**The Mystery of Shakespeare's Identity**

By Jumana Farouky / London Thursday, Sept. 13, 2007

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Like alien autopsies and the second gunman, the belief that someone other than a glover's son from Stratford wrote William Shakespeare's plays is a conspiracy theory that refuses to die. Doubters started questioning the true identity of the writer in the late 19th century. Ever since then, the theory of an alternate author has flirted with the mainstream as some scholars and researchers have tried to get the broader academic community to treat the question as a legitimate debate, instead of the ramblings of crackpots. Now, almost 300 Shakespeare skeptics have made a very public plea to be taken seriously.

On Sept. 10, Shakespearian actor Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance, former artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (a working modern replica of the London theater Will co-owned and acted at), unveiled a "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt." Created by the California-based Shakespeare Authorship Coalition, an educational charity dedicated to raising awareness of the Shakespeare identity question, the document asks the world of academia to accept that there is "room for reasonable doubt about the identity of William Shakespeare" and to start taking the research into who is really responsible for his works seriously. Along with Jacobi and Rylance, signatories include Charles Champlin, the former L.A. *Times* arts editor; Michael Delahoyde, an English professor at Washington State University; and Robin Fox, professor of social theory at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Some more famous names, like Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and Orson Welles, also lent their posthumous support in a list of people who expressed their own doubts about the Bard when they were alive.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that, for a man who was so prolific with his pen, Shakespeare didn't leave much evidence of his life behind. Most scholars accept that there is enough to prove that a William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, became an actor in London and retired back in Stratford until his death in 1616. But that's where the agreement ends. Stratfordians, as they are known, believe that this William Shakespeare is the same man who wrote what would become known as the greatest body of literary works in the history of the English language. The Anti-Stratfordians say that there is, in fact, nothing solid linking Shakespeare with the plays, poems and sonnets attributed to him.

And so begins the game of tit-for-tat. Stratfordians note that Shakespeare's name is printed on the title pages of many of the plays published during his lifetime. The Anti-Stratfordians point out that nobody even knows if that's how Shakespeare spelled his name: the only surviving examples of his handwriting are six scraggly signatures spelled several different ways. Those pro-Will say that some of Shakespeare's contemporaries mention him in their writings; the naysayers counter that they only refer to him as an actor, never explicitly as a playwright.

Then there's the apparent disconnect between the life that William Shakespeare lived and the ones he wrote about. Anti-Stratfordians claim that Shakespeare's plays show a keen grasp of literature, language, court life and foreign travel — not the kinds of things that a small-town actor without a university education would be familiar with. As the Declaration says, "scholars know nothing about how he acquired the breadth and depth of knowledge displayed in the works." And so doubting scholars look to well-traveled writers and aristocrats — essayist Francis Bacon; poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe; theater patron Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford — as the more likely candidates.

But Shakespeare advocates dismiss this as snobbery, saying that even a basic education at the time would have been enough for Will to write his plays. And, if you emphasize — as Stratfordians do — that most of Shakespeare's plays were adapted from older works, what he lacked in experience he could have made up for in imagination. "The problem is that argument presupposes that plays from the period consisted of this hidden autobiography," says leading Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate. "That's a modern image of the writer as someone who puts his own experiences into his plays, a very romantic idea of writing. But it's just not how plays were written back then."

As Shakespeare (or maybe Bacon or possibly De Vere) asked, "What's in a name?" The star-crossed lovers still die, there will always be something rotten in the state of Denmark, no matter who wrote the plays. So why all the fuss? Both sides argue that knowing the identity of the man behind *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* is essential to understanding them. "Our interpretation of Shakespeare's works would be entirely different if we knew who wrote them," says Bill Rubinstein, history professor at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and an academic adviser for the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition. "If he was heavily involved in politics, for example, every line in every play would have a different motivation."

The Coalition's "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt" doesn't claim to know who wrote Shakespeare's plays, but it asks that the question "should, henceforth, be regarded in academia as a legitimate issue for research and publication." Hoping to start the trend is William Leahy, head of English at Brunel University who, later this month, will teach the first ever M.A. course dedicated to the authorship question. "Shakespeare studies already look at his work from so many angles — feminist, post-colonialist, historical," he says. "And I think it's important that the authorship question is one of them." This could be much ado about nothing. Or maybe, one day, the truth will out.

# Shakespeare: the conspiracy theories

## Who really wrote the plays of Shakespeare? Here are some of the conspiracy theories

Who wrote Shakespeare's plays?

