

Title: The Shakespeare Shakedown
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Full Text:

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The new film 'Anonymous' says the Bard was a fraud. Don't buy it.

Roland Emmerich's inadvertently comic new movie, *Anonymous*, purports to announce to the world that the works we deluded souls imagine to have been written by one William **Shakespeare** were actually penned by Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. James Shapiro's fine book *Contested Will* chronicles the long obsession with depriving **Shakespeare** of authentic authorship of his works, mostly on the grounds that no manuscripts survive but also that his cultural provenance was too lowly, and his education too rudimentary, to have allowed him to penetrate the minds of kings and courtiers. Only someone from the upper crust, widely traveled and educated at the highest level, this argument runs, could have had the intellectual wherewithal to have created, say, Julius Caesar.

Alternative candidates for the "real" **Shakespeare** have numbered the Cambridge-schooled Christopher Marlowe (who also happens to have been killed before the greatest of Shakespeare's plays appeared) and the philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon. But the hottest candidate for some time has been the Earl of Oxford, himself a patron of dramatists, a courtier-poet of middling talent, and an adventurer who was at various times banished from the court and captured by pirates. The Oxford theory has been doing the rounds since 1920, when an English scholar, Thomas Looney (pronounced Loaney), first brought it before the world.

None of which would matter very much were there not something repellent at the heart of the theory, and that something is the toad, snobbery--the engine that drives the Oxfordian case against the son of the Stratford glover John **Shakespeare**. John was indeed illiterate. But his son was not, as we know incontrovertibly from no fewer than six surviving signatures in Shakespeare's own flowing hand, the first from 1612, when he was giving evidence in a domestic lawsuit.

The Earl of Oxford was learned and, by reports, witty. But publicity materials for *Anonymous* say that **Shakespeare** by comparison went to a mere "village school" and so could hardly have compared with the cultural richness imbibed by Oxford. The hell he couldn't! Stratford was no "village," and the "grammar school," which means elementary education in America, was in fact a cradle of serious classical learning in Elizabethan England. By the time he was 13 or so, **Shakespeare** would have read (in Latin) works by Terence, Plautus, Virgil, Erasmus, Cicero, and probably Plutarch and Livy too. One of the great stories of the age was what such schooling did for boys of humble birth.

How could **Shakespeare** have known all about kings and queens and courtiers? By writing for them and playing before them over and over again--nearly a hundred performances before Elizabeth and James, almost 20 times a year in the latter case. His plays were published in quarto from 1598 with his name on the page. The notion that the monarchs would have been gulled into thinking he was the true author, when in fact he wasn't, beggars belief.

The real problem is not all this idiotic misunderstanding of history and the world of the theater but a fatal lack of imagination on the subject of the imagination. The greatness of **Shakespeare** is precisely that he did not conform to social type--that he was, in the words of the critic William Hazlitt, "no one and everyone." He didn't need to go to Italy because Rome had come to him at school and came again in the travels of his roaming mind. His capacity for imaginative extension was socially limitless too: reaching into the speech of tavern tarts as well as archbishops and kings. It is precisely this quicksilver, protean quality that of course stirs the craving in our flat-footed celeb culture for some more fully fleshed-out Author. That's what, thank heavens, the shape-shifting **Shakespeare** denies us. But he gives us everything and everyone else. As Hazlitt beautifully and perfectly put it, "He was just like any other man, but -- he was like all other men. He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become."

By Simon Schama

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