead?” wrote: “So far as anybody actually knows and can prove, Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon never wrote a play in his life.”

“I am ‘sort of’ haunted by the conviction,” wrote novelist Henry James, “that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world.”

Sigmund Freud, whose own work is often equated with Shakespeare’s in its cultural impact and who drew heavily on Hamlet for some of his own theories, also believed that someone other than the actor from Stratford wrote the plays. “It is undeniably painful to all of us,” he said, “that even now we do not know who was the author of the Comedies, Tragedies and Sonnets of Shakespeare.”

“I can hardly think it was the Stratford boy,” wrote Charlie Chaplin of the plays. “Whoever wrote them had an aristocratic attitude.”

Such famous doubters have been joined by everyone from Orson Welles to Helen Keller.

Even Malcolm X became “intrigued over the Shakespearean dilemma,” as he referred to it in his Autobiography. “If Shakespeare existed, he was then the top poet around,” the modern revolutionary leader wondered, asking why he didn’t work on the King James Bible. “If he existed, why didn’t King James use him?”

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Shakespeare authorship theories have maintained an upward trajectory in popular discourse, even if they’ve never gained even a foothold among establishment Shakespeareans.

Now, of course, authorship theories are going viral, with a host of websites dedicated to exploring the question.

Take, for example, the Shakespearean Authorship Trust, a society that’s been around since 1922, whose current chairman, actor Mark Rylance, along with fellow doubter Derek Jacobi, appears in Anonymous.

There’s the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition, which, under the website DoubtAboutWill.org, sponsors the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt about the Identity of William Shakespeare, a petition that has more than 2000 signatories.

So there are lots of people who feel there are lots of reasons to think Shakespeare didn’t write his own plays. But who do they think wrote them? Let’s take a look at the arguments for some of the most popular authorship contenders, beginning with Sir Francis Bacon.

**NEXT: The case for Sir Francis**

Sir Francis Bacon, Baron Varulam, Viscount of St. Albans (1561 – 1621) emerged as the first candidate to replace Shakespeare. As a leading figure of the English Renaissance, he certainly had the biography for it: educated at Cambridge, widely traveled, Bacon was a famous philosopher, one of the inventors of the scientific method, who also led a literary society. He was also the ultimate royal insider – in addition to holding other positions, he was a member of the Privy Council and held the title of Lord Chancellor.

The case for Bacon’s authorship was first made by an American author, Delia Bacon – no relation. While people had questioned Shakespeare’s authorship, she was the first person to name an alternative, though she believed that Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays in collaboration with other leading minds of the time, like Sir Walter Raleigh and Edmund Spenser.

The charge of literary collaboration is now, in fact, a relatively non-controversial one. Today, many of Shakespeare’s plays are believed to have been written with other authors – just not the ones Delia Bacon pointed to.

According to Delia Bacon, the reason that Sir Francis and his learned cabal wanted to conceal their own identities was the so-called “stigma of print,” the notion that being a playwright would be an ignominious career-ender for aristocratic politicians.

But Delia Bacon further suggested that the group needed to remain anonymous because they had a subversive political agenda: they were, she wrote, “a little clique of disappointed and defeated politicians who undertook to organize a popular opposition against the government.” According to her, drama was politics by other means: “Driven from one field, they showed themselves in another,” she wrote. “Driven from the open field, they fought in secret.”

Delia Bacon was admired by Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson, though the latter two cooled on her authorship theories.

Miss Bacon and her like-minded contemporaries relied heavily on the arguments that the plays contained “ciphers” or coded messages about politics and also about their true authors. (This was an idea that arose after her friend, Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, told her that Sir Francis had himself created secret codes.) Others have suggested that Bacon’s “signature” in the form of an elaborate code is “embedded” in some of Shakespeare’s plays.

Orville Ward Owen's 'cipher wheel'

One scholar at the time went so far as to produce an enormous “cipher wheel” composed of a 1000-foot piece of cloth that contained the texts of Shakespeare and others for easy comparison and decryption. He claimed that by deciphering codes, he’d discovered the location of a box, buried under the Wye River, that contained documents that would prove Sir Francis’s authorship. But a dredging of the area came up with nothing.

The argument for Sir Francis Bacon has largely been supplanted by other theories, but it still has vigorous proponents, as represented by the Francis Bacon Society, founded in 1886, publishers of the journal Baconiana.

**NEXT: Perhaps literary rival Christopher Marlowe was the Bard?**

Even more intrigue surrounds the candidacy of Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593) as the author of Shakespeare’s plays. There’s no question he’s got the literary pedigree: with Tamburlaine the Great, he virtually invented the blank verse play, and it was followed by such classics as The Jew of Malta and Edward II.

