
A Case of Mistaken Identities

Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?

by James Shapiro
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Reviewed by Yair Lipshitz

In my first year at Tel Aviv University, while hanging out on the lawn with some other students before class, one of my friends told me that there are three important theories about Shakespeare with which I should acquaint myself: (a) he was a homosexual; (b) he was Queen Elizabeth; and (c) he never existed at all. I remember wondering vaguely how all three theories could be true at once. My professors, needless to say, mentioned none of them in class. Yet I never thought to ask myself—or my friend—a far more basic question: Why would anyone doubt that William Shakespeare himself wrote the plays that bear his name?

The historical existence of a person named William Shakespeare is, of course, indisputable. Still, a long-

standing tradition insistently rejects the possibility that the actor who arrived in London from Stratford-upon-Avon was also the creative genius who wrote *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and numerous other masterpieces of theater. Claims to this effect began to appear steadily from the mid-nineteenth century onward, and found their way into both higher and popular literature (as exemplified by Henry James's 1903 story "The Birthplace" and Jennifer Lee Carrell's contemporary thriller *Interred with Their Bones*). Indeed, the debate over Shakespeare's identity has long exceeded the boundaries of history and literary criticism, and has become something of a cultural phenomenon.

James Shapiro's new book, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* explores this phenomenon from a panoramic point of view. Shapiro, a renowned literary scholar at Columbia University who has authored a fascinating work on Shakespeare's attitude toward the Jews, traces the different stages of the debate surrounding the "real" identity of the most famous author

in the English language. In contrast to other scholars who have written on the subject, Shapiro does not limit his argument merely to debunking “anti-Stratfordian” approaches (although he does this, and successfully); rather, he is concerned with the particular cultural conditions that gave rise to this debate in the first place. The result is a remarkable historical composition, one that offers a valuable discussion of the place of the author in modern culture, the connection between biography and literature, and the role of the imagination in the process of dramaturgy.

The first doubts as to the authorship of Shakespeare’s work arose, paradoxically, just as people began to take an interest in the playwright’s life. During Shakespeare’s time, and for years after his death, no one saw the need to document the life or interview the friends of the man who would become the greatest dramatist of all time. Interest in the biography of Shakespeare—or of any other artist, for that matter—was sparked only in the eighteenth century, primarily toward its end. At this point, however, very few original documents relating to Shakespeare were traceable, and what was found was sorely disappointing: a mortgage deed for a London property, a request for a home loan in Strat-

ford, and the playwright’s famous will (implied in the book’s punning title)—in which he leaves his wife, Anne Hathaway, the “second-best bed” in the house. Alas, people at the time were hardly content with a few legal papers presenting Shakespeare as a real estate dealer, a lender, or a petty, vindictive husband. They sought the genius, the visionary, the man of arts and letters, the companion of kings and counts. The few remaining documents, and the image of the provincial man from Stratford they seemed to portray, simply did not accord with their expectations. As Shapiro writes:

An unbearable tension had developed between Shakespeare the poet and Shakespeare the businessman; between the London playwright and the Stratford haggler; between Shakespeare as Prospero and Shakespeare as Shylock... between a deified Shakespeare and a depressingly mundane one. Surely he was either one or the other. Less than a century had passed since Dr. Johnson, who would have found the very idea of having to choose between these alternatives ludicrous, had said that “No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.” The writing life may not have changed much, but assumptions about it certainly had.

And so began a desperate hunt for additional evidence that would shed light on the life and character of the eminent playwright.

In the middle of the 1890s a young man named William Henry Ireland published a series of sensational documents relating to Shakespeare—a veritable treasure-trove, including letters from Queen Elizabeth, correspondence with Anne Hathaway and various publishers, titles from the playwright’s library, a sketch of Shakespeare as an actor on stage, a manuscript of *King Lear*, and even a lost work from the bequest entitled *Vortigern and Rowena*. It was an exhilarating time for Anglophiles and theater aficionados. Shakespeare had at long last appeared as they had always wanted him to be: a devoted husband, an intellectual, the queen’s confidant, and a member of London’s cultural elite. But the excitement was short-lived. Edmond Malone, an Irish scholar and editor of Shakespeare’s writings, revealed that the documents were a forgery. For Shapiro, the scandal produced the model of the “expert” (in this case, Malone) who wields the power to decide between true and false, the final authority on all things Shakespeare. Shapiro wonders, in retrospect, which caused more harm to scholarship—the expert or the forger:

