

Over the years, various persons have expressed doubt as to the authorship of William Shakespeare. These doubts are as old as his plays. American author, Henry James once said, "I am haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and the most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world. (Hoffman 27) On the other hand, author Calvin Hoffman was convinced that Shakespeare was "the author of the most magnificent English dramatic prose and poetry ever written. (Hoffman 27) But, he reiterated this belief nineteen years later, stating, "They are magnificent! Only, William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon never wrote the plays and poems." (Hoffman 27)

Crime, guilt, fraud, exile, hate, deceit, and murder are all woven into this shroud of authorship that hides the identity of the world's most renowned writer. Cranks have proposed over fifty candidates for authorship, from Queen Elizabeth to the Jesuits.

Although many doubt that William Shakespeare ever wrote the works attributed to him, some still resort to pro-Shakespearean arguments. John Drinkwater, author and believer, felt that the flowers, banks, brooks, pastures, and woodlands of Shakespeare's boyhood home, Stratford, were all transfigured in his plays by his wonderful verse, but yet they still remained the scenes to which he was bred. Drinkwater believed too, that not only in Shakespeare's humble folk, shepherds, gardeners, and serving men, but also in his princes and kings, he reflected the humanity with which he was familiar in Stratford. The knowledge and wisdom he acquired directly from his own environment was quite true to life. Drinkwater also said that mere book-knowledge in Shakespeare's works was usually incorrect because he used knowledge outside the range of his own experiences, with a "grand audacity."

It is true that William Shakespeare attended grammar school in Stratford, and that he acquired some competence in Latin and gained a limited knowledge of English history. There was a period of time in his life referred to as his "dark years," and this period of time may have been subjected to influences making for high culture.

Records say too, that Shakespeare left Stratford in 1585 and went on the stage in 1590. During this time he could have attended Cambridge or worked in a lawyer's office, apparently remaining about one year with the court. This left one year in which he might have traveled to France and Italy, which would account for certain knowledge revealed in his works. Perhaps Shakespeare's plays are too scholarly to have been written by a man without a degree, but that, some believe can be explained by the fact that the plays looked learned to people of later generations who did not use classical allusion as a part of their common speech. Others believe that the depth of learning in the plays seems impossible for a man of Shakespeare's position, but when the overwhelming power of the plays is considered, the learning in them seems trivial. Little is known of Shakespeare today. But, this lack of information about Shakespeare's life can be attributed to the fact that his era was not one of biography, casual letter writing, or journalism. What was said about Shakespeare was unwritten.

Stratfordians, or those who believe that Shakespeare did indeed write the works attributed to him, began with a preconceived idea that he wrote the plays, and then they tried to make facts and circumstances fit their case, some say. To account for innumerable instances where Shakespeare exhibited such wide knowledge, Stratfordians say that Shakespeare pumped anyone he could for information. However, others feel that pumping friends for local color could help with broad knowledge, but really could not enable him to convey the atmosphere of a country or to add small, rather insignificant details which could only come from the pen of a writer who had actually experienced them.

Many feel that since Shakespeare's greatness was not widely proclaimed and because none of his original manuscripts survived, is evidence that the latter was destroyed to conceal the author's identity. And too, once a play was printed, the

manuscript possessed no value, so the paper, which was costly and needed for practical purposes was used, leaving no single manuscript in Shakespeare's handwriting.

Anti-Shakespeare arguments begin with the point that no public or private mention of Shakespeare as a man, poet, or dramatist was made at his death. In Elizabethan convention too, the elegiac poem was a true work of respect, yet there was none found for William Shakespeare. How could he then be the foremost figure in English literature? From all indications found, during 1585 to 1593, Shakespeare's most creative years, he was never referred to by anyone, personally or professionally. From birth to death, no evidence, outside of his name appearing in the title pages of the nine First Quartos, has been found to attest that Shakespeare was a writer or poet. Many details in his plays could have been acquired only by personal experiences, yet no Shakespeare was mentioned in the cast of any play during his lifetime. It is pure speculation that some say that he was an actor.