Computer comparisons have apparently found word patterns and usage to be nearly identical in the work of the two playwrights.

But it’s Marlowe’s biography, including the speculation that he was a spy for the Crown, that’s probably fueled Marlowe’s Shakespeare authorship supporters.

Critics of the Marlowe theory point out that he died in a barroom brawl in 1593 – and that Shakespeare’s plays continued to appear for another 21 years until 1614.

But “Marlovians” say that only strengthens their case. Marlowe was about to be arrested – and possibly executed – and they say that he faked his own death, and lived on for years, possibly on the Continent, where he continued to write the plays attributed to Shakespeare. (The two playwrights, Marlovians point out, were born two months apart.)

The Marlowe theory was the subject of a PBS Frontline documentary, Much Ado About Something, in 2002:

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550 -1604) was a relatively late entrant into the Shakespeare authorship wars, but for the past nine decades, Oxfordians, as they’ve come to be known, have presented the dominant challenge to Stratfordians, that is, to those who believe William Shakespeare wrote his own plays.

The candidacy of the Earl of Oxford was first proposed in 1920 by the unfortunately named J.T. Looney (though it’s pronounced “loney”) in his book Shakespeare Identified. Since then, the case for de Vere’s authorship has been bolstered by famous supporters such as Sigmund Freud, as well as by the formation of Oxford societies on both sides of the Atlantic, including one formed by a descendent of de Vere himself.

Now, with the movie Anonymous, the argument for the Earl of Oxford is getting the big screen treatment.

Actually, it’s not the first time the theory has been mentioned on the big screen. Although it’s just a few lines, Oxfordians like to argue they received support from Shakespearean actor Leslie Howard in a movie he made in 1941.

Oxfordians argue that de Vere was highly educated, trained as a lawyer (which they say explains the plays’ ease in dealing with legal matters), and well-connected to the theatrical world. They say that he was not only well-traveled, but he made trips to exactly the locations that are used as settings in Shakespeare’s plays.

For example, de Vere was famously kidnapped by pirates in the English Channel who then left him stripped naked on Denmark’s shore. Oxfordians, who say there are many clues in Hamlet that point to de Vere’s authorship, point out that Hamlet describes himself as “set naked” in the kingdom after he encounters buccaneers. They further say that Hamlet’s tangle with pirates is nowhere to be found in any of the written sources of the play.

Or there’s this fascinating tidbit: de Vere’s brother-in-law once wrote a letter to de Vere mentioning a banquet he attended with two courtiers named… Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Those letters, Oxfordians contend, were private.

In fact, Hamlet is pretty much an ur-text for Oxfordians, with each of its characters standing in for a real-life figure in Elizabeth’s court. According to this view, Polonius is in fact William Cecil, Lord Burghley, trusted advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, who herself would be represented as Queen Gertrude, a none-too-flattering comparison that would likely have condemned its high-born author to death.

This interpretation would also suggest that Polonius’s daughter Ophelia is Lord Burghley’s daughter Anne, who married… wait for it… Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford.

Which of course would mean that Hamlet was really a disguised Earl of Oxford and that the play would have been both autobiographical and treasonous.

Hence the need to hide the identity of its true author.

“Once you understand Hamlet as an expose of Elizabeth’s court, with Shakespeare himself as the hero,” says Charles Beauclerk, a leading Oxfordian who is also a direct descendant of de Vere, “you realize that it would have been impossible for William of Stratford to have written such a satire and survived to tell the tale.”

It also would mean that the entire play of Hamlet could perhaps be said to function just like its own famous play-within-a-play. (A play-within-a-play-within-a-play?)

Oxfordians say de Vere was one of Queen Elizabeth’s favorites – and, some say, much more, which would also explain the need to cover up his authorship. Some say de Vere and the Queen fathered an illegitimate son; others go even further to argue that de Vere was Queen Elizabeth’s illegitimate son, who then had an incestuous relationship with the so-called Virgin Queen, the result of which was another illegitimate son. These theories, by conflating Shakespeare’s authorship with the problem of Tudor succession, raise the political and historical stakes by turning the argument into a question of political conspiracy: according to this twisted family history, both de Vere and his putative son had more of a claim to the throne than James I, who succeeded Elizabeth.

The Oxfordian authorship theory has also had the distinction of being the subject of arguments before Supreme Court justices in a famous moot court argument. Here’s an excerpt:

You can see the whole argument on C-SPAN’s website. Just like real cases before the Supreme Court, this one left advocates on both sides trying to spin justices’ opinions and claim victory.