Those who write about the history of Shakespeare studies cast Malone as an early hero and Ireland as one of the first villains of the story. I’ve been trained to think this way too

and it’s difficult getting beyond it. It’s easy to see why: Malone, much like the scholars who tell his story, spent much of his life surrounded by old books and manuscripts, strained his vision poring over documents in archives, and struggled to complete his life’s work on Shakespeare. Ireland cheated, took a shortcut. But in truth... both were committed to rewriting Shakespeare’s life: one forged documents; the other forged connections between the life and the works. In retrospect, the damage done by Malone was far greater and long-lasting.

Malone, explains Shapiro, laid the groundwork for the speculative study of the relationship between Shakespeare’s life and his work. Such was the tragic result of Malone’s determination to date Shakespeare’s plays in light of events in the latter’s life and the politics of the Elizabethan era—and, at the same time, to reconstruct the playwright’s biography on the basis of his works. The myriad scenes of jealousy in the Shakespearean corpus, for instance, led Malone to the conclusion that the playwright suspected Anne Hathaway of being unfaithful to him. Shapiro criticizes Malone in this context, claiming that the wealth of dramatic materials in Shakespeare’s works makes it possible to associate any work and any fictional character with any event, real or imagined, in the artist’s life. Be that

as it may, Malone—inadvertently, one would hope—opened a Pandora’s box: Many were taken by the assumption that the author of Shakespeare’s plays must have been adept in all subjects he wrote about—seamanship, military tactics, courtly life, falconry, etc. What would a village yokel like William Shakespeare, an unschooled actor who had not a single book among his possessions when he died, know of all of these? From here, it was but a short step to the hypothesis that the credit for authorship belongs to someone else.

Who, then, would be impressive enough to take Shakespeare’s place as the creator of *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*? Of the many contenders for the crown, two central figures Shapiro examines in depth are Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere (1550-1604). The former was considered a leading candidate during the nineteenth century, while the latter rose to prominence in anti-Stratfordian circles during the twentieth century.

The claim that the true author of Shakespeare’s dramas was in truth the philosopher Francis Bacon was first put forward in the 1840s and 1850s by an American Puritan teacher and lecturer named Delia Bacon (no relation). Like others, Delia Bacon found

it hard to believe that a person with no title or claim to nobility could have authored the literary masterpieces attributed to him; by contrast, Francis Bacon, considered among the greatest minds of his time (he was one of the fathers of the scientific revolution), as well as being a nobleman who knew the ins and outs of court, was an eminently more suitable candidate. For nineteenth-century readers, Bacon was akin to the learned sorcerer-duke Prospero, protagonist of *The Tempest*, who in the final scene of the drama surrenders control over the island—much like the play’s author, a politician and man of letters who, with this work, completes a series of glorious contributions to the world of theater.

Delia Bacon’s theory, set forth in *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (1857), was, explains Shapiro, influenced by “Higher Criticism,” a historical-critical method that scholars employed in an attempt to trace the “true” origins of the Holy Scriptures and the Homeric epics. Taking her cue from the philologists who deconstructed these canonical texts, arguing that there was not one author named “Homer,” “Moses,” or “Luke”—and that the historical figure of Jesus, as presented by the Apostles, is nothing more than a myth—Bacon dared to question the very existence of a revered literary icon: William Shakespeare.

As to the reasons a philosopher and statesman would conceal his creation behind the name of the mediocre actor William Shakespeare, Bacon offered an out-and-out conspiracy theory. Francis Bacon and his peers, she claimed, conspired against the monarchy, seeking to transform England into a republic. After their overt political efforts had failed, the group decided to encode its radical messages in popular plays such as *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*. Delia Bacon's thesis was highly gratifying to Shakespeare's American readers: Their republican civic education, so they fancied, enabled them to understand the works of the English genius better than the latter's own countrymen, and to plumb them for the ideas that would come to inspire the founding fathers of the United States.

