

“I say, there is no darkness but ignorance...”

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One hundred years ago, the appropriately named Thomas Looney put forward the theory that the plays of Shakespeare had in fact been written by Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. A not inconsiderable achievement, given that for the last one-third of the plays he would have been dead. But the ‘*Oxfordian theory*’, absurd as it is, offers some object lessons in why people will still believe the most ridiculous fantasies and in how cherry-picked and unsupported evidence can be a very dangerous thing.



Although an alternative theory of anti-Stratfordianism had first been put forward by Delia Bacon in the 1800, it was Looney’s work ‘*Shakespeare Identified*’ that solidified the Earl of Oxford as the leading candidate. The case’s foundation was that William Shakespeare, as an individual, did not fit the profile of the author: he had received only a cursory education and certainly none in the subjects the plays record, hailed from a minor town in the middle of nowhere rather than at the centre of social and cultural experience, and was believed to have poor handwriting evidenced not least by the fact that all six surviving signatures of his are different. Looney thus set about finding someone who better fit what he imagined to be the necessary profile, and quickly settled upon the Earl Oxford. Quite why De Vere came into his crosshairs, we shall come to, but from the first it is evident that Looney was guilty of a pre-judgment: he had already decided on the profile that he would accept and only looked accordingly; a fatal mistake; as it precludes an open mind and concentrates on what you want to find, rather than what you need to know.

It cannot be avoided that part of the arguments of Oxfordian proponents is class related. This son of an illiterate glover, born in a backwater village, could not possibly have gone on to write the greatest verses of all time, so the theory goes: far easier to believe that it was this educated nobleman instead. Not only does this betray the worst of attitudes on a personal level, but it also allows for consideration of no competing hypotheses and rests solely on bias: being pre-attracted to certain individuals or characteristics and dismissing others. There are those anti-Stratfordians who want to believe that an ‘educated’ man (as defined by them) wrote the plays, and so they simply do, despite the clouded judgements this implies and the questionable results it produces. Moreover, adopting such an attitude once (I know what I want to believe and will ignore anything else) creates a dangerous culture of assumption and arrogance in light of facts and reasoned argument that risks becoming ‘the norm’.

So why De Vere himself? Largely because of a patchwork of half-connections and coincidences that would make Dan Brown blush, and partly because he was a figure that ticked all the pre-determined boxes (educated, cultured, noble) that the anti-Stratfordians desired. However, the leaps of faith required to accept the Oxfordian theory illustrate the dangers of drawing big conclusions from small data. For instance, a number of specially marked passages in Oxford’s personal Bible recur in Shakespeare’s works; the only three individuals to whom a play/sonnet is dedicated were the three lords intended as husbands for Oxford’s three daughters; he travelled and lived in Italy (the setting for full half the plays) whereas Will Shakespeare clearly never did; along with De Vere’s own reputation as a minor poet and

the common Elizabethan practice of publishing under a pseudonym. There is even a theory that textual clues are hidden throughout, which when decoded identify De Vere as the author. None of these in and of themselves constitute any evidence for the theory, but the fact that they exist at all is held up as proof of whatever the seer wishes them to say.

Having carefully pruned the case to highlight only what they consider relevant; the next step is to find ways to dismiss anything that does not fit this carefully constructed narrative. Not least De Vere's death in 1604 alluded to at the start: all of the plays were written before and doled out after he died. The plays which are now proven to be collaborations? The co-authors worked on after De Vere died and maintained the conspiracy of silence. *The Tempest*, known to have been written between 1610-1611? It's not a true De Vere/Shakespeare effort at all, just ignore it. Ultimately when not even a man's death can put the theory to bed, we see the anti-Stratfordians reaching ever more desperately for information which fits their narrative and ignores the far more substantial arguments in favour of Shakespeare. It is a dangerous thing to see the world as you want it to be, rather than as it is. Moreover, there is significant danger in adopting the historical perspective of 'this is how it was, so this is how it is' or that following what has gone before for the present-day concerns without adaptability or scrutiny is the best option. Not breaking this obstinate cultural mindset will cause deep-rooted problems and prove perhaps the old paradox that all we learn from history, is that we learn nothing from history. Understanding this, is why we look at the world differently.

Ultimately, the Oxfordian theory remains a fringe one and Shakespeare's position remains secure. However, it serves as an excellent reminder for all that can go wrong with investigation and of the pitfalls of attempting to pick and choose your beliefs in the face of both the evidence, and the lack of it: and of the damage this can do to your reputation. It seems fitting to end with the following line from Othello: *"Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself!"*.

The words of the Immortal Bard – whatever some might think...

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