

Shakespeare... or not Shakespeare?

Lately I watched a fascinating TV programme about Shakespeare, which introduced me to the Shakespeare authorship question¹ and to the conspiracy theory against the Bard of Avon in particular. Indeed, there is a striking divide between the dull personality of William Shakespeare, the merchant of Stratford on Avon, who let no manuscript, letter or literary evidence, and the impressive collection of plays published under the name of Shakespeare in 1623. In this brief presentation, I will try to explain first the reasons why the authorship question was raised. Second, I will briefly present the various candidates and focus on the last one, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and give a rough sketch of the present situation about this question. Third, I will discuss the results of the latest academic research conducted to confirm (or infirm) the collaboration of Shakespeare to the writing of some plays – included or not in the Shakespeare canon. To conclude, I will give my personal response to this issue.

Following the publication of the First Folio in 1623, Shakespeare's reputation briefly rose, then fell during the middle of the 17th century, as Shakespeare's plays came to seem dated. To secure audiences, theatre companies in the later 17th and 18th centuries rewrote nearly all of Shakespeare's plays². Then with the Romantic Movement, in the early 19th century, Shakespeare became adulated as the greatest writer of all time, supreme as a creator of characters (Coleridge, Goethe). William Hazlitt extolled Shakespeare as a genius able to create an imaginative world of his own. Keats wrote in one of his letters: "what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability."³ Shakespeare had become England's national poet and as such, his personality was expected to be as glamorous as Joseph Fiennes in John Madden's film *Shakespeare in Love*!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare_authorship_question and [William Shakespeare - Poet, Playwright, Dramatist | Britannica](#)

² [Rise of Shakespeare I: Shakespeare's New Plays · 2. Rise of Shakespeare I: Shakespeare's New Plays · \(timespencil.org\)](#)

³ John Keats, Letter to George and Tom Keats 21-27 December 1817, *Selected Letters*, p. 41.

The discrepancy between the two personalities of the merchant of Stratford on Avon and the literary genius raised the question about the real authorship of the “Shakespearean cannon”. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a theory has emerged that Shakespeare did not write these plays and sonnets, and that his name was only a pseudonym for a noble, erudite Englishman, who could not write plays under his own name. Up to 60 “candidates” were examined, including Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe and even Queen Elizabeth! This theory was endorsed by famous writers like Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and Henry James.

In the 1920s, Thomas Looney published a book in which he argued that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the real author of Shakespeare’s works. He based his theory on several analogies between Oxford’s life and the events and situations described in Shakespeare’s plays⁴, overlooking the fact that de Vere inconveniently died in 1604, before the writing of *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*...

The battle between “Stratfordians” and “Oxfordians” reached a climax in 1987, when the case was debated before a three-member panel of US Supreme Court Justices in a mock court; the latter ruled that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, or at least “that it would have to be presumed that he did until a better claimant came along.”⁵

The general opinion of literary scholars and academics is that Shakespeare wrote his body of work and that the main arguments of Oxford’s supporters can be refuted one by one⁶. They usually overlook the Oxfordian theory and its supporters. However, with the internet, the “conspiracy theories” about many subjects have spread widely, and the Oxfordians have expanded their visibility, for example through the petition for signing the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt⁷. Thus, a Shakespeare authorship debate ‘Who wrote Shakespeare / Sir Jonathan Bate and Alexander Waugh’ took place on 21 September 2017, at Emmanuel Centre, London⁸.

When defending Shakespeare’s case, Professor Bate explained that the collaborative writing between playwrights was the norm in the Elizabethan theatre⁹. He referred to the collaboration between Shakespeare and Fletcher on the last three plays (*The two Noble*

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxfordian_theory_of_Shakespeare_authorship,

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/26/arts/you-know-who-wrote-the-plays-judges-say.html>

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare/Understanding-Shakespeare>,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXUg0cbEzaE>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Reasonable_Doubt,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZNYifQfYiE>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgImgdJ5L6o&sns=fb>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare%27s_collaborations

*Kinsmen*¹⁰, *Henry VIII* and *Cardenio*), in which scholars have been able to identify the “fingerprints” of each writer in them. He also explained that, using stylometric¹¹ computer analysis¹², scientists have run the whole body of work of Shakespeare and the surviving writings of the other candidates through their computers and concluded with a mathematical certainty that none of these candidates had written Shakespeare’s work. This method also allowed to identify the possible collaboration of Shakespeare in his early plays with George Peele (*Titus Andronicus*) and Thomas Kyd or Marlowe (*Edward III*).

In April 2015, some researchers using new approaches to language and psychological analysis demonstrated that in *Double Falsehood*, published by Lewis Theobald more than a hundred years after Shakespeare’s death, the psychological style and content architecture predominantly resemble those of Shakespeare, showing some similarity with Fletcher’s signature and only traces of Theobald’s.¹³

Because we know almost nothing about Shakespeare’s life, thousands of books about this literary Icon have been published to fill this void, and “conspiracy theories” against Shakespeare of Stratford have been flourishing since the middle of the 19th century. To me, this is “much ado about nothing”: I agree with Roland Barthes (1915-1980) when he argues that the author is dead to the text once it is written¹⁴. Thus, whoever wrote Shakespeare’s plays, the real magic operates on stage, when actors make Othello, Romeo & Juliet and all these unforgettable characters come alive and take us on a whirlwind of emotions. As far as I am concerned, “the greatest mystery of the literary world” can remain open...

¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307702170_With_a_'co-adjutor'_Collaboration_between_William_Shakespeare_and_John_Fletcher_in_The_Two_Noble_Kinsmen

¹¹ Definition of **stylometry** (Merriam Webster Dictionary): The study of the chronology and development of an author's work based especially on the recurrence of particular turns of expression or trends of thought.

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stylometry>

¹³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614566658>

¹⁴ “The Death of the Author” (1967)

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