

BETWEEN FRANCIS BACON AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: INTERROGATING THE SHAKESPEARIAN LITERARY CANON

Nasir HASHIM

Department of English and Drama
Kaduna State University, Kaduna
nasirhashimhydara78@gmail.com
08135295865

Christopher Amaechi UGWU

Department of English (Degree Unit),
Federal College of Education, Enugu
njiagbo@gmail.com
08060689442
&

Suleiman Ibrahim SAFANA

Department of English
Al-Qalam University, Katsina

Abstract

Several historians and literary experts have doubted Shakespeare's knowledge in general and literary skill in particular. This study highlights the issue of authorship of the controversial literary works accredited to Shakespeare. In order to discover the actual brain behind the great literary works, this study explores contribution of other English authors of Shakespeare's time such as Francis Bacon and Edward de Vere. The study adopts Qualitative Method; thus it obtains data from written sources, which include historical and literary writings by reliable authors. The study finds that the Shakespearean canon is a product of collaborations by many literary experts, such as Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and Robert Greene.

Introduction

Shakespeare is not only regarded as the greatest English literary hero of all time, but is also considered the champion of literary enterprise all over the globe, especially within English Commonwealth of Nations. For example, long after independence, Shakespeare is celebrated as if he were the greatest literary statesman in all British former colonies such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Rwanda, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Guyana, Jamaica, Guatemala, and so on. Shakespeare's works have been among the most important materials for literary studies throughout Commonwealth of nations. In Senior School Examination commonly organized by West African English speaking countries, i.e. Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone, Gambia and Liberia, Literature is divided into African and Non-African. Both African and Non-African literary texts written in English by different authors within Africa and across the world are continuously selected after five year intervals; only Shakespeare's works have the honor to be permanently recommended over the years.

As early as 1730s Shakespeare's plays were popular throughout United States of America. Shakespeare's famous plays, such as Hamlet, Richard III and Romeo and Juliet were staged in New York and many other cities of America. In 1863, Shakespeare's works took the special attention of the famous American actor, James Henry Hackett who published some of Shakespeare's plays. Hackett also staged Henry IV. Henceforth, Shakespeare's works were considered the best example of literary materials, and were studied in American High Schools and Universities. Shakespeare was regarded as America's national hero. He was also celebrated in United States of America probably more than he was in United Kingdom. Recently, Shakespeare's 400th death anniversary was celebrated throughout the world.

In Australia, Shakespeare has been celebrated as national figure at least the past for three hundred and fifty (350) years. His works have been studied as part of Australian national curriculum. Renowned theatres used to stage his plays more than any other plays produced by other playwrights. For example, Sydney Theatre Company has severally performed Shakespeare's plays, including *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like in America, Shakespeare's death anniversary has been a national event in Australia.

Shakespeare's Biographical Sketch

William Shakespeare was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire in 1564. There was no documented evidence supporting the claim that William Shakespeare had attended the local Grammar High School in Stratford. If he actually did, then he must have studied subjects like Classical Literature, Rhetoric, Latin, among others. Considering that fact that during his childhood, Shakespeare's family experienced some difficulties, due to oft-decline of socio-economic prosperity, it was supposed that Shakespeare engaged in some jobs to support his education and perhaps the family. At age of 18, Shakespeare got married to Anne Hathaway of Stratford. Anne Hathaway died in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare. Shakespeare had a daughter, christened Susanna on 26th May, 1583. According to Waugaman (2012), Shakespeare had twin children Hamnet and Judith baptized on 2nd February, 1585. Apparently, no one knew what he was doing for living in Stratford before moving to London some time in 1580s. But there was a narrative after his death that together with some of his friends, Shakespeare had once stolen a deer at Sir Thomas Lucy's park— an incident that pushed him into trouble with Sir Thomas, and as a result he fled to London where he joined a group of dramatists. He became a member of the then most reputable theatre in London called "Chamberlain's Men". It was not clear as to how Shakespeare managed to get admitted into Chamberlain's Men, and when he began to appear in theatre. He was said to have written many plays and sonnet poems, perhaps while still in his home, Stratford and during his theatrical career in London. The following literary works are attributed to him:

