
The Shakespeare Enigma. Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2004.

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The “enigma” is Shakespeare himself in this recent release from Films for the Humanities & Sciences. The documentary tackles the age-old authorship controversy, acknowledging first that there ought to be some intrinsic connections between the poet/playwright and the works. Dissatisfaction on this score with the traditionally identified “Shake-speare” – Will Shakspere of Stratford – has prompted several generations of scholars and researchers to seek a better candidate as the true author of the Shakespeare canon.

The film divides its 51 minutes pretty evenly between discussions of Stratford Will, Sir Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and includes some vignettes from a few plays. First, defending orthodoxy, is Shakespeare scholar Professor Stanley Wells whose vested interest in the issue, as head of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, is well known. He asserts that all who question the traditional identification are “crackpots” (thus sneeringly condemning Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Charles Chaplin, Sigmund Freud, Supreme Court Justices John Paul Stevens and Lewis F. Powell and Harry Blackmun, Orson Welles, Michael York, Derek Jacobi, and countless other luminaries). Admissions concerning the gaps in the biography of the Stratford grain merchant – no grammar school records, lost years until 1592, etc. – are interspersed with the standard Stratfordian inventions and complete conjectures: for example, Shakespeare performed glorious transformations on plots he plagiarized, and “he tired” eventually of theater arts and retired to Stratford, where he scrawled out the meager six signatures that comprise all that remains of documentary evidence. Tracy Borman of the Public Records Office tries to suggest that he dictated his last will and testament so that his poetic flair was “lost in translation” and that his sickness was responsible for the fact that his signatures look like the work of an illiterate grain merchant. (The theory of illness doesn’t explain why the three signatures from earlier years are even worse.) We cut back to Stanley Wells, lying to us about “masses of evidence” concerning the Stratford gent, and insisting that doubting orthodoxy amounts to “snobbery,” “crackpot theory,” and a “slandering” of the town of Stratford.

The earliest alternate candidate was “lawyer, philosopher, scientist” Francis Bacon, whose 17th-century home we next see in ruins. Francis Carr, a Baconian for more than fifty years, has accused the Stratford Birthplace Trust of false advertising. He claims that Will Shakspere wrote nothing, probably not even his signa-

tures, and that Shake-speare was a pseudonym adopted because of the danger of being tried for treason, given the touchy nature of especially the history plays. Geerhardt's *Portrait of a Lady* may be a painting of a pregnant Elizabeth I, the "Virgin Queen," commissioned by Bacon after Elizabeth, his mother, had died. Although reliance on codes and ciphers bogs down the Baconian case, a Northumberland document and assorted other oddities put forth as evidence seem compelling. The philosophy expounded in the essays in Bacon's own name – essentially, observe Nature (including human nature) – is supposedly reflected in Shakespeare's plays. Circumstantial evidence seems strong, but artistic connection seems weak. If nothing else, the Baconians are responsible, admits the narrator, for "a good solid case against Shakspere."

Mark Rylance, director at the Globe Theater, admits to being overwhelmed with questions about the authorship controversy. He laments, rightly, the discouragement that one so often encounters in universities against beneficial inquiry into the Shakespeare question.

Christopher Marlowe, the "golden boy of the London theater scene," but also very likely involved in the Elizabethan secret service, is proposed as Shake-speare by A.D. Wraight of the Marlowe Society. The Sonnets may tell his story, though not chronologically now, and his "brilliant but rebellious" nature matches what in later centuries would be considered an artistic temperament. Marlowe's involvement in Sir Walter Raleigh's clandestine organization, the School of Night, seemed to be leading to danger for the atheist Marlowe in 1593 when he was reportedly killed in the company of several "shady characters" — indeed, all government agents. The Marlovian theory is that the death was faked as a means for him to go into deep cover and continue his spy activities, and that Marlowe subsequently published under the Shake-speare pseudonym.

Clearly there is much regarding Marlowe's "death" that lends credence to the Marlovian hypothesis. M.J. Trow's *Who Killed Kit Marlowe?* (Somerset: Sutton Pub. Ltd., 2001) and other recent books do convincing jobs of showing this. But even last summer's PBS *Frontline* show on the Marlovian thesis failed subsequently, in my view, to point out intrinsic connections between the man and the plays.

Such is the strength, however, of the Oxfordian thesis: that Shake-speare was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. As a ward of the crown from the time his father died, Oxford had access to William Cecil, Lord Burghley's extensive library. His grand tour of Europe in the mid-1570s enamored him with all things Italian – hence the plays are typically set in Italy. Noblemen did not publish under their own names, and de Vere was independently cited in his day as "the best for comedy." Dr. Daphne Pearson claims that friends and family knew the truth but did

not need to write it down. Elizabeth Imley of the De Vere Society spells out other autobiographical connections, especially to the one play often considered to convey the intensity of autobiography: *Hamlet*. Oxford's doubts about the legitimacy of his own first daughter show up in *The Winter's Tale* and four other plays about maligned women. A violent temper, eccentric love of fashion, financial difficulties and other features provide an actual life behind the author of the plays. When asked about a possible conspiracy, Imley forthrightly says yes, that the First Folio and the Stratford monument comprise a deliberate attempt to cover up the identity of the author. Although Imley feels that the manuscripts and other materials have been destroyed, Daphne Pearson hopes still to find some kind of "smoking gun" that will more unassailably link Oxford with the works of Shakespeare.

Much more compelling material than the film has time for ought to be more generally known. For example, one of de Vere's uncles served as his tutor: Arthur Golding, whose translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is omnipresent in the Shakespeare canon. Another uncle, Henry Howard, was the Earl of Surrey partly responsible for introducing into England the sonnet format now known as the "Shakespearean" sonnet.

The film is more objective about all the material than this review can be. As a first introduction to the authorship controversy, this is an ideal 51 minutes. Soon, however, anyone pursuing this subject will tire of the assumed need for carefully structuring such presentations so as to give equal time to all theories. It becomes increasingly irksome to have to revisit the same old ground instead of just basking in *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, presented by Sir Derek Jacobi (TMW Media Group Inc., 2000), knowing it's de Vere, and getting on with really understanding the Shakespeare works now.

At the end of the film, Mark Rylance offers unexpectedly moving last words, asserting that despite the contentiousness regarding the question of the Shakespeare authorship, all of these energies emerge from one and the same impulse: an intense love of Shakespeare, "and any friend of Shakespeare is a friend of mine." ❀