Another argument is that only nobles or those associated with nobility could have written such noble thoughts and described the aristocratic character. How could someone of Shakespeare's status write Hamlet? Therefore, some say that the world in which Shakespeare evidently was not at home, must have been the world to which he belonged.

In addition, familiarity with languages, literature, law, politics, history, geography, and court life found in Shakespeare's writings, are all inconceivable for a commoner. Shakespeare never attended a University and was not highly cultured. Yet, whoever wrote the plays must have been highly cultured. Some think he may not have been able to even write. Also, it was doubtful if his wife and children could write. His own barely legible signature, attached only to his will and some business deals, with sixteen variations of handwriting, was odd for a literary genius. Self-education was impossible since he probably owned no books. In his will, no mention of any books was made, and books were valuable enough to be mentioned.

Before death, Shakespeare composed his own epitaph:

Good friend for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed here;
Blest be the man that spares these stones
And curst be he who moves my bones. (Sykes 60)

Why would a poet and playwright who wrote so brilliantly have no higher sentiments for his own epitaph?

Now, just who could have written the works attributed to William Shakespeare? That Christopher Marlowe was really Shakespeare has been given much credence among many literary people. Marlowe was educated and awarded scholarships. This proves he was able to produce great works.

Another theory came from Calvin Hoffman, who long ago said that on May 29, 1593, Marlowe, previously arrested for atheism, was charged with treason. His homosexual friend, Thomas Walsingham, foresaw doom for his lover and made a plan. Marlowe was to be the victim of a fake murder, allowing charges against him to vanish with his death. The murder of a sailor, supposedly Marlowe, was arranged and committed, forcing Marlowe to pack up and leave the country. A coroner was contacted and Marlowe was officially pronounced dead.

Possibly Marlowe went to Italy after escaping to France. That might account for knowledge of Italy in certain plays. Then too, he is thought to have later returned to England, in disguise, to work in seclusion at Walsingham's estate. There, he could have walked the thousand acres of woods where so many allusions to nature could have come to him. Thus, was it a coincidence that Marlowe in his thirteenth year, May, 1593, died, and Shakespeare, also in his thirteenth year, came forth as a writer, four months later, in September, 1593?

Marlowe left a poem, it is said, called "Venus and Adonis,"² registered anonymously. Four months after the end of Marlowe, this poem appeared with the name William Shakespeare. To make Shakespeare inconspicuous, the poem was a logical candidate for the first publication, since Marlowe's reputation was that of

a dramatist, not a poet. Walsingham probably received manuscripts from Marlowe, but Marlowe's handwriting was known to his publishers who owned his previous material, so a trusted Marlowe's experiences even appear in the plays. There is a duel in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *The Jew of Malta*, he even described his fate, where the character Macheval is Marlowe saying:

Albert the world think Macheval is dead,
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps
And now the Guize is dead, us come from France
To view this land (Britian) and frolic with friends.
To some, perhaps my name is odious,
But such as love me guard me from their tongues,
And let them know that I am Macheval. (Hoffman 142)

Calvin Hoffman, long ago, found similarities between Marlowe and Shakespeare. He found a picture of both, enlarged them, and saw identical details in their faces. Other critics feel there are similarities in style and tone. Also, Marlowe could not have influenced Shakespeare if he died before Shakespeare began to write. There is no evidence the two ever met or spoke.

Lastly, in an attempt to prove Marlowe's authorship, Calvin Hoffman, a long-time critic, received permission to open the tomb of Marlowe's friend, Thomas Walsingham. There he hoped to find manuscripts. However, all he found was sand. There was no coffin and no papers.

