

Why Shakespeare Was Shakespeare

Since the release of the film 'Anonymous' in 2011, the odds have increased dramatically of being cornered in a pub and informed that the works of Shakespeare were actually written by the Earl of Oxford (or Sir Francis Bacon, or Christopher Marlowe, or space aliens). [1]Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, another candidate for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays [Public Domain], via Wikipedia Commons So here's a quick breakdown of the reasons often proffered as to why William Shakespeare of Stratford couldn't have written all those wonderful plays, and how those reasons can be rebutted:

1. Someone with only a grammar school education couldn't have written plays with so many classical allusions?

?but a grammar school education was very different in the sixteenth century. Verses were written, classical drama studied, and many schools expected of their pupils fluency in Latin. Rhetoric lessons had boys dispute against one another to improve their persuasive techniques. An educational system grounded in memorization would have allowed young boys to retain vast sections of classical texts.

Crucial to grammar school lessons in the early modern period were exercises of translating to and from Latin. Students were taught rhetoric, persuasive speech, and how to construct good prose.

2. No manuscripts survive in Shakespeare's hand?

?but relatively few manuscripts in any early modern playwright's hand survived, because playwrights rarely published their own works in Renaissance England.

Once Shakespeare sold the initial copy to the playing company, he lost all legal claim to his works. If they were published, they were given to the printers by the company, or they were pirated by audience members or individual actors (consider quarto 1 of Hamlet, in which all of Marcellus's lines are correct, but many other character's lines mangled).

When only one manuscript survives in the playwright's hand, and is then copied out for prompt books and presentation copies, it's amazing anything consistent survives at all. And as for the inconsistent spelling of Shakespeare's name, take a look at Marlowe's signature: often times he writes his name 'Marley'. Spelling, even of surnames, wasn't consistent at that time.

[2]The Signature of Christopher Marlowe [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons 3. A playwright had to know the court to write about the court in such intimate detail?

?but the theory that writing must be autobiographical is relatively recent, largely propagated by Mark Twain. In fact, no one seems to question the disparity between the life and the works of say, John Webster or even

Michael Chabon.

Delia Bacon, who popularised the theory that there must be an explanation for the gap between the life in the works, was undergoing a personal and theological crisis at the time when she wrote on the authorship question, and ended her life in an asylum.

The sheer variety of his plays proves that William Shakespeare couldn't have written all from life. The playwright of that body of work couldn't have been Pistol and Richard II, Snug the Joiner and Lady Macbeth. Surely to assume one can only write one has lived is doing a disservice to the tremendous capacity of the human imagination.

Conclusion

It's true that Mark Twain, Henry James, and Orson Welles are all advocates of the theory that Shakespeare isn't Shakespeare. But it's this scholar's belief that the assertions of the authorship controversy are all too often based around fundamental misunderstandings of the function of the author in early modern England? and maybe even a little bit of class snobbery.

[3]Sir Francis Bacon, another candidate:some believe the plays use a Baconian cipher revealing Bacon as the true playwright [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

And at the end of the day, there's the question of Occam's Razor. The explanations for why another writer would have posed as Shakespeare include hidden incest, vast conspiracies, secret ciphers, and political intrigue. Isn't it more realistic to have faith in William Shakespeare? Especially given that he was recognised by contemporary playwrights:

Shakespeare acted in Ben Jonson's play *Every Man in his Humour* in 1598, so it's likely Jonson knew Shakespeare personally. Jonson wrote in his private papers of Shakespeare, 'I loved the man, and do honour his memory (on this side Idolatry) as much as any. He was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature; had an excellent fancy; brave notions, and gentle expressions'. Jonson's poem 'To the Memory of My Beloved Master Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us' was included in the prefatory material to the first folio.

Others who wrote of Shakespeare the man and therefore must have been deceived by or involved in any authorship conspiracy include actors John Heminges and Henry Condell, and playwrights Thomas Heywood, John Webster, and Francis Beaumont.

For a more detailed analysis of the Shakespeare authorship controversy, check out James Shapiro's comprehensive and engaging book *Contested Will*, or to hear the other side of the argument, visit the websites of the Bacon Society or the [Shakespeare-Oxford Society](#) [4].

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[1]

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[3] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francis_Bacon.jpg

[4] <http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com/>