Bacon's theory, contends Shapiro, clearly bears the mark of her personal life. He notes her failure as a playwright in New York, her seclusion, her problematic relationship with a younger man, the breakdown she suffered after the scandalous ending of the affair, and her hospitalization in an institute for the mentally ill until her death. Shapiro raises the possibility that the rift between Bacon and the Puritan community in the United States pushed her to search for alternative fathers of the American republic, and to identify deeply with

the image of an artist misunderstood by his society. Unlike many researchers before him, Shapiro refuses to see Bacon as a "madwoman"; he notes that her personality and ideas were compelling enough to convince prominent literary and cultural figures of the time—such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as Henry James and Mark Twain (whose interest in the Bacon theory, according to Shapiro, may be attributed to his fascination with characters with a double or assumed identity, as well as his conviction that all writing must emerge from the author's own life experience).

With the dawn of the twentieth century, however, the Baconian hypothesis lost much of its credence. Literary scholarship became less interested in the public and the political, and more concerned with the personal and psychological. Thus, it was only natural that Hamlet should supersede Prospero as the idolized character of Shakespeare's oeuvre. Gradually, a new theory as to the authorship of these plays emerged, which suggested a relatively unknown candidate: a poet by the name of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. And indeed, many of de Vere's biographical details are reminiscent of Shakespearean plots: Like Lear, he had three daughters;

like Hamlet, his father died and his mother subsequently remarried; his first wife was the same age as Juliet when they wed—and so forth.

The father of the “Oxfordian” theory was John Thomas Looney, one of the English leaders of the “Church of Humanity,” a group that worshipped spiritual giants the likes of Homer, Dante, Descartes, and Shakespeare himself. In contrast with Delia Bacon, Looney saw in Shakespeare’s plays (and in *Hamlet* specifically) a nostalgia for a feudal past—a sentiment that corresponded perfectly to Looney’s own reactionary worldview. The true author of these classic works, he maintained, must have been an aristocrat, as one can easily see how difficult it was for him to create convincing lower-class characters (here Shapiro cannot restrain himself, and wonders how flashes of dramatic genius such as the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and the fool in *King Lear* can be dismissed out of hand).

One person who embraced this theory was none other than Sigmund Freud. The father of psychoanalysis was captivated by the controversy surrounding the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays, and found Looney’s suggestion particularly conducive to his own Oedipal reading of *Hamlet*. Freud believed that the author of the tragedy experienced tremendous grief after the passing of his father,

an emotion he conveys through the character of the Prince of Denmark. The only problem was that the play was in all likelihood written around the year 1600, *before* the passing of William’s father, John. Attributing the Shakespearean creation to de Vere overcame that difficulty: The father of the Earl of Oxford died in 1562, and his mother, as noted, remarried. Apparently, Freud needed little more to go on in identifying the Earl’s mourning with the psychological torments experienced by Hamlet. According to Shapiro, this interpretation shaped Freud’s Oedipal theory no less than was shaped by it; the question of Shakespeare’s identity therefore filled an important role in the development of one of the most influential concepts of twentieth-century thought.

After debunking the claims of the anti-Stratfordians, Shapiro puts forth his own argument: William Shakespeare, he contends, is in fact the author of the plays attributed to him. Shapiro points to the great success that the playwright enjoyed in London, claiming that—being quite famous in his day—Shakespeare would have made an unlikely straw man for the political ploys of this or that group. After all, if his acting career was no more than a front, it would have been difficult to keep such a secret. Shapiro’s position

is solid, articulate, and persuasive. Yet by this stage, the reader—awash in secrets and conspiracy theories—will be hard-pressed to disregard the stubborn shadows of doubt.

The main thrust of the book is revealed in full force only in the epilogue. Here, Shapiro broadens the discussion and examines the premises at the heart of the debate surrounding Shakespeare's authorship. He attacks the condescending belief that only a nobleman could write as well as Shakespeare (and, likewise, that only an aristocratic audience could understand him). But even more upsetting for Shapiro is the destructive influence of the anti-Stratfordian theories on our understanding of the creative process:

What I find most disheartening about the claim that Shakespeare of Stratford lacked the life experience to have written the plays is that it diminishes the very thing that makes him so exceptional: his imagination.... When he turned to writing, he demonstrated an even more powerful imaginative capacity, one that allowed him to create roles of such depth and complexity—Rosalind, Hamlet, Lear, Juliet, Timon, Brutus, Leontes, and Cleopatra, along with hundreds of others, great and small—that even the least of them, four centuries later, seem fully human and distinctive.