By Telegraph reporters

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There is so little known about the real **[William Shakespeare](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/william-shakespeare/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**. It is hardly surprising therefore that plenty of theories about our most famous bard and his work have arisen. It was, after all, Mark Twain who said: “So far as anybody actually knows and can prove, Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon never wrote a play in his life.”

Not always as easily dismissed as Shakespeare champions would have you believe, here are the most widely known theories about the authorship of the plays.

In 1848 the American Joseph C Hart wrote a book putting forward the argument that the plays were written by several different authors. In 1856 Delia Bacon, another American, wrote an article to support this theory and attributed the authorship to a group of people who were overseen by Sir Francis Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh.

**Edward de Vere**

Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford was also the Lord Great Chamberlain of England and a courtier poet. There is little evidence that suggests he did write them, but some believe there are references in the plays to de Vere's life and that there are a series of codes in the writing that implicate the Earl as the author. This is the theory put forward in the film **[Anonymous](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8853862/Anonymous-review.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**.

**Sir Francis Bacon**

It is also thought possible that Sir Francis Bacon, writer of New Atlantis, essayist and scientist, could have penned the plays. Again there is little evidence to suggest this, apart from similarities in the plays to his own. The theory that Bacon could have written the plays was first put forward in 1856.

**Christopher Marlowe**

The playwright Christopher Marlowe was writing at the same time as Shakespeare and it's likely that the two crossed paths. The theory goes that the reports of Marlowe's death in a drunken brawl on May 30 1593 were falsified to protect him from going to prison for being an atheist. Marlovians believe that Shakespeare was named as the play's author to protect the truth of what really happened to Marlowe.

**William Stanley**

With the initials WS, William Stanley is another strong contender for authorship of the plays. He was the 6th Earl of Derby and had his own theatre company called Derby's men. He was known to sign himself off as Will. He travelled in Europe, and through his marriage to Elizabeth de Vere, he was related to William Cecil, on whom many believe the character of Polonius in Hamlet is based.

**Roger Manners**

The theory that the plays were written by Roger Manners the 5th Earl of Rutland was supported by a German literary critic called Karl Bleibtreu in 1907. Manners married the daughter of the poet Philip Sydney and it is thought that the two of them together wrote the plays. However, the Earl would have been only 16 when the first of Shakespeare's works was published in 1593.

