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History of Doubts Surrounding the Authorship of Shakespeare's Works

1728 -

Publication of Captain Goulding's *Essay Against Too Much Reading* in which he comments on the background Shakespeare would require for his historical plays and suggests that Shakespeare probably had to keep "one of those chuckle-pated Historians for his particular Associate...or he might have starvd upon his History." Goulding tells us that he had this from "one of his (Shakespeare's) intimate Acquaintance."

1769 -

Publication of *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense*, an anonymous allegory which describes a profligate Shakespeare casting "his Eye upon a common place Book, in which was contained, an Infinite Variety of Modes and Forms, to express all the different Sentiments of the human Mind, together with Rules for their Combinations and Connections upon every Subject or Occasion that might Occur in Dramatic Writing..."

1785 -

James Wilmot, attributed authorship to Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam.

1786 -

The Story of the Learned Pig, an anonymous allegory by an "Officer of the Royal Navy," in which The Pig describes himself as having variously been a greyhound, deer, bear and a human being (after taking possession of a body) who worked as horseholder at a playhouse where he met the "Immortal Shakespeare" who's he reports didn't "run his country for deer-stealing" and didn't father the various plays, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *Midsummer's Night Dream*. Instead the Pig confesses to be author.

1848 -

In *The Romance of Yachting* by Joseph C. Hart, a former American consul at Santa Cruz, provides Considerable anti-Stratfordian opinion. Favors Jonson as probable author of Shakespeare's plays.

1852 -

August issue of *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* contained an anonymous article, "Who Wrote Shakespeare" The author suggests that Shakespeare "kept a poet."

1856 -

Bacon is proposed as author of Shakespeare's plays in *Putnam's Monthly* (January issue) which contained "Shakespeare and His Plays: An Inquiry Concerning Them" by Delia Bacon, an American bearing no family relationship to Francis Bacon.

1857 -

Publication of *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, a book by Delia Bacon in which she considers the possibility of several authors. Nathaniel Hawthorne helped Delia Bacon publish this book, for which he contributed a preface.

1891/92 -

James Greenstreet, a British archivist, in a series of essays in *The Genealogist*, proposed that William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby was author of the Shakespeare plays.

1892 -

Our English Homer listed several writers as a group who were responsible for writing Shakespeare's works: Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Nashe, Lodge, Bacon and others.

1895 -

It Was Marlowe: A Story of the Secret of Three Centuries, a novel by Wilbur Ziegler, proposed that Marlowe, Raleigh, and the Earl of Rutland were authors of the Shakespearean canon.

1903 -

Henry James in a letter to Miss Violet Hunt says "I am 'a sort of' haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practised on a patient world."

1908 -

Sir George Greenwood, scholar and Member of Parliament, exposed the major arguments and scholarship against the Stratford man as author of the Shakespearean canon in his book, *The Shakespeare Problem Restated*, the first in a series of volumes that Sir George devoted to the subject.

1910 -

Bacon Is Shakespeare by Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence (New York, John McBride Co.) cited arguments that Bacon is Shakespeare and that the following are distinguished men who perceived "the truth respecting the real authorship of the Plays:"

Lord Palmerston, British statesman, 1784-1865.-Lord Houghton, British statesman, 1809-1885 (better known as Richard Monckton Milnes). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, British critic and poet, 1772-1834-John Bright, British statesman, 1811-1889 ("Any man that believes that William Shakespeare of Stratford wrote *Hamlet* or *Lear* is a fool.") Ralph Waldo Emerson, American philosopher and poet, 1803-1882

--John Greenleaf Whittier, American poet, 1807-1892 ("Whether Bacon wrote the wonderful plays or not, I am quite sure the man Shakspeare neither did nor could.")

--Dr. W. H. Furness, eminent American scholar and father of the editor of the Variorum, 1802-1891 ("I am one of the many who have never been able to bring the life of William Shakepeare and the plays of Shakespeare within planetary space of each other.")--Mark Twain, American author and humorist, 1835-1910

--Prince Otto von Bismarck, 1815-1898

1915 -

The Derbyite theory, suggesting that William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby was the true author behind the Shakespeare name, was revived by Robert Fraser in *The Silent Shakespeare*.