**NEXT: The case for Shakespeare himself**

Of course, the dominant view is still that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, with a few partial collaborators along the way, especially for some of the later works. Among literature professors, academics, and established mainstream scholars, it’s not merely the most popular theory, it’s the only theory – not even a theory, really, but a closed question.

For Stratfordians, the appropriate non-literary comparison to the Shakespeare authorship question isn’t really the Kennedy assassination. For them, the more likely comparison would be the so-called debate over Darwin’s theory of evolution, in which Stratfordians would view themselves as Darwinians.

Stratfordians acknowledge that there is missing information and little contemporary biographical documentation, but they emphasize that there is not a total absence of evidence and that what does exist all points to William Shakespeare of Stratford, and not to someone else. There are the printed plays themselves, the records of theater companies, and the comments of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, including Ben Jonson.

Stratfordians may suffer from the disadvantage that their evidence tends to be of the more prosaic variety and doesn’t boast hidden codes, shrouded mysteries, or powerful conspiracies – in short, elements similar to those that draw us to the work itself.

For example, Stratfordians concede that there’s not much documentation about the kind of schooling that Shakespeare received as a youth in Stratford, but, they say, there’s not much documentation about the kind of schooling that anyone received in Stratford at the time.

And while there are no extant written manuscripts, Columbia’s James Shapiro points out that there were printed versions of the plays at the time that incorporated changes that could only have been made by Shakespeare himself, not by the Earl of Oxford or Christopher Marlowe, or others, from afar.

Shapiro also points to a rewritten epilogue for a special royal performance of Henry IV, Part II, which is, he says, “the closest we ever get in his plays to hearing Shakespeare speak for and as himself.” Shapiro says: “It’s inconceivable that any of the rival candidates for the authorship of the plays associated with the court” could have possibly stood on stage to deliver that epilogue.

Stratfordians are accused by the doubters of self-interestedly defending the status quo, on which, it is alleged, everything from their livelihoods to the income generated from Shakespeare’s birthplace, relies.

Both sides feel beleaguered – the anti-Stratfordians because they feel that they’ve gotten a raw deal by the establishment over the centuries and Stratfordians because they feel exhausted by what they see as a series of never-ending time-wasting arguments.

In the 1970s, Shakespeare biographer Samuel Schoenbaum wrote that the “voluminousness” of “lunatic rubbish” that questioned Shakespeare’s authorship was “matched only by its intrinsic worthlessness.”

But more recently, Shapiro, whose book Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare? has perhaps placed him at the forefront of the Stratfordians, thought it might not be worthless to look into how and why those authorship theories arose. He thinks it shows more about how we read than it does about Shakespeare. In other words, the fault, to paraphrase Julius Caesar, is not in our Bard but in ourselves.

Shapiro ascribes the long-term interest in Shakespeare authorship theories in large part to the modern penchant for hunting down biographical or autobiographical elements in art. He says it’s no coincidence that fascination with Shakespeare authorship arose alongside the development of the modern murder mystery.

And he says that current popular interest in the topic parallels our society’s obsession with conspiracy theories.

Last year, while Anonymous was being filmed, Shapiro wrote in an Los Angeles Times op-ed piece that it was “one more sign that conspiracy theories about the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays have gone mainstream.”

As an English professor, he’s imagining the flood of questions teachers will get from students.

“Sure, it’s only a movie,” he wrote, “but try explaining that to schoolteachers who will soon be confronted by students arguing that the received histories of Elizabethan England and its greatest poet are lies — and that their teachers, in suppressing the truth, are party to this conspiracy.”

Shapiro also says that the doubters’ outlook reflects an inability to grasp the greatness of the work itself.

“What I find most disheartening about the claim that Shakespeare of Stratford lacked the life experiences to have written the plays is that it diminishes the very thing that makes him so exceptional: his imagination,” he writes.

Harold Bloom, in some ways a sort of Falstaffian figure himself, says Shakespeare’s imagination was so large that it actually changed our consciousness, changed the very way we think. The title of his landmark reading of the plays says it all – Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. It’s just difficult to get our minds around a genius so large.

In other words, Shakespeare’s achievement is so enormous that it’s hard to believe that anybody wrote it all, alone or in conjunction with others, openly or secretly. The resulting body of work has led critics to point out the dilemma: if you think Shakespeare didn’t write his plays, you have to believe in vast arrays of impossible plots, and, if you think he did, then you have to believe in an impossible talent.