

The Authorship Debate – The Way Forward

Philip Johnson reports on stimulating speech by Professor Bill Rubinstein to the De Vere Society at the Quatercentenary Celebration.

William Rubinstein, Professor of History at the University of Wales Aberystwyth laid down a challenge to Members of the De Vere Society by posing questions that have yet to be addressed:

- to identify the "grand possessors" – who released the plays?
- to find the author's Continental links – who sent him/her books and letters?
- to explore the 'humanist' element in the plays

Bill, as he wishes to be known, has long been interested in the Shakespearean Authorship question. He once read Ogburn on a flight from London to Melbourne. He runs a course for History undergraduates History's Mysteries, in which, he encourages students to analyse and compare the work of professional with amateur historians in investigating unsolved historical puzzles; other topics include Jack the Ripper.

In his 2002 article for History Today, he had written that there is much evidence that William Shakespeare of Stratford didn't write the plays, but that we may be forced to accept the traditional view, in the absence of alternative evidence.

Today he can categorically say that William of Stratford did not write the plays, though he has his name on the title page of the First Folio, and his dates are absolutely right. Shakespeare knew technically about the theatre – actors and casting, etc. – and he is recorded as an actor and sharer.

Arguments against the Stratford man

William Shakespeare had no education beyond the age of 13. There are only six signatures in his own hand-writing. He did not have the access to literature demonstrated in the works; the plays contain over 300 close references to classical and contemporary works, many not translated into English in his lifetime. For centuries he has been the best-researched man in history, yet little information has emerged. In the 20th century only two new 'facts' emerged: the Mountjoy case and the Lancashire connection. Both are problematic.

Bill asked: why are there no Huguenots in the plays, or references to the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, or to the persecution of Protestants? The Lancashire theory entails accepting 'Shakeshafte' = 'Shakespeare': would we so readily claim that e.g. 'Jackson' = 'Jonson'? The Lancashire connection

contradicts the account of how he came to London and held horses outside theatres – equivalent to a valet parking attendant.

William of Stratford's authorship is untenable. The First Folio contains no tribute to his family and was produced without reference to them. There is no record of any copy owned by any of his family (it would have been a treasured possession) nor was it owned by any of the gentry in the Stratford area. It cost £1000 to produce; two actors couldn't have put up the money. Who did?

For orthodox chronology the Strachey letter is also a problem. The Virginia Company owned the wrecked ship; there were 710 members who had paid £12 each. William Shakespeare was not one of them, so how did he even know about the shipwreck or read the unpublished account?

A further unanswered question concerns Falstaff. Why did Shakespeare banish and kill off Falstaff in 1599 when he was the most popular character in the plays, attracting crowds and making money. Stratfordians are silent about this.

There is no fit between Shaksper and the plays. They have a clear pattern: first come Italianate comedies and triumphalist history plays. Then 1601 is a key date, when a hinge event occurred, leading to the great tragedies and problem plays. It could be the impact of a great political event such as the Essex rebellion or a serious private event, of which we may never know.

Stratfordians suggest the death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, as the personal cause of his grief – but that was in 1595 and it was followed by the Falstaff plays. The play sequence has no objective link with the facts of William Shakespeare's life. Moreover, he became rich and successful, but the Sonnets indicate disgrace. So, for Bill, Shaksper was an actor and factotum but he was not the author; he was a front man.

Arguments against De Vere

Professor Rubinstein regards De Vere as the most convincing alternative candidate in the public domain. (Better candidates have yet to be identified publicly!) But there are problems with the Oxfordian case:

1. there is no tangible evidence for De Vere except the Geneva Bible
2. like Shakespeare of Stratford, he has no literary paper-trail

3. De Vere was involved in court theatricals and wrote under his own name not a pseudonym
 4. the mysterious performance of Richard II before the Essex rebellion – De Vere condemned Essex to death, so what was he doing apparently giving support through ‘his’ play and the Chamberlain’s Men?
 5. De Vere has no documented personal relationship with the Earl of Southampton:
 - ‘William Shakespeare’ did have links with Southampton – there are the two dedications to him, and Professor Rubinstein thinks the first group of sonnets was written to Southampton. De Vere and Southampton are known to have been in the same room only once – when De Vere was on the jury, which condemned Southampton to death. There is no mention of Southampton in the De Vere papers or vice versa.
 - Oxfordians have produced cogent arguments for the production of the First Folio, but they need
 6. to identify the "grand possessors" – who released the plays?
 7. to find De Vere’s Continental links – who sent him books and letters?
 8. to explore the ‘humanist’ element in the plays
- e) Hamlet is about Essex – ‘The Mousetrap’ refers to the performance of Richard II on the eve of the rebellion
 - f) We need to Ben Jonson must have been involved in the editorship of the plays
 - g) De Vere had no cover-up. He was known as a writer of plays.
 - h) Who were the "Grand Possessors"? A coherent Oxfordian exposition of their identities and motives is urgently needed. Did the "possessors" include Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, Bacon, Southampton, the Herbert brothers, Ben Jonson, or anyone else, all of whom might have been involved in producing the First Folio?
 - i) How do Oxfordians respond to the standard Stratfordian line that Shakespeare's manuscripts belonged to the King's Men? The pay off for Oxfordians is the real possibility of very important evidence that might follow from a close investigation of the likely members of this group.

The real author

There are hundreds of possibilities for the true author. The candidate must have been well-educated by private tutor, at Oxbridge and/or Inns of Court. He must, like many, have made the Grand Tour. He must have been involved in court politics or been one of the 400 MPs. But the field narrows down to 50-100 people with similar dates to WS. In questions and discussion, Professor Rubinstein, agreeing that he was adapting Looney’s method, suggested further criteria:

- a) he would have been connected to a prominent politician
- b) the author suffered a crisis of some sort in 1601 which caused a change from triumphalist histories and amusing Italiante comedies to the great tragedies and problem plays – comedies which no-one finds funny.
- c) he had a relationship with Southampton
- d) he was involved in the Virginia Company. Professor Rubinstein sees The Virginia Company as a key piece of evidence. On 23 May 1609, James I issued the Second Virginia Charter, and in the same week the Sonnets were published; the Dedication refers to "venturing forth". He made several other interesting points:

Professor Rubinstein said that he was very pleased to have been invited to the De Vere Quatercentenary Celebrations, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He fully approves the work the DVS is doing and he accepts that De Vere is the best candidate so far put forward. His points were intended constructively. If Oxfordians can put these into a coherent framework, preferably finding contemporary evidence to support, he himself would be delighted.

Bill seemed to imply that he is aware of a better candidate but he would not elaborate. He did say that he would gladly accept De Vere as the author if more evidence became available.

It was a most stimulating and thought-provoking talk, which must lead to further Oxfordian investigation - and no little speculation, until the new candidate(s) can be revealed.