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|  | ho Wrote Shakespeare?http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shakespeare/line.gif**Four hundred years after the premiere of *Hamlet*, the authorship question remains a mystery.** by Al Austin'GBH April 1989 "Isn't it odd, when you think of it," Mark Twain wrote, "that you may list all the celebrated Englishmen, Irishmen and Scotchmen of modern times, clear back to the first Tudors - a list containing 500 names, shall we say - and you can go to the histories, biographies and cyclopedias and learn the particulars about every one of them. Every one of them except one - the most famous, the most renowned - by far the most illustrious of them all - Shakespeare!" Twain went on to suggest that it was because Shakespeare *"hadn't any history to record!"*Biographies of William Shakespeare do exist - hundreds and hundreds of them. But Twain complained that they are composed of guesswork.Precious little is known for certain about Shakespeare. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, got married when he was 18, had three children, left his family and went off to London. His name was listed among actors who performed twice for the queen, and he is listed among the shareholders in the Globe Theatre. He returned to Stratford in his 40s, bought a big house, dealt in real estate and grain for a while and died in 1616. His will mentioned no plays or poems or books. Only six examples of his handwriting are known to exist: six signatures, each spelled differently. When he died, nobody seems to have noticed.How did this small-town boy with little or no education learn so much about law and history and Italy and Latin and Greek and royalty and all the other knowledge that filled Shakespeare's plays? Well, say the biographers and historians, by keeping his eyes and ears open and being a genius. Samuel Schoenbaum of Washington, DC, America's foremost Shakespeare biographer, says, "There are certain things that defy rational explanation. There is something incomprehensible about genius. Shakespeare was superhuman."Answers like that didn't satisfy Twain - or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sigmund Freud, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman or Henry James. All found something fishy about the man from Stratford.And doubts continue. New doubters are born every day. This past November, one of England's most famous politicians and classical scholars, Enoch Powell, stood contemplating the Shakespeare monument in the Stratford church. "Isn't it disgusting? It's a lie. I can't look at it."Since the middle of the last century, non believers in the Stratford man have been putting up other names as the "real" author, men (and a woman or two) who might, for a variety of reasons, have used "William Shakespeare" as a pen name: Francis Bacon, Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe. But most of these challengers have fallen by the wayside, and with each failure, the snickering from the Stratford stands has grown louder.Then, early in this century, an English schoolmaster named J. Thomas Looney went looking for Shakespeare the way a detective might - with a list of characteristics the true author would need to have had, historical fingerprints. After years of searching through old documents, Looney came up with this man: Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, who lived from 1550 to 1604.History had all but ignored de Vere. And yet, he was the highest-ranking earl in the kingdom - and brilliant, earning two master's degrees before he was seventeen years old. And he seems to have cut a wide swath through England, France and Italy four centuries ago, was an intimate of Queen Elizabeth I, sailed off in his own ship to help battle the Spanish Armada, got himself captured by pirates, killed a man and engaged in a scandalous extramarital affair.Looney found several poems written by de Vere under his own name when he was in his early 20s, poems Looney thought were similar to some of those attributed to Shakespeare plays. For example, de Vere's guardian, Lord Burghley, the most powerful man in England, seemed to be satirized as Polonious in *Hamlet.*De Vere seemed to quit writing when still a young man. But Looney was sure the writing continued under the name "William Shakespeare."Why wouldn't de Vere have put his own name to the plays? In Looney's view, it was because play-writing was beneath the dignity of nobility. Furthermore, de Vere would have been barred from using his own name because he had inside knowledge of all the court intrigues. Powerful people, like Lord Burghley, and even Queen Elizabeth, would have been embarrassed had the public known de Vere was the author and the plays were satire. So, (according to the scenario constructed by Looney and others who continued his work after he died) de Vere chose a natural pen name. Gabriel Harvey, a poet and secretary to de Vere, had, after all, saluted him in a speech before the queen as a man whose "countenance shakes a spear." Then, when de Vere's friends and relatives decided to publish his plays, long after de Vere's death, they chose as a "front man" the obscure, semiliterate, country bumpkin, William Shakespeare of Stratford, who, Powell noted, "had the added advantage of being dead.""Preposterous!" retorted the historians and biographers and teachers of Shakespeare. De Vere could not possibly be the author (the counter-attack continued); he died before some of the plays - *The Tempest*, for one - were written!Although Looney announced his discoveries 70 years ago, and his disciples have been digging up new evidence ever since, the general public has remained, for the most part, blissfully unaware. To find out about it, one had to read several books not found in most bookstores, or even in most libraries.Then, in 1983, a successful author named Charlton Ogburn wrote an even bigger book - about 900 pages - called *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, skillfully explaining hundreds of ways in which the life of de Vere and the works of Shakespeare seem to meet. Ogburn and many of his readers are confident that the evidence contained in this book amounts to proof that Edward de Vere was William Shakespeare.De Vere's champions have discovered that once into the fight there seems to be no way out - it becomes an obsession, a lifelong passion. Ogburn and his colleagues consider their man a heroic figure who was wronged in life and slandered through his history as a libertine spendthrift. Tears fill Ogburn's eyes as he quotes lines from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* that he believes came straight from the soul of the tormented Earl of Oxford.There is a passion on the other side of the argument, too. Historian A.L. Rowse's eyes also well up with tears as he stands beside the "bloody fools" who doubt his hero. "These are people who aren't qualified to hold an opinion," he seethes. The only thing wrong with the man from Stratford is that "he likes the girls too much. He was too sexy."Rowse and his colleagues insist the evidence in favor of the orthodox view is insurmountable. The First Folio, the first collected edition of the plays, seven years after the Stratford man's death, was edited by two of his fellow actors, Herminge and Condell, men he named in his will. And "Honest Ben" Jonson, in his poem prefacing the First Folio, called the author "sweet swan of Avon." What's more, the Shakespeare monument in the Stratford church, erected about the same time, clearly implies that the man it honors was a famous writer. And throughout their lives, none of the people who took part in those tributes ever let on that they were anything about what they seemed to be.All part of the hoax, counter the anti-Stratfordians, all cooked up to disguise the author. They contend the First Folio and the Stratford inscription provide sure clues that the people behind those things were joking.The Stratford man's supporters note that Americans are prominent in the challenge to their man. They suggest that it stems from a peculiar sort of snobbery, that some Americans can't accept the thought of a common English schoolboy being Shakespeare.The contest - the mystery - comes down to this: Those who believe de Vere was Shakespeare must accept an improbable hoax as part of it, a conspiracy of silence involving, among others, Queen Elizabeth herself. Those who side with the Stratford man must believe in miracles. |