

THE LEGENDS OF

Much ado about Will

He was a woman. He was Catholic. He didn't write even one of those plays. And – the latest – he was the son of Elizabeth I.

On the eve of his birthday, **John Walsh** recites the top crackpot ideas in the torrent of conspiracy theories about the Bard



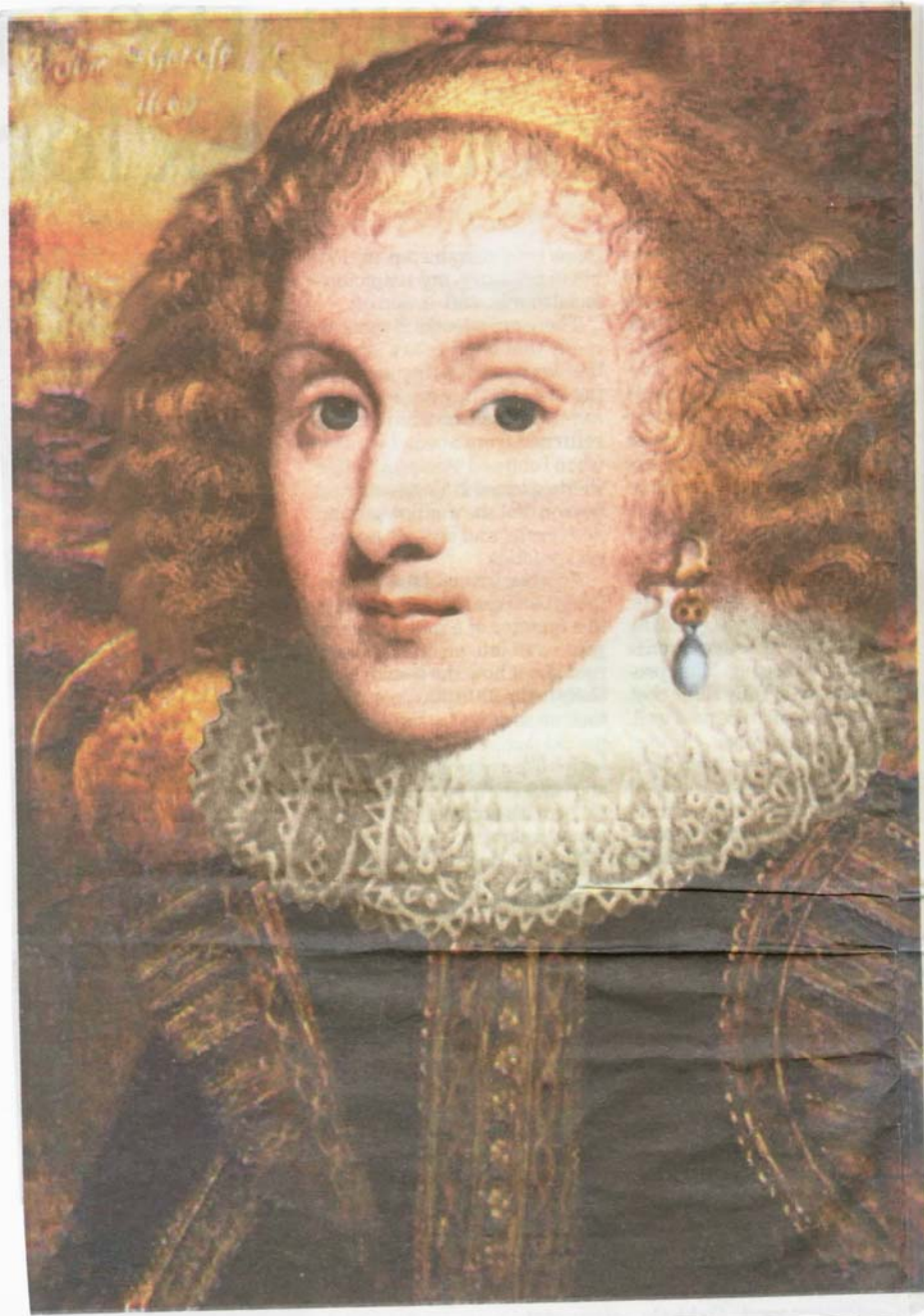
Edward de Vere wrote the plays

De Vere (1550 – 1604) was the 17th Earl of Oxford, and a well-travelled courtier and favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. Has been a leading candidate in the Who-wrote-Shakespeare's-plays-if-it-wasn't-Shakespeare? debate since the 1930s, when one Charlton Ogburn investigated parallels between them: he points out, inter alia, spooky similarities between the portrayal of Polonius in *Hamlet* and the real-life vapourings of de Vere's guardian, William Cecil. The De Vere Society made a special fuss in 2004, on the