Works	Date of Production	Date of Publication
Henry VI, Part II	1591	1594
Henry VI, Part III	1592	1595
Henry VI, Part I	1592	1562
Venus and Adonis	1593	1597
Richard	1593	1593
Two Gentlemen of Verona	1593	1623
The Comedy of Error	1594	1623
King John	1595	1623
The Taming of the Shrew	1593	1623
Titus Andronicus	1594	1594
Romeo and Juliet	1594	1597
The Rape of Lucrece	1594	1594
Love's Labours Lost	1594	1598
The Sonnets	1594	1609
Richard I	1595	1597
A Midsummer Night's Dream	1595	1600
The Merchant of Venice	1596	1600
Henry IV, Part I	1596	1598
Henry IV, Part II	1597	1600
The Merry Wives of Windsor	1597	1602
Much Ado About Nothing	1598	1600
As You Like It	1599	1623
Julius Caesar	1599	1623
Henry V	1599	1600
Hamlet	1600	1603
Twelfth Night	1601	1609
All's Well That Ends Well	1602	1623
Troilus and Cressida	1603	1623
Othello	1603	1622
Measure for Measure	1603	1623
King Lear	1605	1623
Timon of Athens	1606	1608
Macbeth	1606	1623
Pericles	1607	1609
Antony and Cleopatra	1608	1623
Coriolanus	1608	1623
Cymbeline	1609	1623
The Winter's Tale	1609	1623
The Tempest	1610	1623
The Two Noble Kinsmen	1611	1634
Cardenio	1612	-
Henry VIII	1613	1623

Author and Authorship

Foucault (1969) argues that the function and status of an author is a controversial one. He raises a question as to whether a book or any kind of text naturally has an author or the author is assigned to it. Foucault considers the author as an object of manipulation as well as public property which could be appropriated. He claims that in modern time, legal system makes it a matter of must to identify an author in order to get him or her for punishment in the case of any transgression such as sedition, blasphemy or slander which is regarded as unhealthy for political establishment. He stresses that:

...the form of property they have become is of a particular type whose legal codification was accomplished some years ago. It is important to notice, as well, that its status as property is historically secondary to the penal code controlling its appropriation. Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered a transgression (p. 124).

In some situations, many gifted writers cannot identify themselves with the works they have painstakingly laboured for, for fear of legal action. They have to hide their identity by using pseudonymous or anonymous status. Thus, the true identity of an author may not in all cases be the name on the front page of a text. There are many texts written by some people but attributed to different individuals, most cases fictitious beings. It is for this reason that Foucault considers an author as a fictive personality.

An author, text and reader constitute system of relationship, in that none of them exist without the other. An author functions as ideological mechanism. According to Foucault (1969), “an author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses... there is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (p. 02).

Literature in 16th Century England

Drama and Poetry were the dominant genres of literature during Shakespeare's time. Drama, most importantly, was not only a cultural enterprise but it was a lucrative business venture. Theater was an important venue for propagating social and cultural awareness. English Monarchs were much interested in the drama and theater as sources of pleasure and entertainment. Since common people are mostly inclined towards the interests of their leaders, play writing therefore has become the most popular literary endeavor.

Debate about Shakespeare's Authorship

Historians and literary critics have debated intensively about the authorship of the literary works attributed to Shakespeare. The literary works had been popularly and traditionally believed to be Shakespeare's production until 18th century when some literary critics and historians began to cast doubt on the credibility of such belief. Severe debates followed. The debates led to the emergence of many theories—mainly divided into two: Stratfordianism and Anti-Stratfordianism. In addition to the three above, Maley (2010) identifies the following disintegrator, “the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition”, “Continuity Shakespeare” and “Provisional Shakespeare.”

Stratfordianism

Stratfordianism is a theory on authorship question. Proponents of this theory are known as Stratfordians. They argued that the world famous plays and poems were written by Shakespeare, a native of Stratford-Upon-Avon who was born in 1564. Stratfordians failed to advance any logical evidence but they are fond of accusation and threat. They accuse Oxfordians of misusing literary and historical evidence in order to support their claim of Edward de Vere authorship of Shakespeare's canon. Richard M. Waugaman (2012) claims that Stratfordians are fond of “playing many mental tricks to get around the vast number of contradictions in their theory” (p. 33). They sometimes behave like children, who speak without any cogent evidence but expect their audience to believe that their theory makes a reasonable sense. Most Stratfordians are fond of digressing or intentionally turning away from the subject of discussion and begin to make unnecessary accusation against any anti-Stratfordians. They tend to threaten Anti-Stratfordians. Wagauman reveals that “...my eminent colleague warned me I would jeopardize my professional reputation unless I dropped my interest in de Vere (as the author of Shakespearean conon)” (p. 34).

Stratfordians deliberately turn blind eyes on any evidence, provided it goes contrary to theory of belief on Shakespeare. “When another friend read my work in the Psalms marked in de Vere's copy, he dismissed everything as having no credibility, since it was written by an Oxfordian” (Waugaman, p. 34). Stratfordians rest almost all their argument on the 1623 first Folio of Shakespeare's plays. “In accepting the misleading attributably authorship of this volume, they ignore the growing documentation of the ubiquity of anonymous and pseudonymous authorship of 16th century plays” (Waugaman, p. 35).

