

How To Tutor

Who Wrote Shakespeare?



Sam Blumenfeld

It's a question that has been asked for over two hundred years. And the reason is quite simple: apart from the name appearing on the First Folio as author, there exists no documentary evidence that the man William Shakespeare was a professional writer.

Diana Price, in her well-researched 2001 book, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, examined all of the documents pertaining to Shakespeare unearthed by literary scholars during the last 300 years and came to the conclusion that he was not a writer. She states: "These documents account for the activities of an actor, a theatre shareholder, a businessman, a moneylender, a property holder, a litigant, and a man with a family, but they do not account for his presumed life as a professional writer."

Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman in *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, summed up the problem in these words:

The life of William Shakespeare is shrouded in mystery. There is no record of him receiving an education, buying a book or writing a single letter, and no original manuscript of a Shakespeare play survives. There is no direct record of his conversations, and no one in his home town seems to have known that he was a successful playwright while he was alive. There is not even a contemporary portrait to reveal his true appearance.

In 1616, shortly before he died, Shakespeare wrote a Will. Of this Will, the ever skeptical Mark Twain, wrote:

It named in minute detail every item of property he owned in the world—houses, lands, sword, silver-gilt bowl, and so on. It mentioned not a single book. The will mentioned not a play, not a poem, not an unfinished literary work, and not a scrap of manuscript of any kind. Books were much more precious than swords and silver-plate bowls, and when a departing person owned one he gave it a high place in his will.

Not even Shakespeare's son-in-law, a noted physician who wrote a medical book in Latin, knew that his father-in-law was a writer of any kind.

How did this mind-boggling question start? It started when a retired clergyman, Rev. James Wilmot, a friend of Samuel Johnson and a great admirer of Shakespeare, became curious about this literary genius, of whom so little was known. In 1780, Wilmot moved to Stratford, intending to gather enough documentary material about the Bard so that he could write a full-scale biography. He searched everywhere within a fifty-mile radius of Stratford, hoping to find books, letters, or any other records pertaining to Shakespeare, but came up with nothing.

After much frustration, Wilmot came to the inevitable and disappointing conclusion that William Shakespeare of Stratford did not write the works attributed to him. But, obviously, someone did write the 36 plays in the famous First Folio. Who was he? Wilmot undoubtedly gave the question some thought, but he kept his doubts and conjectures to himself and ordered his papers to be burned after his death.

And so the question remains, if Shakespeare did not write the works attributed to him, who did? There have been three serious contenders: Sir Francis Bacon; Edward de Vere, the 7th Earl of Oxford; and Christopher Marlowe, the playwright. But each one of them presents a problem. It is highly unlikely that Bacon, with an ego as big as a house, would have hidden the fact that he had written the greatest dramas ever created by a human being. As for Oxford, he simply did not have the genius required to produce these masterpieces. Also, he died before many of the plays were believed to have been written.

Marlowe had demonstrated his extraordinary poetic genius with *Tamburlaine I & II*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Dido: Queen of Carthage*, *The*

Massacre at Paris, *Edward II*, his translations of the Roman poet Ovid, and his great love poem, *Hero and Leander*. He and Shakespeare were the same age. But the history books tell us that Marlowe was murdered in 1593 and therefore could not have written the 36 plays in the First Folio.

But was Marlowe actually murdered? Or was it a faked death to save him from prosecution and execution by the Archbishop's inquisition? That was Calvin Hoffman's contention in *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, published in 1955. Particularly interesting is that Shakespeare's literary career began a few months after Marlowe's ended.

The recent publication of new biographies of Shakespeare, the Earl of Oxford, and Christopher Marlowe, has also inevitably renewed interest in the authorship debate. The new biographies of Shakespeare—Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (W. W. Norton, 2004); James Shapiro's *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (Faber & Faber, 2005); Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* (Public Affairs, 2005)—have not settled the case for Shakespeare. As Harold Bloom, the great Shakespeare scholar at Yale, wrote:

The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually.... He wrote the best poetry and the best prose in English, or perhaps in any Western language.... If any author has become a mortal god, it must be Shakespeare.

And so, until we know the true identity of the "mortal god" of English literature, the question, "Who wrote Shakespeare?" will not go away.

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