400th anniversary of De Vere's death – ignoring the fact that many of Shakespeare's plays were written after 1604. De Vereans subscribe to the Snob Logic theory, which says that no mere, grammar school-bred, Stratford-born actor could have such knowledge of foreign lands and court behaviour as Shakespeare, therefore the plays must have been written by the well-travelled, well-educated Edward. Now Paul Streitz, an American historian, suggests that De Vere was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth. Virgin Queen gives birth to Shakespeare – you have to admit, as a theory it's a humdinger.

Bard Credibility Quotient: *

SHAKESPEARE



Shakespeare was a woman called Mary

This is a bold, although rather recent, proposition. There have for years been wild rumours that a woman wrote Shakespeare's plays – the woman in question being Queen Elizabeth I (but we prefer the story about the Queen being his mother). It was claimed in 2004 that Mary Sidney Herbert was the “onlie begetter” of the canon. Ms Herbert was the Countess of Pembroke, a soignée literary dame, articulate, well-read and energetic; she ran a literary society and wrote plays and poetry. Unusually for the period, she was educated, having studied history, geography, medicine, languages, music, alchemy and needlework. Why should anyone think she was capable of writing *King Lear* or *A Winter's Tale*? Because Ben Jonson, in his introduction to the First Folio, introduces the reader to the “author” of the plays, talks about “a mature gentlewoman” – and the Folio is dedicated to the Countess's sons. One of them, William Herbert, carries the same initials as the shadowy “Mr WH” to whom the sonnets are dedicated (and addressed?). We know she wanted William to marry – were the sonnets written by her to steer her beautiful son towards a connection with the “dark lady”? Were they hell.

Bard Credibility Quotient: *

Christopher Marlowe wrote the plays

OK, fasten your seatbelts: this theory says that Christopher Marlowe, the great dramatist, poet, duellist, atheist and all-around gay blade who wrote *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II*, did not die in 1593 at the age of 29, after being stabbed in the eye during a pub brawl. The brawl story was merely a ruse to cover up his escape from "the English inquisition". Instead he fled to Italy where he wrote 30-odd plays and conspired with a nobody actor from Stratford called William Shakespeare that he should pass them off under his name. The theory was first advanced in 1955 in *The Murder of the Man Who Was 'Shakespeare'* by a Broadway press agent called Calvin Hoffman. More recently it became the subject of a documentary, *Much Ado About Some-*



thing, by the Australian filmmaker Michael Rubbo, who spent years in Italy looking for clues, and in England confronted Shakespearean and Marlovian experts in what he called "the heart of Bardolatry". Reviewing the movie, *Beat* magazine wrote: "The story contains espionage, conspiracy theories, faked deaths, cover-ups, identity theft, homosexuality and sex ... it's so outrageous Hollywood would love it." **Bard Credibility Quotient: *****

Shakespeare was an early freemason

Did you know that the Masonic Lodges met for the first time, under a Grand Master, to set up a Grand Lodge, in 1716 - on the centenary of Shakespeare's death?

Wait, wait, there's more. Doesn't it strike you as a little odd that the Freemasons' protocol document, Book of Constitutions, came out in 1723 - conveniently 100 years after the publication of Shakespeare's First Folio? Don't you tell me that it is just coincidence.

According to modern Lodge thinking, it is possible that the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare were some kind of blueprint or template of Masonic ritual and discursive.

Further, that all the paraphernalia of lanterns, squares, aprons and brotherhood have



their *fons et origo* in Shakespeare's vivid imagination.

Enterprising scholars have counted the number of times the word "brother" appears in the plays (479), the words "compass" (32) and "lodge" (24) and "mason" itself (twice).