Anti-Stratfordianism

Anti-Stratfordian theory argued that the Shakespearean canon were actually produced by someone or some other people else than Shakespeare. The famous candidates for the authorship of the works are Edward de Vere (1550-1604), the 17th Earl of Oxford, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the famous 16th century literary figure Christopher Marlowe(1564-1593), English playwright and poet (1564-1593), Lancelot Andrews (1555–1626), Bishop of Winchester, William Alexander (1568–1640), Anthony

Bacon (1558–1601), John Barnard (1604–1674), the husband of Shakespeare’s granddaughter, Barnabe Barnes (1571–1609), Charles Blount (1563–1606) and Richard Barnfield (1574–1620) are among the candidates of the Shakespeare’s canon authorship. Others are Sir Thomas Bodley (1545–1613), Richard Burbage (1567–1619), Robert Burton (1577–1640), William Butts (d. 1583), Thomas Cecil (1542–1623) and Thomas Dekker (1572–1632). This study examines the arguments in support Francis Bacon and the members of his literary group as foregrounded below.

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon was born on in 1561 in central London to Sir Nicolas and Anne, as popularly known. But reliable evidence proved that Francis was born at York Palace to the so-called virgin Queen, Elizabeth I and her secret husband Robert Dudley. This matter will be discussed in details later. As the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Francis’s supposed father, Sir Nicolas Bacon was regarded as the second most influential person after Queen Elizabeth I. Francis grew up amid wealth, privileges and opportunities. Like Edward, Francis was so dear to Queen Elizabeth’s heart that she called him “my Lord Keeper”. Allegedly, he enrolled into Cambridge University at the age of 12. He was passionate for scholarly business, and particularly, he loved writing. Owing to his father’s influential place in the then English society, Francis was appointed assistant English Ambassador to France. After the death of Queen Elizabeth, her successor, King James I appointed Francis Bacon Attorney General of England — a post he so much desired. Even with his demanding legal activities, Francis kept writing.

Many historians and literary scholars argued that Francis Bacon, not Edward de Vere was the true author of Shakespearian canon. Delia Bacon (1811—1859) was the first famous literary authority to argue in support of Francis as the author of the great works. Delia Bacon became interested in researching for the truth behind the authorship of plays attributed to Shakespeare. Her decision was triggered by among other things — discovery that the Bible was written by many authors and heated argument about the masterpieces attributed to Homer. Also, Delia was influenced by the current of veneration of Francis Bacon as philosophical genius. An American playwright and Shakespeare scholar retired from public interactions and her university lecturing, but committed herself to researches. Delia could not believe that such great works were produced for commercial purpose. She looked at the works from philosophical perspective. Delia regarded the works as great philosophical masterpieces meant for society under absolute control of aristocratic monarchy. Such works in her opinion could not be written by someone with low level of social and academic profiles like William Shakespeare. Delia argued that the works were produced by an intelligent author, Francis Bacon perhaps in collaboration with a coterie of men such as Edmund Spenser (1553—1599) and Walter Raleigh (1552—1618). Mark Twain (1835—1910), another American literary figure and lecturer accepted the Delia Bacon’s theory. Twain puts forward his argument using some points below:

- That very little is known about Shakespeare's biography. Even the little that is known is based on conjecture.
- That prominent English lawyer and judges deciphered the plays and found in them rich with a lot of acute legal thoughts which were far above the author's ability as layman.
- That Shakespeare never held legal office, and that only record available showed that he was in court only for lawsuit late in his life.
- That small towns in English tradition celebrated their famous writers for years, but Shakespeare was rarely celebrated in Stratford.

Wagner (2009) advances his argument with even more convincing evidence in support of Delia's theory. Wagner exposed that Elizabeth was known to the public as a virgin Queen, but a handful of members of her privy council such as Nicolas were aware of her pregnancy by Robert Dudley, a man who was so dear to her heart. They also witnessed her secret wedding with the same Dudley. Dudley was appointed the Earl of Leicester shortly after the wedding. This appointment enabled Dudley an opportunity to meet the Queen at any time without any suspicion. Barely twenty days after the wedding, was Queen Elizabeth delivered of a male child, named Francis. The Queen asked Nicolas and his wife Anne to adopt Francis under the vow of secrecy. Under other children of Nicolas, Francis birth registration was done in a special way - his name was registered into as Mr. Francis. This kind of registration where "Mr." was added to a baby name registration never happened in the past. This indicated that Francis birth registration was made for special reason. As Francis began to grow, people realized a strong resemblance between him and Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester.

Around the age of 15, Francis discovered link to English royal family. Unlike Nicolas' other children, Francis was brought up in a special way. He received care and attention at all the times. As states earlier, Francis was enrolled into Trinity College of Cambridge University at the age of 12. He grew up very learned in variety of fields, including History, Literature, Politics, Latin classical, Greek mythology, and so on. In order to avert possible social frictions, the Queen engaged Francis as her representative across European continent. This opportunity enabled Francis to travel widely around the continent. While in France, he got acquainted to some renowned French poets and Playwrights such as Pierre de Ronsard, "the prince of Poets". Being well learned many fields of knowledge; Francis became very popular among French intellectuals. He was known as "the Jeweled mind", The man who knew everything" (p. 24). In Italy and Spain, Francis studies the languages, the cultures and the literature of the two societies.

