12-1-2002

The Shakespeare Authorship Controversy: The Case Summarily Stated

Daniel Wright
Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol11/iss1/15

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Promethean by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
Who wrote the works of Shakespeare? Tradition tells us that the author was a tradesman from provincial Warwickshire who was baptized Gulielmus Shakspere, a man who never had a day’s schooling, and yet we are told—and are expected to believe—that in his twenties, this man began to publish (having written nothing before in the whole of his life!) the most erudite works of literature the world has ever seen. We are told by traditionalists that this man (who literally could not spell his own name the same way twice) wrote poems and plays that are dense in their reliance upon the literature of classical antiquity as well as Continental verse and narrative that had not even been translated into English in Shakespeare’s day. We are told that this man who never owned so much as a single book wrote, without any education and apprenticeship in the literary and dramatic arts, poems and plays that invoke the names and legends of hundreds of figures from Greek and Roman mythology—poems and plays that demonstrate the writer’s easy familiarity with and competence in Latin, Greek, Italian and French—poems and plays demonstrative, moreover, of a linguistic facility so agile and confident that the writer sometimes would compose large sections of his work in a language other than English (as one observes when one reads Henry the Fifth, for example).

When, where and from whom did this man—who never traveled farther than London from his hometown or studied so much as a day in any kind of school; who was compelled to marry in haste when, as a teenager, he got an older woman pregnant; who reputedly worked as a butcher’s apprentice in the market town of Stratford-Upon-Avon; and who never wrote anything before he abandoned his wife and family to live in London—supposedly learn all of this? How was it that he appeared in London, suddenly and with no preparation, like a genie from a lamp, a cultivated, accomplished and knowledgeable scholar of his own and other nations’ literatures, histories, customs, painting, sculpture, intimately versed in the history of the English aristocracy as well as the character of many ages’ and nations’ political and religious disputes? Where did he study and master English case law, Continental civil law and learn the arcane jargon of aristocratic sport and military command if all he did for the first half of his life was chop meat in a provincial burg of perhaps forty families’ size?

Can anyone truly think the scenario likely? Is this—a process that defies everything we know about the development of literary creativity and skill—a credible explanation of how Shakespeare came to his craft? Are we seriously to believe that a man of no education, who had no journeyman experience in the literary arts, no
Warwickshire poet Michael Drayton but never wrote a line acknowledging that his Upon-Avon, traveled on the Continent, especially in France and Italy. He received graduate Concordia University has demonstrated, utterly defies rational explanation. In own lifetime, in their letters, memorandae, literary dedications or diary entries? apparently literate member of his family (his son-in-law) praise, in print, fellow Warwickshire poet Michael Drayton but never write a line acknowledging that his own father-in-law was England’s most famous poet-dramatist (or even a writer)? Would this Shakespeare not have been feted and received tributes like his peers—rather than fail to be acknowledged as a poet or playwright of any kind by anyone, in his own lifetime, in their letters, memorandae, literary dedications or diary entries?

If the writer who called himself Shakespeare were this man from Stratford-Upon-Avon, he is the most improbable person ever to have lived, and his story is the most improbable in history—one that, as Professor Steven Steffens of Concordia University has demonstrated, utterly defies rational explanation. In point of fact, however, this man from Stratford-Upon-Avon—whom no literary figure in his own day acknowledged even as an acquaintance, and from whom no one ever received so much as a mere letter—was not the author of the works that bear the name of William Shakespeare (a name, it is worth noting, that the man from Stratford himself never used). Rather, the author of these incomparable plays and poems, almost certainly, was Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain of England—a brilliant court poet and playwright who was a cousin to the Queen and the son-in-law of her principal minister of state, William Cecil, the first Baron Burghley.

Unlike the butcher from Stratford, Edward de Vere was nurtured in the arts of poetry and stagecraft from his youth. He grew up in the home of the man who had the largest library in England (larger even than the library, at the time, of Cambridge University). He was tutored by England’s finest scholars; he was multilingual, a fluent speaker and writer of Latin, Italian and French. He was extensively traveled on the Continent, especially in France and Italy. He received graduate degrees from both Oxford University and Cambridge University. He matriculated at Gray’s Inn, one of the revered Inns of Court and—not incidentally—one of the principal sites of theatrical performance in late sixteenth-century London. He created lavish entertainment for the Queen and her court, was a patron of writers and playwrights, and he held the lease to the Blackfriar’s Theatre, the principal private theatre in London. He was an acclaimed poet and playwright in his own time, owned an estate on the Avon, and was hailed as a man whose “countenance shakes a spear” by Gabriel Harvey. He was recognized as the foremost writer of his age by Henry Peacham, declared the “most excellent” of all Elizabethan court poets by William Webbe, acclaimed “the best for Comedy” by Francis Meres, and acknowledged by George Puttenham as the best of those Elizabethan writers at court who, he declared, were publishing without appending their own names to their works.

Oxford also received a host of literary dedications that distinguished him as pre-eminent among writers of the Elizabethan Age; Angel Day, for example, hailed him as a man “sacred to the Muses”; Edmund Spenser praised him in The Fairie Queene, and John Brooke congratulated Cambridge University for its special recognition and commendation of Oxford’s “rare learning.” By contrast, to the man who supposedly brought the Renaissance to England—Will Shakespete of Stratford-Upon-Avon—no one in his own lifetime ever dedicated a thing. Moreover, when Stratford Will died, he was buried in a grave that did not even bear his name, and his passing was not marked with any of the mourning and ceremony that attended the passing of far less notable (and now all-but-forgotten) writers of the day.

The case for Edward de Vere as the pseudonymous author of the Shakespeare canon, of course, is one that requires more than a few summary statements for an adequate presentation. Massive and detailed scholarly investigations by some of America’s, Canada’s and Britain’s best scholars are available for study by those who may wish to join efforts to attain a definitive resolution of the Shakespeare Authorship Question in order to impart to the real author of Shakespeare the long-neglected distinction that is his due. Moreover, to the pursuit of this end, there is the international convocation of scholars that gathers each April to explore and share the latest research on the Authorship Question at Concordia University’s Edward de Vere Studies Conference, to which all who are interested in seeing this question debated, studied and resolved are invited.