



## Who Wrote Shakespeare? An Exercise in Critical Thinking

Educators and homeschoolers these days are teaching their students how to exercise their critical thinking skills. In other words, students must be able to look at a problem or controversy, take it apart, and find out what makes sense and what doesn't, what is true and what isn't. The main tool in that form of critical thinking is logic, the ability to take a fact and connect it with other facts, the ability to separate fact from fiction, and fact from opinion. Thus critical thinking must involve analysis and judgment.



There is no better subject on which to hone these skills than the ongoing controversy surrounding Shakespeare's authorship. Harold Bloom, the Yale professor, writes of the Bard: "The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually....He wrote the best poetry and the best prose in any Western language....If any author has become a mortal god, it must be Shakespeare."

It is this kind of accolade that makes us want to know more about this great literary genius, what kind of a man was he? How was he educated? How did this great mind develop? If the works of Shakespeare were not so marvelous, we would probably be less concerned about him biographically. But such astounding genius invites inquiry.

And it was inquiry that gave birth to the authorship question. It all started when a retired clergyman, Rev. James Wilmot, a friend of Samuel Johnson and a great admirer of Shakespeare's works, became curious about this literary genius, of whom so little was known. In 1780, Wilmot moved to Stratford intending to gather enough documentary material about the playwright so that he could write a full-scale biography. He searched everywhere within a 50-mile radius of Stratford, hoping to find books, letters, or any other records pertaining to Shakespeare as a writer, but came up with nothing.

After much frustration, Wilmot came to the inevitable and disappointing conclusion that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon did not write the works attributed to him. But, obviously, someone did write the 36 plays in the famous First Folio. Who was he? Wilmot undoubtedly gave the question some thought, but he kept his doubts and conjectures to himself and ordered his papers to be burned after his death.

But what have we come up with since then? Diana Price, in her 2001 book, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, examined every single document that has been unearthed about William Shakespeare since scholars began searching, and concluded that he was not a writer. "These documents," writes Price, "account for his activities as an actor, a theatre shareholder, a businessman, a moneylender, a property holder, a litigant, and a man with a family, but they do not account for his presumed life as a professional writer."

But that addresses only one part of the mystery. The second part is equally urgent. If Shakespeare didn't write the works attributed to him, who did? That has become the great question that has occupied the minds of such individuals as Sigmund Freud, Henry James, Mark Twain, and others of



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equal stature.

There have been three serious contenders: Sir Francis Bacon; Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford; and Christopher Marlowe, the poet-playwright. But each of them poses a problem. It is highly unlikely that Bacon, a brilliant thinker and writer with an ego as big as a house, would have hidden the fact that he had written the greatest dramas ever written by a human being. Indeed, he was alive when the First Folio was published in 1623, and if he had been its author he would have taken credit for it. As for Oxford, a literary dilettante, he did not have the genius required to produce these masterpieces. Also, he died before many of the plays were believed to have been written.

On the other hand, Marlowe had demonstrated his extraordinary poetic genius with *Tamburlaine I & II*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Dido: Queen of Carthage*, *The Massacre at Paris*, *Edward II*, his translation of the Roman poet Ovid, and his great love poem, *Hero and Leander*. He and Shakespeare were the same age, both born in 1564. Marlowe had the best education anyone could have in Elizabethan England: six years at Cambridge. As for Shakespeare, there is no documentation that he had any schooling at all. But the history books tell us that Marlowe was murdered in 1593 at age 29 and therefore couldn't possibly have written the 36 plays in the First Folio.

But in my book, *The Marlowe-Shakespeare Connection*, I believe that I have gathered enough evidence to be able to assert with reasonable certainty that it was Christopher Marlowe who is the actual author behind the mask of William Shakespeare and that he did not die in 1593.

Any serious effort to apply critical thinking to a controversy as important as the one about Shakespeare's authorship requires a lot of hard work. And that means reading many books on the subject. Books have been written in support of each of the contenders. The first book to put forth the Marlowe thesis was Calvin Hoffman's *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, published in 1955. Since then, three books have been published in support of the Earl of Oxford: *Alias* by Joseph Sobran; *Shakespeare by Another Name* by Mark Anderson; and *The Mysterious Mr. Shakespeare* by Charlton Osborn.

The question becomes: Who is right and who is wrong? Who has presented the best evidence to support his case? This writer had to read all of these books in order to make up his own mind. In the end, my choice was Christopher Marlowe because he had all of the requirements needed to write these great plays. He was a literary genius and a professional writer. Only such a professional could have written the 36 plays in the First Folio. They could not have been written by a part-time amateur.

But with the decline of literacy in the United States, interest in Shakespeare's plays has diminished as well as interest in the authorship controversy. English literature is not taught in our schools and universities as it was decades ago. Most students cannot handle complex language since they've been taught to read by the sight method which limits their ability to read the classics with their extensive vocabularies.

Nevertheless, there is still enough interest among a growing number of literate human beings, including several Supreme Court judges, to keep the controversy very much alive. Indeed, in England there is now a website totally devoted to this controversy. It is called "Doubt About Will" and has collected several thousand signatures from people all over the world who agree with the premise that doubt about Will's authorship is a very legitimate form of literary interest.

It took me seven years of research to reach the conclusion that Christopher Marlowe was the actual author of the Shakespeare canon. He was not killed as reported in May 1593. It was a faked death to



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save him from the gallows. He had been charged with atheism and blasphemy, which were capital crimes in those days, and since he was a valuable member of the Queen's secret service, his boss, Lord Burghley, the Queen's right-hand man, made sure that the young playwright could escape execution and continue working for them under a new identity in exile.

And so a faked death was staged, and Marlowe was sent into exile where he continued to write plays. They were then sent to London via diplomatic courier to Lord Burghley, who then conveyed them to Marlowe's patron, Thomas Walsingham, who had them copied by a scribe, and then brought to Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre by his publisher, Edward Blount.

The system apparently worked very well, and William Shakespeare, a hired front, was well paid for his trouble. Anyone who reads the First Folio will find Marlowe's fingerprints all over the 36 plays. But first you must read all of Marlowe in order to be able to spot the clues which Marlowe inserted in the plays.

History is full of intriguing plots and conspiracies. But that the greatest playwright in all of history should be the subject of such a bold conspiracy, tends to leave one speechless.

**Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld** is the author of nine books on education including *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, *The Whole Language/OBE Fraud*, and *The Victims of Dick & Jane and Other Essays*. Of *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, former U.S. Senator Steve Symms of Idaho said: "Every so often a book is written that can change the thinking of a nation. This book is one of them." Mr. Blumenfeld's columns have appeared in such diverse publications as *Reason*, *The New American*, *The Chalcedon Report*, *Insight*, *Education Digest*, *Vital Speeches*, *WorldNetDaily*, and others.



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