Some argue that the Folio's dedication is addressed, not to two young men, but to Freemasons everywhere.

Spooky, isn't it? **Bard Credibility Quotient: ***



Shakespeare collaborated with many other dramatists

Odd though it may seem to modern audiences, whose familiarity with dramatic partnerships is limited to Rice and Lloyd Webber, it was once considered perfectly proper for two playwrights to co-author a whole five-act play, a scene or just a sketch. There's evidence that Thomas Middleton (a London playwright, like the Bard) had a hand in the witches' scenes in *Macbeth*. He's also thought to have dabbled in *Timon of Athens*, although this theory is sometimes advanced by Shake-

speare fans simply to explain why the play is so gloomy and the plot makes no sense. We know that John Fletcher (the popular and prolific author of *The Faithful Shepherdess*) wrote a sequel to the *Taming of the Shrew* to impress Shakespeare, and worked with him on *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII* and the lost play *Cardenio*. So much of *Kinsmen* is taken to be his work that the play is quietly left out of some complete works editions. Elsewhere George Wilkins, like Shakespeare a member of the King's Men acting company, is thought to have originated or brushed up *Pericles Prince of Tyre*. And the playwright and poet George Peele probably revised the deeply horrible *Titus Andronicus*.

Bard Credibility Quotient: ****



Shakespeare was a Catholic

Did Shakespeare use his plays to promote the papist faith that had been outlawed by the founding of the Church of England? At a time when there were increasingly hideous penalties for holding inappropriate beliefs, did this make him a subversive propagandist? In *Shadowplay: the Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*, Clare Asquith claims to be able to detect code-words and riddles in the Bard's language that are saturated with Catholic symbolism. Keep an eye out, next time you're in a theatre, for references to turtle doves, to fidelity in love, to the number five (be-

cause of Christ's five wounds), also any stray remarks about red roses or the sun. They're all apparently **studded into the text** as solace to anyone persecuted for their faith. Then again, they may just be images he was keen on. Elsewhere there's some evidence of Catholic belief in the playwright's family - especially a letter from his father, John, professing his loyalty to Rome. The latter was found, romantically enough, in the rafters of Shakespeare's family home, but has since disappeared. Shakespeare himself, meanwhile, goes on seeming, to the un-theoretical eye, just as atheistic as a great number of cultured Elizabethans, whatever the rumours ...

Bard Credibility Quotient: **



William Stanley, Earl of Derby, wrote the plays

Who? This rival "Will", this shadowy "Mr W.S." grew up in a household that was stiff with nobility but which enthusiastically supported the performing arts. William's father Henry supported a troupe of players (as aristocrats did in the 16th century). His older son Ferdinando set up an acting company called Lord Strange's Men, one of whose number was William Shakspar ... The rest of the argument is political. It maintains that Stanley needed "Will Shakespeare" as a front because his conservative dramas wouldn't go down well if the public suspected they were written by an aristocrat. If it were thought they came from the quill of a classless Stratford nobody, however, they stood more chance of being acclaimed as patriotic. Stanley was deeply connected with drama, with actors, playwrights and the business of running a troupe. Oh, and he was born four years before Will S and died some years after him. Case proven?

