

Shakespeare, the Masked Man *Nothing Truer Than Truth*

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2016 was the much celebrated 400th anniversary of the death of the great author William Shakespeare. Or was it? That year, the Folger Shakespeare Library tried to eliminate the Shakespeare authorship controversy, by taking to all 50 states first editions of Shakespeare's 1623 complete works. Since the traditional authorship theory arguably rests on a foundation of mostly tradition, authority, confirmation bias and group-think, this tour exposed the faith-based core of the "Stratfordian" authorship theory. It resembles not so much objective scholarship as the medieval tradition of showing the alleged bones of saints, or pieces of the "true cross," to increase faith. A former president of the Shakespeare Association of America once told me all Shakespeare scholars "get apoplectic" about the authorship debate. Scholars cannot be objective when they get so emotional.

This important film, *Nothing Truer Than Truth*, joins the lively debate about

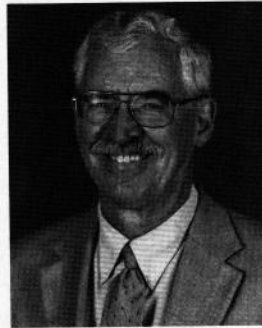
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who wrote these works of true genius. In 1920, J. Thomas Looney notoriously proposed that it was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, and director Cheryl Eagan-Donovan agrees.

The film's title translates the Earl of Oxford's family's Latin motto, "Vero Nihil Verius." Eagan-Donovan first encountered the Shakespeare authorship debate when she took a course at Harvard on historical controversies, taught by Donald Ostrowski. She optioned the movie rights to Mark Anderson's pivotal 2005 book, *Shakespeare by Another Name*, the book which underpins the narrative of this film. The film's haunting, original score for violin and cello was composed by Katy Jarzebowski.

Shakespeare scholars have tried to discredit the Oxfordian authorship theory, partly by "proving" the author did not actually visit Italy, where many of his plays take place. But, as John Shahan says in the film, Shakespeare the author seems to have had a strong emotional connection with Italy. The Earl of Oxford spent a year touring Italy, and the film offers convincing visual and verbal evidence that the author of the canon had to have been in Italy to see the wealth of local details described with precise accuracy in the plays and poems. An important inspiration for the Italian themes in the film was Richard Paul Roe's 2012 book, *Shakespeare's Guide to Italy*. It shows that Shakespeare did not make errors in



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his depiction of Italy. Oxford's year in Italy provides a colorful organizing narrative for the film, with many scenes shot on location.

For example, we see the rich frescos in a palace Oxford probably visited in Mantua, which are later described in detail in Shakespeare's long 1594 poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*. This one story alone should be enough to make supporters of the traditional authorship theory rethink the matter. A mural depicting the Trojan War was painted in the 1530s by Giulio Romano, the very artist mentioned in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare devotes some 200 lines of his long poem to a detailed description of the painting (scholars who haven't seen the mural in question can't agree whether the lines are based on a painting; a tapestry; or are purely imaginary). Lucrece looks for solace after Tarquin rapes her by mentally reviewing this mural. Most of the painting is on the ceiling, so Lucrece is in a figurative sense "floating up to the ceiling," as many women dissociatively imagine they are doing while being raped. One stanza says that Achilles—like the anonymous author of Shakespeare's works—"was left unseen, save to the eye of mind," while standing in for "Achilles' image stood his spear." These lines are in the second work signed with the pen name *Shakespeare*, while the real author "was left unseen," as Oxfordian scholar Michael Delahoyde has observed.

The film's tour guide to Venice is Alberto Toso Fei, co-author of the 2007 book *Shakespeare in Venice*, which documents the intriguing connections between Shakespeare's plays and that city. Fei tells us that in 1576, when de Vere used Venice as his home base to explore Italy, Venice was the cultural crossroads of Europe, thanks to the Venetian Empire. It had Europe's most vibrant theatrical scene, with two new public theaters, which probably led Oxford to encourage the founding of public theaters after he returned to London. Fei plausibly speculates that the city's

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Carnival tradition, which allowed masks to be worn in public, helped inspire Oxford to "mask" his true identity in his plays. Earl Showerman adds that Shylock is probably based on the Jewish moneylender in Oxford's Venice, Gaspar Ribeiro.

One of the many exciting speculations about Oxford's year in Italy involves his visit to Palermo, where the historical record shows he issued a whimsical challenge to anyone to joust with him, as he chivalrously vowed to defend the honor of his lady, Queen Elizabeth (Oxford was a champion jousting). Since Cervantes was probably there at the time, this story may have contributed some details to his *Don Quixote*.

A secondary theme in the film is the highly contentious thesis that Oxford's bisexuality is consistent with the bisexuality of the Sonnets and of some of the Shakespeare plays. Sir Derek Jacobi, who appears frequently in the film, states that Shakespeare's first 126 Sonnets are love poems from an older man to a younger man. Sir Mark Rylance comments on Oxford's ambivalence toward women.

Roger Stritmatter's Ph.D. in comparative literature was the first doctorate in literature awarded in the U.S. for a dissertation that provides evidence (from Oxford's personal Geneva Bible) that he wrote Shakespeare. In the film, Stritmatter agrees Oxford was bisexual.

In the 19th century, Polonius in *Hamlet* was widely thought to be a spoof on Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's chief minister and Oxford's father-in-law. Burghley's direct descendant, the 18th Baron Burghley, who appears in the film, strongly supports the Oxfordian authorship theory. For example, he mentions that Oxford, his ancestor's ward after his father died when he was 12, had access to Burghley's library, one of the largest in England. When he was a younger boy, Oxford lived with his tutor Sir Thomas Smyth, whose library had hundreds of books.

The film abounds in material of psychoanalytic interest. Sigmund Freud was the first prominent intellectual to support the Oxfordian authorship theory. Stritmatter observes that the traditional

authorship theory insists we must not look for connections between the works and the life of their author. But Rylance gets to the heart of the matter when he says "Unwrapping the plays from a ... protective cover the Stratford [theory] has put around them to make them this cuddly little, harmless, provincial fantasy allows us to see that they are really painful plays, attacking, confused at times, raging." Rylance adds, "People in the theater are forced ...to express themselves behind a mask of being someone else, whether you're an actor or a writer... that obviously applies to de Vere."

What are the film's weaknesses? It does not include nearly enough information to persuade skeptical viewers that Oxford wrote Shakespeare. No single film can do so. Oxford's authorship has previously been explored more broadly in Laura and Lisa Wilson's 2012 documentary, *Last Will. and Testament*.

Those who wish to arrange local screenings, or obtain a DVD of the film, should contact the director at eagandonovan@verizon.net. APSA



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