In the final analysis, the great virtue of Shapiro's book lies in its ability to function on two planes simultaneously. On the first, more overt plane, the book traces the processes that led to skepticism about Shakespeare's authorship in the first place. Here Shapiro reveals himself as not only a gifted researcher, but also a first-rate storyteller: At some points—such as in the descriptions of Ireland's forgery—the narrative is charged with the suspense of a good detective novel; moreover, some of the characters—primarily Delia Bacon—are crafted with a sensitivity and complexity that is exceptional for a work of non-fiction. Particularly impressive is Shapiro's knack for capturing in a single image an intensely powerful drama (as, for instance, his description of Mark Twain awaiting a visit from Helen Keller, ahead of an action-packed weekend). Finally, despite Shapiro's reservations about the widespread tendency to link biography and art, the book skillfully presents the theories of Bacon and Looney in light of the upheavals in their personal and public lives. To Shapiro's credit, he is aware of the problems inherent in this method, and exercises extra caution in his analyses. Rather than commit a theoretical fallacy, then, Shapiro has succeeded in navigating between

readers' expectations of discovering Shakespeare's personal imprint in his writings and other, less popular approaches, which do not presuppose such connections.

Shapiro's treatment of his opponents is also worthy of praise. Though he debates the anti-Stratfordians, attempts to refute their hypotheses, and at times even paints them in shades of deep irony, he affords them respect, takes their claims seriously, and points to basic assumptions they share with academic Shakespearians. A glance at some of the reviews written by proponents of the Oxfordian theory reveals that, while some naturally argue that he has ignored the incontrovertible evidence supporting their position, many others view Shapiro's approach favorably, and consider his book an important contribution to the discussion of Shakespeare's authorship.

On the book's second plane, Shapiro draws on the Shakespeare controversy to explore the deeper questions of authorship: What is an author? How do we perceive him? What type of relationship exists between his life and his work? And how does the imagination fit into all of this? This discussion will fascinate readers and scholars even outside the Shakespearean field, since it demonstrates in an elucidating manner that contemporary notions of the creative process

are far from obvious. The debate surrounding the identity of the man who wrote the Shakespearean plays—and, no less important, who could *not* have written the plays—hinges on each generation's perception of the creative genius. In other words, every era embraces its own Shakespeare, someone who reflects its own expectations of the consummate artist.

It is interesting, in this context, to examine exactly which Shakespeare the present period offers us. In his best seller, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, the leading American Shakespearean, adopts the very course against which Shapiro cautions, reconstructing the playwright's life from his works and the few documents he left behind. But Greenblatt takes precisely those biographical aspects that have repelled so many in the past—the provincialism, the banality—as the basis for his book's thesis: "He who had imagined the lives of kings and rebels, Roman emperors and black warriors, he who had fashioned a place for himself in the wild world of the London stage, would embrace ordinariness." Shakespeare, according to Greenblatt's description, is an all but bourgeois character, preoccupied with the trivialities of this world, in stark contrast with the ethereal artist

whom the Romantics preferred to picture. Following Shapiro, one may wonder what we can deduce from this theory about our own era.

Another profound question that the book raises—though it could, in my opinion, have been developed a bit further—touches on the mythical and theological aspects of the subject. Shapiro points to the religious undertones of the Shakespeare phenomenon: the elevation of the dramatist to “author-god” in the eighteenth century; the spiritual crises experienced by some of the more prominent anti-Stratfordians prior to being enlightened as to the true identity of the plays’ author; the widespread use, within the context of the controversy, of expressions such as “orthodoxy,” “heresy,” and “conversion”; and, finally, the clear correspondence between the deconstruction of Moses and Jesus by scholars of “Higher Criticism” and the skepticism surrounding Shakespeare’s authorship of his plays.

This final point may provide an additional answer to the question “Why should we doubt Shakespeare in the first place?” It is for good

reason that the founders of Western culture—Moses, Jesus, Homer—became mythical figures whose very historical existence is called into question. Such skepticism may be motivated not by a simple, iconoclastic impulse (tempting though this notion may be), but rather by the opposite inclination: Perhaps, in an increasingly secular world, the only way to preserve the superhuman status of these geniuses is to reject their concrete being. Ostensibly, this is an act of “heresy”—certainly as it pertains to Moses and Jesus—and yet, paradoxically, it envelops its objects in an ethereal aura, as if their legacy were far too lofty to be attributed to mere flesh and blood. The argument over the identity of the illustrious English playwright thus only enhances the irresistible fascination with him. Indeed, like Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, even the skeptics ultimately praise the man they sought to bury.

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