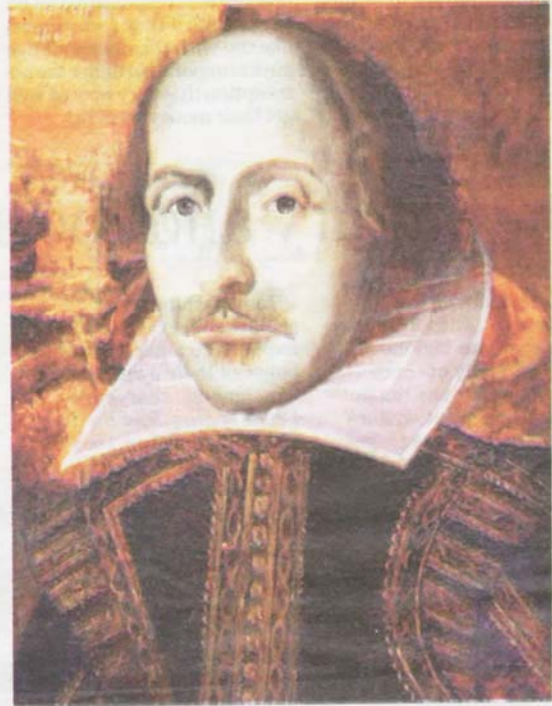
Bard Credibility Quotient: **

Shakespeare was a colourless human being with no personality

Unable either to prove who really wrote Shakespeare's works, or to discover any new facts about the playwright, some commentators retreat sulkily into the Sour Grapes theory, which confidently states that the chap who lived in Stratford and London was a dullard, a nasty piece of work, an emotional black hole, who couldn't have written so feelingly about human life. Harold Bloom, the right-wing American intellectual, wondered in his book, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, why the Bard comes across as "colourless" when the plays are so rumbustuous, flavoursome and characterful. Sam Schoenbaum, author of *Shakespeare's Lives*, won-

ders why he seemed to cause so little stir in his own lifetime among his contemporaries. Mark Twain spitefully remarked that, "When Shakespeare died in Stratford, IT WAS NOT AN EVENT. It made no more stir in England than the death of any other forgotten theatre-actor would have made. Nobody came down from London; there were no lamenting poems, no eulogies, no national tears - there was merely silence and nothing more. A striking contrast with what happened when Ben Jonson and Francis Bacon, and Spenser and Raleigh, and the other distinguished literary folk of Shakespeare's time passed from life!" And Katherine Duncan-Jones, author of *Ungentle Shakespeare*, pictures "a rather unlikeable man, a money-minded fellow who dealt eagerly and profitably in real-estate, and lent money to people at high rates of interest". So that's *him* cut down to size.

Bard Credibility Quotient: **



Shakespeare was bisexual

Shakespeare had a wife, Anne Hathaway, and three children, Susanna, Hamnet and Judith but exegetes of the Sonnets have puzzled for centuries over the *ménage à trois* that can be detected between the lines. Twenty-six of the poems are addressed to a married woman (the "Dark Lady") and 126 to a young man (the "Fair Lord"). The latter repeatedly celebrate the man's beauty and occasional wordplay on words like "prick" have led readers to infer a gay subtext. Many critics read no more into the urgency of the phrasing than passionate masculine appraisal. CS Lewis was suspicious: he said the sonnets were "too lover-like for ordinary male friendship" and it is indeed hard to imagine him exchanging such throbbing sentiments with his pal JRR Tolkien. Elsewhere in the Shakespearean canon, critics detect



the occasional use of gay slang. In *King Lear*, for instance, there's a phrase that has mystified audiences and scholars - when Kent says to Oswald: "If I had thee in Lipsbury pinfold, I would make thee care for me." The "Lipsbury pinfold" may sound like a wrestling hold but, according to the noted psychotherapist George Weinberg (who invented the word "homophobia"), it means oral sex.

Bard Credibility Quotient: **

Francis Bacon wrote the plays

The evidence is circumstantial, m'lud, but it's certainly suggestive. Francis Bacon was a leading scholar and philosopher of the age, a highly educated statesman at home in royal courts and principalities. He could have read all the sources of the Shakespeare plays in the original Greek, Italian, French or even Hebrew. He was well travelled, in the lands where many of the plays are set - Verona, Venice, Athens, Egypt. He was known to possess two manuscripts of Shakespeare plays. Shakespeare was famously a whiz at legal terms and phrases; Bacon was a lawyer. The longest word in the First Folio - "honorificabilitudinitatibus" - occurs in *Love's Labour's Lost* and is used only one other time in literary history, by Bacon. Most interestingly, although Shakespeare died in 1616, his plays were not published until 1623, incor-



porating many revisions by unknown hands. Bacon died in 1626. See what I'm getting at? The only problem with this network of suggestions is that Bacon had a perfectly good career as a writer and politician: where would he have found the time to have Shakespeare's career as well? And he was far too scholastic a writer to have handled Shakespeare's exuberant bawdiness and flights of extended metaphor.

Bard Credibility Quotient: ****