

Probing Question: Did Shakespeare really write all those plays?

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William Shakespeare

“Done to death by slanderous tongues.” So wrote William Shakespeare in his play, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Or did he? Even people who have never actually read Shakespeare have heard the theories: Shakespeare’s plays were written by Francis Bacon! Shakespeare’s plays were written by the Earl of Oxford! Shakespeare’s plays were written by anyone, anyone, but William Shakespeare!

“Lunacy,” says Patrick Cheney, Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature, gesturing to the early twentieth-century inventor of the Oxford theory, J. Thomas Looney. “The Shakespeare authorship controversy is all conspiracy. Not a single reputable scholar I know has

the least doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the plays and poems ascribed to him.”

One of the chief arguments of those who doubt his authorship is that Shakespeare lacked the education and experience to have produced such a wide-ranging body of work. Not so, argues Cheney, noting that William Shakespeare had a superior education, some of it acquired from grammar school in Stratford, but much expanded upon as an adult. Adds Cheney, research shows that even in a pre-library age, Shakespeare had a good deal of access to books. “Shakespeare was not simply a genius; he was by all accounts a voracious reader: the plots from nearly all his plays and poems come from books.”

As for lacking experience, anti-Stratfordians (as the authorship doubters are sometimes called) usually point to scenes featuring royals or to plays set in foreign countries, and argue that a provincial commoner such as Shakespeare could not have been familiar enough with these topics to have written his worldly plays. Cheney is not impressed by such arguments. “Neither royalty nor international travel has ever been a prerequisite for good fiction,” he notes. “As a member of a royal acting company, Shakespeare had plenty of opportunity to experience the courts of sovereigns first-hand. And as an avid reader of history, he could certainly re-create a foreign country in his fictions.”

The most popular of the anti-Stratfordian theories is that the plays attributed to Shakespeare were written by the Earl of Oxford. However, explains Cheney, Oxford died in 1604, and significant evidence indicates that some of Shakespeare’s work was produced years later. (For instance, *The Tempest* was influenced by a voyage to the Americas that did not occur until 1610). “The case for Oxford depends on the erasure of history,” says Cheney.

The entire authorship controversy itself “is a product of modernity,” he

adds, noting, “For over two hundred years after Shakespeare’s death, it did not occur to anyone to challenge his authorship.”

Explains Cheney, the rising middle class of the nineteenth century could not believe that a mere country stripling could have written what scholar Stephen Greenblatt calls “the most important body of imaginative literature of the last thousand years.” But those who can’t believe that a man with a grammar-school education wrote these plays and poems overlook a sobering fact of literary history: the inventors of modern English literature were overwhelmingly from the working class. “Not only was Shakespeare the son of a glover, but Ben Jonson was the son of bricklayer, and Edmund Spenser the son of a tailor, while Christopher Marlowe was the son of a butcher,” says Cheney. “The case for the Earl of Oxford is about the belief of class-conscious gentlemen that only an aristocrat could produce great works of literature. Perhaps we should let Spenser, Marlowe, and Jonson know.”

Cheney believes there is an important question now being asked about Shakespeare’s authorship, and it has nothing to do with the Earl of Oxford. Instead, it asks what kind of author William Shakespeare really was. “Was he a consummate businessman concerned only with the commercial success of his acting company, or was he also a literary poet-playwright who cared about preserving his artistic legacy?” In two recent books, Cheney has tried to reclassify Shakespeare as at once a man of the theater and a writer with a literary career: “Our fullest understanding of Shakespeare needs to come to terms with both.”

Says Cheney: “It is true, when students come into my Shakespeare courses, they typically want to ask only a single question: ‘Did Shakespeare really write all his plays?’ When they leave, I hope they’re more inclined to ask, ‘How did it come to be that the world’s greatest man of the theater also penned some of the most extraordinary poems in English?’ Shakespeare wrote those plays—and poems. Read them; see

them: listen to them. They are our great cultural inheritance, the real legacy of William Shakespeare.”

Source: By Alexa Stevenson, Research Penn State

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