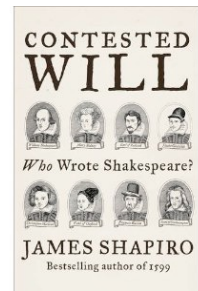


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# Shakespeare in the Psikhushkas

Contested Will • James Shapiro • 2010  
Faber • 367pp • £20



DELIA BACON, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American bluestocking who believed that Shakespeare was written by a group led by Francis Bacon, eventually went mad. The founder of the Oxfordian authorship theory was a man called Looney. And, according to most literary scholars, anyone who doubts that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare is probably more or less insane. The whole notion, it is said, belongs in the manic realm of flat-earthers, Princess Di conspirators and holocaust deniers.

In the Soviet Union dissidents were sent to psychiatric hospitals called psikhushkas because the authorities were afraid that the people might listen to them. In the 'free' west there is no need of psikhushkas for dissidents because derision and indifference are more effective in stifling their opinions.

Superficially, there is an absence of mockery in James Shapiro's latest work, but he is a wolf in sheep's clothing. *Contested Will* is not, as its subtitle states, an investigation of 'who wrote Shakespeare' but more a psychology of heresy. There is a paradox at its heart: it argues that it is a mistake to read Shakespeare's life out of the works (thus completely contradicting the entire thrust of his previous book, 1599), while itself being premised on the assumption that it is legitimate to read people's lives out of their opinions. Shakespeare heretics are allegedly reflecting their own personal crises, religious doubts, arrogance, self-advertisement or snobbery. None of them could possibly be motivated purely by an interest in the truth.

To turn Shapiro on his head, it is actually most Stratfordians who have no interest in the truth of this matter. As he himself says in the Prologue, the authorship question is the one subject walled off from serious study by Shakespeare scholars. But what is scholarship if not the pursuit of truth? Is it not highly ironic that on this question so many scholars are guilty of betraying their very function?

We can see it in the reviews of this tedious trawl through the lives of some key heretics. "Fully explaining the authorship controversy isn't a job for a Shakespearean scholar: it's a job for a pathologist", writes Michael Dobson in the *Financial Times*. Dissension on the authorship is a '150-year record of snobbery, fantasy and paranoia', according to Boyd Tonkin in *The Independent*. He ends: "'Oh, that way madness lies', as King Lear fears. Shapiro shows us how, and why, to shun it". In *The Observer* Robert McCrum mocks the 'fantasies' of 'refuseniks' who have 'gone over to the dark side' and live in a 'delusional world'.

Actually, McCrum seems unable to leave the subject alone, having referred to it in *The Observer* on numerous occasions. He doth protest too much, methinks. Perhaps he subconsciously harbours his own doubts but believes that even to hint at them might bring the wrath of scholarly opinion crashing down on him, so he conceals it with sneering contempt.

More importantly, it is difficult to see how the facts of the case can ever be discovered when even to question orthodoxy is to invite such personal abuse. English critics are particularly prone to this smug dismissiveness, whereas Shapiro, to give him his due, is more polite and respectful.

However, the question remains: why do Shakespeareans persistently avoid discussing the issue? I suggest that it is they who are in denial, they who are victims of groupthink and they who have imbibed the myth of the classless Warwickshire genius. In short, it is they and not the heretics who should be sent to the psikhushkas. For the fact is that if the Shakespeare plays and poems had all been written anonymously, nobody in their right mind would have ascribed them to William of Stratford because it would have made no sense whatsoever to marry this man to the verse. Ben Jonson wrote that if we want to discover the real Shakespeare we

must look not on his picture but his book. That indeed is what we have done from time immemorial. We study art to discover the artist and in turn we study the artist to discover the art. It has always been and always will be a two-way process.

Let's take just one area of evidence. Shapiro repeats the common error that nobody doubted Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare for two centuries after his death. The truth is that several contemporaries questioned the authorship. In his 1597 satire *Virgidemiae*, Joseph Hall suggests that a concealed cynic whom he calls 'Labeo' wrote two Shakespeare plays and the two long poems. In *The Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image* (1598) John Marston agrees but also calls the author 'Canaidos' and 'Mutius'. In the anonymous play *The Return from Parnassus*, performed by students at Cambridge in 1598-1601, we are told that Shakespeare made himself rich by 'mouthing words that better wits have framed'. In the anonymous 1605 pamphlet *Ratseyes Ghost* the writer suggests that Shakespeare, who had bought 'some place or lordship in the country', was not the real author of *Hamlet*. And, strangest of all, in a letter to Francis Bacon, Sir Tobie Matthew attributes *Henry IV Pt 1* to 'that excellent author Sir John Falstaff'.

The name 'Shakespeare' appeared on the title page of 51 plays including *Lochrine* and *The London Prodigal*. If James Shapiro doesn't believe that he wrote all of them, then he too doubts that Shakespeare wrote all of Shakespeare. There can be no dispute that, at least on some occasions, the name was used as a pseudonym or allonym.

Even if it were true that nobody questioned the Shakespeare authorship for 200 years after his death, what would that prove? How long did it take for people to question the flat earth theory or the geocentric notion that the earth was the centre of the universe?

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