1919 -

Abel Lefranc, a French scholar, also supports the Derbyite theory in his *Sous le Masque de "William Shakespeare": William Stanley, VI Comte de Derby*.

1920 - J. Thomas Looney, British schoolmaster and scholar, evolved the theory of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford as author in his book, *"Shakespeare" Identified in Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*.

1922 -

The Shakespeare Fellowship, an organization devoted to research on the Shakespearean authorship, is formed with honorary president Sir George Greenwood, and officers including J. T. Looney, Colonel B. R. Ward (father of the biographer of Edward de Vere) and Abel Lefranc.

1926 -

Sigmund Freud adopts J. Thomas Looney's theory on the 17th Earl of Oxford. (One of Freud's teachers, Theodor Meynert, had believed in Bacon as the true author.) Freud later confirmed this advocacy in 1935 with the revision of his *Autobiographical Study*.

1930 -

Canon Gerald Rendall, Gladstone professor of Greek at Liverpool's University College, publishes *Shakespeare Sonnets and Edward de Vere* --another book that influenced Sigmund Freud.

1930 -

Eva Turner Clark publishes a book, *Shakespeare's Plays in the Order of Their Writing*, which proposes that the 17th Earl of Oxford wrote the plays and at a much earlier date than supposed.

1943 -

Alden Brooks advocates the candidacy of Sir Edward Dyer as author in his book, *Will Shakspeare and the Dyer's Hand*.

1952 -

Dr. A. W. Titherley, onetime dean of the faculty of science at the University of Liverpool wrote *Shakespeare's Identity* in which he tried to establish the Derbyite theory through a series of scientific formulas.

1955 -

The argument over the authorship of Shakespeare continues as strong as ever, with more and more people interested in the question. The greatest difficulty about the Oxford candidacy for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, from a scholar's point of view, is the fact that the seventeenth Earl of Oxford died in 1604. No scholars doubt that many of the greatest plays were produced subsequent to this date: *King Lear* (c. 1605-6), *Macbeth*(c.1606-7), *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606-7), *Coriolanus* (c. 1608), *Cymbeline* (c. 1608-10), *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609-11), *The Tempest* (c. 1611), and *Henry VIII* (1613), to name the most important. A great deal of careful work has been done on dating in the last 150 years, so much so that many Oxfordians concede the lateness of production of many of these plays, arguing instead that Oxford wrote them before he died, and that they were brought out as needed for performance, sometimes with added contemporary references to events after 1604 in order to make them look timely.

Such an argument has to discount considerable evidence that the corpus of Shakespeare's plays is a cohesive whole showing stylistic development that can be traced into the late years, in terms of run-on lines, enjambment, use of feminine rhymes, and the like. More seriously, the argument has to posit a conspiracy of staggering proportions. Shakespeare, according to this scenario, agreed to serve as a front man for Oxford because the writing of plays was below the dignity of a great man. Shakespeare's friends in the company agreed to serve up his plays in the years after Oxford's death, publicizing the plays as by Shakespeare. Persons, who knew Shakespeare well, like Ben Jonson, went along with the fiction, writing economiastac verses for Shakespeare after his death in 1613. The acting company, especially Shakespeare's colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell, supervised the publication of all of the plays (except *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which they may have regarded as collaborations) in a handsome Folio volume in

1616, essentially the first of its kind to recognize a dramatist. Many writers poured out their praise for England's great national poet and playwright, and some of them knew Shakespeare. All of these people had to be either deceived by the presumed cover-up or, in many cases, accessories to a hoax.