He returned to England much wiser and well versed in European history, culture and literature. With the help of some friends and associates, such as Anthony Bacon, Francis formed a secret group named, "Fra Rosi Crosse Society". Interested in literary writing, he worked very hard and produced many literary materials (poems and plays), but none of these works carried his name because, in his

time literary writing was regarded as lowly business done only by undisciplined common people. It was also a very dangerous enterprise and indeed life threatening. For example, if Monarchy or Church rejected or sanctioned a particular literary work, the author was in trouble; he/she could be imprisoned or even killed. Thus, authors of literary texts had to use anonymous or pen names. In some cases, an author had to pay a lower common man to stand as the author of a work. Francis used his “Fra-Rosi Crosse Society” as an industry through which his plays were produced and performed. As the volume of the works grew very huge, Francis and the members of his society realized the necessity of creating brand name so as to curtail piracy and plagiarism. He then conceived the idea of using “Pallas Athena”, the Greek goddess of wisdom whom he considered his source of muse. He decided to use the literal meaning of the name: “Shake Spear”. Francis and his associates considered Shakespeare as “the goddess of wisdom shaking her spear at ignorance” (p. 39). Wagner claimed that for numerical reason, Francis added letter “E” in the end of the name which resulted to Shakespeare. “Up until the publishing of the 1623 Shakespeare Folio, the name appeared either as “Shake-spear” or as “Shakespeare.” The hyphenated spelling of the name was aimed more at presenting the name as a brand name than as a surname (p. 39)”.

Shakespeare enterprise was non-profit organization, but it existed in order to promote artistic creativity and innovation. Apparently, Francis lavished much of his wealth in financing the activities of the enterprise, and as a result he perpetually broke. He had to go into borrowings. Shakespeare group made up of talented literary writers such as Anthony Bacon, George Wither, The Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Lyly, Sir John Davies, and George Herbert. Others Shakespeare circle were Tobie Matthew, Sir Fulke Greville, Countess of Pembroke, Thomas Nash, John Davies of Hereford, George Peele, Edmund Spenser, the Earl of Essex, the Earl of Southampton, Sir Philip Sidney as well as his sister Mary Herbert.

It is important to remember Robert Greene (1592) once accused a supposed author called “Shake-scene” who lived by efforts talent of some English writers. Greene stated that he was aware of “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Iohannes factotum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country” (p. 16 - 17). The name Shake-scene could refer to Francis Bacon himself or Shake Spear as a brand name for the Shakespeare enterprise.

Conclusion

Obviously, Shakespeare’s biography did not show a personality with enough intellectual and social backgrounds capable of producing great literary works which had been regarded as the best of all its kinds throughout recorded history of mankind. This paper is convinced and wishes others to be convinced as well that a human author named William Shakespeare never existed. The paper did believe

that the great literary works attributed to the fictitious personality, named Shakespeare were products of collaborative effort of talented writers of the 16th century England, who constituted Fra- Rosi Crosse Society established by Francis Bacon. Famous among these writers were: Edward de Vere, Francis Bacon himself and his foster brother Anthony Bacon, Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and Robert Greene. Others include George Wither, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Lyly, Sir John Davies, and George Herbert. Others Shakespeare circle were Sir Philip Sidney, the Earl of Essex, Tobie Matthew, Sir Fulke Greville, Countess of Pembroke, Thomas Nash, John Davies of Hereford, George Peele, the Earl of Southampton, among others.

References

- Greene, R. (1592). *Greens, Groats—Worth of Wit*. Oregon: Oregon University Press.
- Brian, V. (1988). *In Defense of Rhetoric*.
- Davis, P. (2009). *Thinking Shakespeare Now*. London: A& C Black.
- Wainwright, M. (2018). *The Rational Shakespeare: Peter Ramus, Edward de Vere and the Question of Authorship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes, J. (2014). “Comparative Caricatures in King John and Troublesome Raine.” *Brief Chronicles*. (5): 101 - 112.
- Shapiro, J. (2010). *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* New York: Faber.
- Bacon, D. (1856). “William Shakespeare and His Plays: An Inquiry Concerning Them.” in *Putnam’s Monthly*. 1 - 19.
- Twain, M. (2007). *Is Shakespeare Dead?* <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/servlet>
- Waugaman, M. R. (2012). “Psychopathology of Shakespearians Stratfordianism” in <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/761086>
- Looney, J. M. (1920). *Shakespeare Identified*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *What is an Author?* Cornell University Press.