

Alas, poor Shakespeare

Conspiracy theories about the authorship of his plays have gone mainstream.

Opinion

April 11, 2010 | By James Shapiro

Film director Roland Emmerich, whose last effort was the apocalyptic "2012," has begun shooting "Anonymous." It won't be another disaster movie -- except perhaps for English professors. According to Emmerich, the film is "about how it came to be that William Shakespeare was not the author of his plays," which, he says, turn out to have been written by the "Earl of Oxford."

Emmerich calls "Anonymous" a political thriller. "It's about who will succeed Elizabeth and the cause of that thriller, the Essex Rebellion." The film, starring Vanessa Redgrave as Queen Elizabeth and Rhys Ifans as the Earl of Oxford, will have "kings, queens, and princes," he adds. "It's about illegitimate children, it's about incest. It's about all of these elements which Shakespeare's plays have."

Except, of course, it's also about how Shakespeare didn't write those plays, indeed, couldn't even write his own name.

The story behind this story dates back to 1920, when J.T. Looney published "Shakespeare Identified," the bible of those who believe that the Earl of Oxford is the true author of Shakespeare's plays. When Emmerich says his movie will be about incest and bastards, he means that the story line follows a popular spinoff of Looney's undocumented theory, in which the Earl of Oxford was not only the secret son of the not-so-virginal Queen Elizabeth, but also, when he came of age, her lover. There's more fantasy: the Earl of Southampton was their illegitimate child and likely heir to the throne of England, until he was imprisoned for his role in the Essex Rebellion.

And the explanation as to why Shakespeare would have gotten credit for plays and poems the Earl of Oxford wrote? The "real facts" had to be hushed up because a Tudor prince could never be seen to stoop to the lowly business of playwriting.

Emmerich's film is one more sign that conspiracy theories about the authorship of Shakespeare's plays have gone mainstream. While dozens of alternative candidates have been proposed, the Earl of Oxford is the one whose supporters have been most vocal and visible.

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Leading actors, including Mark Rylance, Derek Jacobi, Michael York and Jeremy Irons, have publicly come out against Shakespeare as Shakespeare. National Public Radio's Renée Montagne recently accepted an award for her series on "Morning Edition" calling Shakespeare's authorship into doubt. At the New York Times, William Niederhorn has written a series of pieces questioning Shakespeare's authorship. Elise Broach's "Shakespeare's Secret," a popular young-adult novel, has recycled the story of Elizabeth's clandestine relationship with the Earl of Oxford for the middle-school crowd.

And as the Wall Street Journal reported last year, the Supreme Court boasts some of the most prominent Oxfordians in the land. Retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has signed a "declaration of doubt" about Shakespeare's authorship. Justice Antonin Scalia has publicly acknowledged his belief that the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays. So has Justice John Paul Stevens, who has been declared "Oxfordian of the Year."

A quarter-century ago all this was unimaginable. In fact, Stevens, along with fellow Justices Harry Blackmun and William Brennan, ruled unanimously in favor of Shakespeare and against the Earl of Oxford in a celebrated moot court in 1987. The objection to Oxford's authorship was obvious: Because he died in 1604, he could not have written, sometimes in active collaboration with other dramatists, 10 or so plays after that (including "Henry VIII," described by contemporaries as "new" when staged in 1613).

What then accounts for the reversal? The facts haven't changed; what has is our comfort level with conspiracy theory as well as our eagerness to seek authors' lives in their works.

In a literary culture swamped by memoirs, many now take it for granted that most writing -- of the past no less than the present -- is confessional or at least experiential, and that you had to live it to describe it. (The Elizabethans would have found such notions bizarre.) By that logic, the Earl of Oxford, who in reality was captured by pirates and had three daughters, has a stronger claim to have written "Hamlet" and "King Lear" than a professional playwright from Stratford who never set sail and only had two daughters.

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Since no external documents link the Earl of Oxford to the plays (in contrast to Shakespeare himself, for whom there is plenty of contemporary linking evidence), those convinced that he wrote them are stuck arguing, in circular fashion, that circumstantial evidence is to be found in the works, and that these works are necessarily autobiographical, a portrait of an aristocratic author's life, loves and thwarted political ambitions.

"Anonymous" capitalizes on the desire for a more exciting story than one in which a young man from the provinces moves to the big city and fashions out of old stories and a powerful imagination great plays and poems. And the democratization of knowledge on the Internet, a breeding ground for conspiracy theories, has been a boon for those who believe that Shakespeare didn't write the plays. It certainly hasn't helped that literary scholars have mostly dodged this fight, even as they've lost their cultural authority.

All this would have come as a shock to Looney, whose advocacy of the Earl of Oxford was spurred by a hatred of democracy and modernity, and who in making his case for Oxford was also promoting the view that we needed to return to a social order in which everyone knew his and her place and the few ruled over the many.

In cashing in on this fantasy, Emmerich's film may lead moviegoers to believe that only a nobleman had the necessary gifts to write the works of Shakespeare. Sure, it's only a movie, but try explaining that to schoolteachers who will soon be confronted by students arguing that the received histories of Elizabethan England and its greatest poet are lies -- and that their teachers, in suppressing the truth, are party to this conspiracy.

Emmerich's film will also do a deeper disservice to Shakespeare's legacy. Encouraging audiences to believe that the plays are little more than the recycled story of a disgruntled aristocrat's life and times devalues the very thing that makes Shakespeare so remarkable: his imagination.

James Shapiro is a professor of English at Columbia University and the author of "Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?" (Simon & Schuster).