

Debate on whether shakespeare wrote his work



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The Mystery of Shakespeare

“ To be, or not to be,” are the famous words of renowned playwright William Shakespeare. To many, Shakespeare is regarded as the greatest, most talented writer of all time; his plays and works have been read by millions around the world for centuries. However, the controversy of whether Shakespeare actually authored his famous works has been a common topic among literary critics. There is mounting evidence showing that William Shakespeare was not the true composer of the works attributed to him.

A myriad of reasons exists supporting that Shakespeare did not write his works. Doubts about the authorship generally arise from the fact that Shakespeare’s lack of education and his background is incompatible with his ability to write great dramas and works. There are no documents that show Shakespeare attended college or university. Shakespeare attended Elizabethan grammar school like many other boys in the time period; however, Shakespeare’s father, John Shakespeare, pulled him out of school at the age of twelve. Also, because Shakespeare married early at the age of eighteen, he was unable to obtain an apprenticeship, further showing Shakespeare’s lack of education (Wood). Only six of Shakespeare’s signatures have been uncovered; each is an illiterate scrawl and contain a different spelling of his last name, including “ Shake-speare” and “ Shak-spear” (Shapiro 23). The inconsistent spelling indicates that Shakespeare was not the same person who wrote the plays.

Another major argument that led to the debate on Shakespeare authorship is that Shakespeare’s plays show great insight into various aspects of human

experience, suggesting that the author must have been someone with skill — a sailor, soldier, lawyer, or doctor. “ The Shakespeare canon exhibits such breadth of learning and intimate knowledge of the Elizabethan and Jacobean court and politics that no one but a highly educated nobleman or court insider could have written it” (“ Shakespeare Authorship Question”) . For example, the play *Merchant of Venice* , which takes place in Venice, Italy, includes scenes on the contract and the court case of Shylock and Antonio. How could William Shakespeare, who never left England, have an understanding of the court politics and the culture of Italy?

Some may argue if Shakespeare was not the author, why would the real author give credit and fame to someone else? Many of Shakespeare’s plays bring light to politics or controversial topics. The author, particularly one of high status, would have to hide his identity in order to criticize or denounce the current regime without receiving direct backlash or even potentially being sentenced to death. Also, during the Renaissance period in England, there was “ a powerful stigma attached to the publication of poetry and, especially, drama by courtiers” (“ Shakespeare Authorship 101”). For a gentleman to participate in writing and print was unseemly. As a result, the author who wrote the plays would have hired someone to be the author or would have used a pseudonym.

As mentioned previously, many literary scholars suspect someone of higher status and education to have written Shakespeare. One of the forerunners is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Edward de Vere lived in about the same time period as Shakespeare, mid to late 1500s to the early 1600s. De Vere was at the center of English literary life, as he was a recognized poet and

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playwright and a patron of theatre and music. Unlike Shakespeare, de Vere possessed classical learning, knowledge of the law, music, aristocratic sports, and foreign culture found in Shakespeare's works. As a courtier, de Vere would have needed a pseudonym. The name "William Shakespeare" would have been very fitting for him. Research has uncovered that Pallas Athena, who is the patron goddess of ancient Athens and Renaissance goddess of the arts, literature, and theatre was associated in Renaissance Europe with the action of 'spear-shaking.' Because of deVere's skill at tournaments, de Vere was known as "Spear-shaker" ("Shakespeare Authorship 101"). Additionally, "in a 1578 address to Oxford [de Vere] in front of the court, Gabriel Harvey refers to him as one who 'vultus tela vibrat' — his 'will shakes speares'" ("Shakespeare Authorship 101"). The pseudonym is strong evidence that Edward de Vere was the true author.

Looking into the works of Shakespeare, there are frequent references to events that are paralleled in de Vere's life. For instance, in *Hamlet*, the Oxford-Sidney tennis quarrel is referenced when Polonius speaks of "young men falling out of tennis" ("Shakespeare Authorship 101"). Another example is in the play *Merchant of Venice* when Antonio borrows three thousand ducats from Shylock. De Vere is referring to his investment in an expedition to find the Northwest Pathway to China. In 1578, Edward de Vere entered into a bond to buy stock from Michael Lok, a merchant from London. De Vere and Lok met in Venice, and de Vere became Lok's biggest investor (Whittemore). Like Antonio's ships, the expedition was a loss and de Vere lost three thousand pounds, the same amount Antonio borrowed from Shylock. Shylock's name is believed to have originated from Lok.

Ultimately, a plethora of evidence supports that William Shakespeare of Stratford upon Avon was not the author of his works. Shakespeare's lack of education and knowledge of foreign culture and law conflicts with his great dramas and books. Much support points to Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford as the true author. De Vere possessed the education and experience needed to write Shakespeare's famous works, and there are many events in the plays that parallel with his life. Though evidence supports Edward de Vere was the author, the mystery has not been solved. But as said in *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

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