On the other hand, Professor J. M. Massi says that the entire Marlowe theory is ridiculous. To say that because Shakespeare came from a lower economic class, therefore he could not have written the works, says that only the wealthy and advantaged can be a success. Shakespeare took part in share-holding in theatrical companies. He was a shrewd businessman, and was granted, through his father, a coat of arms and status. Also, if Shakespeare was educated typically of his time, he was fluent in Latin and had some Greek and had read the classical authors, which is impressive. Massi says too, that in Shakespeare's time, authors trained authors so a work had many authors, and the printer put one name on the cover of the play. Lastly, Massi says that people say there aren't many records about Shakespeare, but he feels that considering the few they kept then, we have enough.

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, another candidate for authorship, was born April 23, 1550, Shakespeare's birthday. He was attached to letters and the theater. He also had an intimate relationship with Queen Elizabeth. Edward de Vere studied law, knew the people of court, war, and Italy. He had appropriate knowledge to write the plays. He may have used the pseudonym Shakespeare because in tournaments he carried a long spear, or because his coat of arms was a lion shaking a spear. He may also have been ashamed of writing, being the Earl of Oxford, and therefore assumed a pseudonym as protection against losing status. Edward de Vere was a royal ward where he had the opportunity to observe and participate in court life, while Shakespeare was in little Stratford, isolated from an intellectual society, at the time he was supposed to be writing.

Edward de Vere traveled widely in Europe, too. And, Shakespeare's plays must have been written by a much-traveled man. If Shakespeare ever traveled outside of England, or even within England, further than London, nothing is known of it.

There is further support for Edward de Vere. Writers often put their thoughts, friendships, love affairs and other personal experiences into their works. Matching episodes from de Vere's life with the plays, revealed his mother to be similar to Hamlet's mother, a father-in-law like Polonius, a fair lady-the Queen, a dark lady-his mistress, Ann Vavasor, and a boy, de Vere's bastard son.

Some even believe de Vere paid Shakespeare hush money to use his name. In conclusion, of the de Vere theory, is the point that de Vere's death coincided with Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford. The mouthpiece was withdrawn when the voice was gone. Again Professor Massai believes that the evidence for de Vere is highly creative, but he would be the best choice. But still, he says, that if there was a cover-up going on, many people would know the truth, and they certainly all would not have kept the secret going to their graves.

A third contender for the writer of Shakespeare's works is Francis Bacon. Those who support him are Baconians. Bacon was chosen because of his intellectual ability. Also, parallels exist in both Bacon's and Shakespeare's works, suggesting their identities are one. Bacon too, invented a cipher and some believe it was to conceal himself. A Sir Toby Matthew once wrote to Bacon and said, "The most prodigious wit that ever I knew... is of Your Lordship's name, though he be known by another." (Encyclopedia Britannica) People who say Bacon did not write Shakespeare's works assert that he was not a great poet, so he could not have been a great dramatist. They say he was a cold man, stately, and grave. Whoever wrote Shakespeare's works was "sparkling" and "extravagant." Bacon's works did not sympathize with suffering, while Shakespeare's did. Bacon and Shakespeare viewed the world differently.

Finally, some disbelievers support another candidate, William Stanley, the 6th Earl of Derby, who was interested in drama, and became a patron of a company of actors. Several poems showed signs of early and immature Shakespeare, but he was a boy at that time. One was signed in Derby's handwriting, and three signed "William Shakespeare." His motive- like de Vere's-would have been to avoid association of his family name with the lower social order of the stage.

Was Shakespeare hinting at his name through word play? His verses, such as "... every word doth almost tell my name..." seem to be an attempt to reveal his name. Another line says, "Whats in a name?" Sonnet III says, "Hence comes it that my name receives a brand," and "my name be buried where my body is..."

In conclusion, curiosity has indeed been aroused for many, many years. Hundreds of theories and shreds of proof have been gathered, but the world will always wonder and waver between doubt and belief in William Shakespeare. So, the question still remains, "Was Shakespeare really Shakespeare?"