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Is This the Bard We See Before Us? Or Someone Else?

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By Roger Stritmatter
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"Who's there?" That's not just the opening line of "Hamlet." When it comes to Shakespeare, that, as the melancholy Dane would say, is the question. Who's there, really, behind all those extraordinary plays and brilliant characters?

It's the authorship question, and half a millennium after the Bard wrote his works, it won't go away. But don't expect any discussion of it during Washington's Shakespeare Festival. It's missing amid all the celebrations -- just as it's always missing from official considerations of Shakespeare.

The authorship question is the elephant in the living room of modern Shakespearean criticism. According to today's Shakespeare scholars, the greatest poet of the English language was a possibly Catholic businessman and sometime actor from Stratford-upon-Avon who did well by writing. Unlike every other writer in history, he didn't put himself or his experience into his work. If he had a motive for writing, it was to earn six pounds per play. Or perhaps, after his son Hamnet died at 11, he memorialized him in "Hamlet."

These are the views promoted in a seemingly endless procession of books that roll off the presses every year -- all grounded in little tangible fact. Mark Twain quipped that every relevant fact known about the Stratford author would fit on a postcard, and another century of literary biography hasn't changed that. Shakespearean professionals begin by noting that there is a Shakespeare monument in Holy Trinity Church at Stratford and go on from there to imagine almost everything else. They have to. They have a monument without a man.

Outside the university, though, populist resistance to the author from Stratford has persisted for two centuries. Skeptics have been divided on their support for one candidate or another -- Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I or Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford -- but we all believe that the real author was forced to conceal his identity and allow his works to be published under another man's name.

We are not just unrepentant conspiracy theorists who lie awake at night concocting unverifiable historical scenarios and contriving pseudoscientific cryptograms while ignoring the undeniable facts of Shakespeare's career. We're struck by the fact that all the speculation the biographers engage in to fill the gaps in our knowledge of Shakespeare reveals a man who contradicted the literary thumbprint of his creation in every way. Their author was a huge commercial success -- but "Hamlet" satirically inveighs against buyers and sellers of land. Their author never left England -- but 16 of the plays are set in Italy or the Mediterranean. There is no evidence that their author owned any books -- but the man who wrote Shakespeare clearly devoured all the most important books of his generation.

"Shall I set down the rest of the Conjectures which constitute [Shakespeare's] giant Biography?" Twain wrote in 1909. "It would strain the unabridged Dictionary to hold them." In 1984, Richmond Crinkley, the late director of educational programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, acknowledged that "doubts about Shakespeare arose early. They have a simple and direct plausibility." Henry James was blunt: "I am 'sort of' haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world."

The list of skeptics reads like a Who's Who of the English-speaking world: Washington Irving,

James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Helen Keller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Malcolm X, Leslie Howard, Sir John Gielgud, Sir Derek Jacobi, Michael York, Jeremy Irons, Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, and many more. And the ranks keep growing.

But modern Shakespearean studies are founded on the undeviating principle that rational authorities - i.e. "Shakespeareans" -- do not discuss the authorship question. Beyond this, we seem to be deeply invested in a view of the Bard as a creator in our own image. Born to a comfortable middle-class existence, he evades the stark class realities of Elizabethan society and conquers the literary world through Will-power, re-creating the lives of kings, queens and courtiers simply by deploying his superabundant imagination.

The beguiling notion that our author could write "King Lear" without ever suffering the ostracism of Kent, the madness of a hunted Edgar, the dilemma of Cordelia or the alienation of Lear allows us to reduce the play to mere entertainment, without ever contemplating its ring of terrible authenticity. A papier-mache author who accomplishes everything through sheer genius fortifies the American myth that anything is possible if you just click your heels three times and wish hard enough.

But if a real conversation about the "A" word could take place in America's classrooms, it would be eye-opening.

First, one of the best-kept secrets of English 101 is that concealed authorship was a common practice historically, especially in 15th- to 17th-century Europe, a period known to scholars as the golden age of authorship ruses. Such colorful propagandists -- some still poorly identified -- as "Martin Marprelate," "Pasquil Cavaliero of England" and "Cuthbert Curry-Knave" punctuated the Elizabethan literary scene. At the least, this makes it plausible that even "Shakespeare" could have been a name contrived to conceal another man.

Second, art is never just about art. Drama in particular has always been controversial. At no time in English history were the consequences of violating public protocols more serious -- or the political forces inhibiting the theater more vigorous -- than during Shakespeare's age. Yet because political power was so fully concentrated in the hands of the monarch, the stage was essential as a forum for political dissent.

So it's not hard to imagine a highly placed author, a participant at the uppermost levels of court intrigue, writing plays such as "Hamlet" or "All's Well That Ends Well" for the public stage. Like Feste in "Twelfth Night," he was an "allowed fool," tolerated by a monarch who loved the theater and indulged her subjects' creativity, but tolerated no open threat to her governance. This author aired the power elites' dirty linen through literary indirection, used stage symbolism to conduct his own fiercely partisan feuds (producing such comically inept or decadent characters as Malvolio in "Twelfth Night" or Polonius in "Hamlet") and, through characters such as Cordelia, delivered unflattering truth to power.

Do we have a political problem on our hands? Of course. Not coincidentally, we also have an author equal to his literary creation.

There's abundant proof that the author of "Hamlet" saw the stage as a forum for public comment on contemporary matters and took audacious liberties. It's generally agreed that Polonius, the bumbling adviser to the Danish throne, is a thinly veiled lampoon of William Cecil, Elizabeth's most trusted confidant and adviser for 40 years.

This parody is puzzling. The author's compatriots were jailed or worse for far less grievous crimes than exposing the most powerful man in England to public scorn. How could "Shakespeare" commit such literary transgression without penalty? And what possible motive could inspire such literary

animus against a man generally regarded as one of the most honorable statesmen in English history?

Since 1920, when Englishman John Thomas Looney wrote "Shakespeare Identified," a clear solution to this enigma has been staring orthodox Shakespeareans in the face: Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford, a man known for his disregard of class protocols and his passionate devotion to the theater, was Cecil's ward and later his unhappy son-in-law. He was a man with the means, the opportunity and, above all, the motive to write "Hamlet." Frustrated in his political ambitions at court, he spent a lifetime selling off his vast inherited estates to pay his creditors and pursue his literary ambitions. Like the misanthropic Jaques in "As You Like It," he literally sold his own lands to see the lands of other men.

The most "Italianate" Englishman of his generation, he toured the Tuscan cities that are featured so prominently in Shakespearean plays, and built a house for himself in Venice only blocks from the Jewish ghetto. His life, in myriad ways, illumines the Shakespearean oeuvre and becomes the touchstone for grasping the meaning of many obscure passages in the plays.

But consider the consequences of placing De Vere's name on the title page of "Hamlet." The lampoon of the author's father-in-law would have been embarrassingly obvious to every Joan and Jack. Cecil's son, the unpopular principle secretary for King James when "Hamlet" was first published in 1603-04, would have seen his father humiliated in print and onstage. Like Laertes, he could not have refrained from desperate action to defend his family honor.

So it's not hard to understand why those involved in creating the Shakespearean myth at the highest levels may have engaged in what Justice Stevens called an "imaginative conspiracy." Change the author's name, and the political problem disappears. And suddenly it becomes clear who's there. What better time to talk about it than now?

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