

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, WHOEVER YOU WERE

❁ CONSPIRACY
THEORISTS INSIST
THAT A HUMBLE GLOVER'S
SON FROM STRATFORD
COULD NOT HAVE
WRITTEN HAMLET, THE
SONNETS – OR ANYTHING
ELSE ATTRIBUTED
TO THE BARD. ON
SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHDAY,
JAMES SHAPIRO DEBUNKS
THE DEBUNKERS ❁

Illustrations by Brett Ryder





Sur Walter Raleigh



Sur Francis Bacon



Countess of Rutland

THIS YEAR, EVEN AS MANY ARE busy celebrating Shakespeare's birthday – attending his plays in the RSC's year-long run of the entire canon or touring the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition 'Searching for Shakespeare' – others will be quietly commemorating the 150th anniversary of the movement devoted to proving that a glover's son from Stratford-upon-Avon could never have written anything as great as *King Lear*.

It was in 1856 that an Englishman, William Henry Smith, and the American Delia Bacon independently announced that William Shakespeare of Stratford lacked the credentials to have been the plays' true author. Smith quietly expressed his doubts in a published letter addressed to Lord Ellesmere, past president of the Shakespeare Society. Bacon had more of a flair for the dramatic: shovel in hand, she sought to prise open Shakespeare's grave in Stratford, convinced that she would find the proof buried there. She had second thoughts – perhaps the warning 'Cursed be he that moves my bones' inscribed over Shakespeare's remains put her off – but she went on to publish *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, in which she argued that the plays were written by a group that included Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Bacon. William Henry Smith was committed to a one-man theory, and his man was Francis Bacon.

The floodgates were open and soon dozens of new candidates were proposed, including Sir John Barnard, Richard Barnfield, Robert Burton, Sir Robert Cecil, the Earl of Derby, Lord Mountjoy, John Donne, Thomas Sackville, Michael Drayton, Sir Edward Dyer, Bartholomew Griffin, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Pembroke, the Earl of Rutland, Sir Anthony Shirley, Sir Philip Sidney, the Earl of

Southampton, the Earl of Stirling and Cardinal Wolsey.

Others urged that only a woman could have written the plays – perhaps the Countess of Rutland or of Pembroke, or Queen Elizabeth herself. Even a cursory glance at this list makes clear that the 'anyone-but-Shakespeare' crowd leans heavily towards aristocratic candidates: the presumption is that only someone with the proper breeding could have had such keen insights into politics, history and human nature itself.

In the absence of any proof, and in order to overcome obstacles raised by surviving evidence that supports Shakespeare's authorship – Ben Jonson knew him well and referred frequently to his writing, others at the time alluded to him as a playwright and poet, and his name appears repeatedly on title pages – those opposed to Shakespeare's claim (known as anti-Stratfordians) have had to fall back on a conspiracy theory: the true author of the plays must have needed to protect his (or her) identity, so the plays were published under the name of a willing accomplice – the acquisitive, untalented actor Will Shakespeare (ignoring the fact that the easiest way to protect one's identity was to publish anonymously, as most Elizabethan playwrights did).

A great many people would have had to be party to this unprecedented arrangement and faithfully carry the secret to their graves, including the many actors, shareholders and dramatists who worked with Shakespeare, those in the alleged 'real' author's circle, a two-faced Ben Jonson, and of course those responsible for publishing the First Folio. Once you head down this path, you almost have to believe in a hidden code or cipher embedded in the work, for how else would the true authorship be revealed to posterity? Predictably, the plays have been combed through time and again for such proof, with different

ciphers or hidden clues confirming the claims of rival candidates.

If you believe all this, you'll easily be persuaded of another conspiracy, committed to denying the existence of the earlier conspiracy. It goes like this: with so much at stake, Shakespeare professors, overseers of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, publishers and others with a vested interest in insisting that Shakespeare really was Shakespeare, knowingly collude in suppressing theories that the Earl of Oxford (who died in 1604, almost a decade before Shakespeare stopped writing plays), Christopher Marlowe (who was killed in 1593) or any one of the 50 or so other candidates really wrote the plays.

All this may not seem so bizarre to 21st-century readers, enamoured of books such as *The Da Vinci Code* and increasingly comfortable with even the wildest of conspiracy theories – from 'Who killed Kennedy?' to 'Did men really walk on the Moon?' In such a climate, abetted by post-modern relativism about what constitutes fact, theories about the 'real' authorship of the plays are thriving.

The past year has been a good one for the anti-Stratfordians: *The Oxfordian*, the journal of the Shakespeare Oxford Society, attracted attention with the publication of Mark Anderson's '*Shakespeare by Another Name*', while the British media proclaimed the arrival of a fresh contender, Sir Henry Neville, proposed by Brenda James and William Rubenstein in their book *The Truth Will Out*. Across the Atlantic, William Niederkorn of *The New York Times* concluded that each side has its own story to tell, and – taking a page from Creationists who argue that 'intelligent design' should be taught alongside evolution – that those who teach Shakespeare's plays should make the authorship controversy part of the curriculum.

A century-and-a-half of exchanges between those who think that Shakespeare wrote the



Robert
Burton



Lord Mountjoy



Queen
Elizabeth

plays and those who don't reflects more than competing systems of belief: as with the debate over 'intelligent design', the two sides have irreconcilable notions of what constitutes evidence – and this masks more fundamental differences about what it meant to write plays in Elizabethan England.

As one might suspect of a movement rooted in Victorian thinking and values, much of what anti-Stratfordians believe about Elizabethan authorship is stuck in time – their portrait of the artist is of a well-heeled genius in his (or her) study scribbling for posterity, then surreptitiously smuggling manuscripts to the playhouse, rather than of a man of the theatre who spent a quarter of a century working closely with a talented group of actors with whom he performed and for whom he wrote.

Their vision cannot be squared with what we also now know about Shakespeare: that he wrote, like every other professional Elizabethan playwright, in tandem with other dramatists, including George Peele on *Titus Andronicus*, George Wilkins on *Pericles*, and his talented successor John Fletcher on a group of late plays: *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the lost *Cardenio*.

Our lingering fixations with class, our growing attraction to conspiracy and codes and the surprisingly strong hold that the Romantic myth of solitary genius still has on us all ensure that the controversy over who wrote the plays is not going to go away any time soon. Shakespeare, as usual, puts it best: 'The gods look down,' he writes, 'and this unnatural scene / They laugh at.'

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THE THEORY
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WITH THE
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