What does this scenario help to explain? The idea did not occur to anyone before the nineteenth century; prior to that time, all English people proudly celebrated Shakespeare as their greatest genius. Only at an era of a newly emerging sizable middle class, when a liberal university education became the distinguishing mark of a gentleman, did it occur to anyone that Shakespeare's plays and poems could only have been the work of a university-educated gentleman. In the sixteenth century, on the other hand, education at Oxford or Cambridge focused chiefly on Latin religious and philosophical texts intended for the training of ministers and courtiers.

Some writers, like Christopher Marlowe, did attend one of the universities; others, like John Webster and Thomas Dekker, apparently did not. In either case, writers came primarily from social origins below those of the ruling class. Webster seems to have been the son of a merchant tailor; Edmund Spenser's father had been a journeyman in the art of clothmaking; Marlow's father was a shoemaker in Canterbury; Jonson's stepfather was a bricklayer. These promising young men were well educated, whether or not they went on to university, at places like the Merchant Taylor's School in London and the Westminster School. Educated beyond their social expectations when they went to university, they tended to become writers in London, where the theatre (among other opportunities) provided employment and intellectual stimulation, as well as a world of courtly and urban happenings upon which to draw for their inspiration. They could, and did, observe the goings-on of their rulers and set down compelling pictures of courtly life in their plays. They did not have to be courtiers themselves to do this, just as reporters today depict for us what happens in the centres of power without themselves being high administration officials.

Shakespeare's background is thus characteristic of the other leading writers of his time. His father was a prosperous seller of leather goods who held several prominent offices in the town, including that of high bailiff-- Stratford's principal municipal position. The King's New School in Stratford, a free grammar school, offered an excellent education, with many years of Latin-- just the kind of background needed for writing the plays and poems we have. Although school records have been destroyed by time, we cannot doubt that the town's high bailiff sent his son to this institution. Shakespeare moved to London probably in the late 1580's, at the age of about 23, and became famous in his time as an actor and, much more prominently, as London's leading playwright. He became wealthy. The profile fits the canon of plays and poems precisely, and in a way that Oxford's profile distinctly does not.

The lack of manuscripts, of handwriting samples (though we may indeed have some of Shakespeare's handwriting in some additions made to a play called *The Book of Sir Thomas More*), the uncertainties about certain periods of Shakespeare's life, are all what one would expect of a playwright of the period, even the most famous. We don't read and preserve movie scripts today, and often do not even know who wrote a movie we particularly like. Play scripts were like that in the Renaissance. They existed to enable an acting company to put on a play. The wonder is that so many of Shakespeare's plays were published at all. We have no manuscripts of plays by Marlowe or Jonson or Webster, even though some of their plays rival Shakespeare's in their literary and dramatic qualities.

No one proposes that Marlowe wasn't written by Marlowe, or Jonson by Jonson. Why is Shakespeare singled out? The answer lies mainly in his greatness; he is the best, and so he is the target of intense scrutiny and speculation. As a figure representing the Establishment in British literature, he is suspect; he is a god, and gods are to be toppled. What's more, solving mysteries is exciting, whether it be the Kennedy assassination or the Shakespeare authorship question. Sleuthing of this kind appeals to educated professionals like lawyers and businessmen who like to pursue Shakespeare as a hobby. What a treat it must be,

through ciphers and other presumed codings, or through archival research, to show that all of Western culture has been bamboozled over the centuries by a hoax, and that Shakespeare is really the Earl of Oxford.

The pleasure of such a revelation is so great that Oxford has had several predecessors as claimants; the first, in fact, was Sir Francis Bacon, followed by Marlowe and a host of others. The very fact of there having been so many claimants ought to make us suspect that the endeavour is essentially one of finding the answer to a problem that may not exist and that did not exist for English readers and theatre-goers for the first 300 years or so after Shakespeare's birth.

If Oxford was so eager that someone should "Report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied," why did he leave such enigmatic clues? Was the stigma of being a playwright so huge that he could tell no one, not even write it down for his friends? Ultimately the case collapses on lack of motive as well as lack of evidence, for it presupposes a social history of how playwrights got to be playwrights that is simply not in keeping with historical reality.