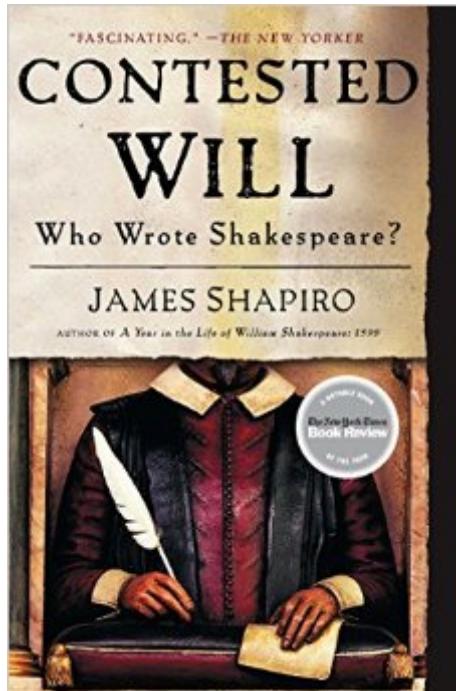


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Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?



Synopsis

For more than two hundred years after William Shakespeare's death, no one doubted that he had written his plays. Since then, however, dozens of candidates have been proposed for the authorship of what is generally agreed to be the finest body of work by a writer in the English language. In this remarkable book, Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro explains when and why so many people began to question whether Shakespeare wrote his plays. Among the doubters have been such writers and thinkers as Sigmund Freud, Henry James, Mark Twain, and Helen Keller. It is a fascinating story, replete with forgeries, deception, false claimants, ciphers and codes, conspiracy theories—and a stunning failure to grasp the power of the imagination. As *Contested Will* makes clear, much more than proper attribution of Shakespeare's plays is at stake in this authorship controversy. Underlying the arguments over whether Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, or the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare's plays are fundamental questions about literary genius, specifically about the relationship of life and art. Are the plays (and poems) of Shakespeare a sort of hidden autobiography? Do Hamlet, Macbeth, and the other great plays somehow reveal who wrote them? Shapiro is the first Shakespeare scholar to examine the authorship controversy and its history in this way, explaining what it means, why it matters, and how it has persisted despite abundant evidence that William Shakespeare of Stratford wrote the plays attributed to him. This is a brilliant historical investigation that will delight anyone interested in Shakespeare and the literary imagination.

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Customer Reviews

I'd always ignored the so-called Shakespeare authorship question, because I think it's irrelevant. I don't care who wrote Shakespeare's plays, because it's the plays that count, not the man. But I decided to read James Shapiro's *Contested Will* out of curiosity about how the theory that Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare took hold. It so happens that I'm familiar with a lot of the backstory - the rise of biblical criticism and the questioning of who Homer was - that serve as a foundation to the earliest anti-Stratfordian theories. It's easy to understand how, in the early 19th century, people who felt this approach so important could be convinced that another great author was not who he seemed. But as time went by, this became a story of lies, deceit and forgery, as well as convoluted conspiracy theories. Deep down, it seems that there are two essential elements that come into play. The first is that, according to skeptics, there is no way the son of a glover could have written so eloquently about so many things. His limited education could not have enabled him to write such profound plays. As if in the nature vs. nurture argument, only nurture counts. This has been proven wrong with many artists, musicians and authors who came from humble beginnings, so it seems like a moot point, and surprises me that so many people bring up this point to deny Shakespeare's legitimacy. The second element is the belief, which became prevalent in the romantic period, that all art is personal; that art reflects personal experiences. If this is the case, the skeptics say, then Shakespeare, who never visited Italy, could not have written about Italy. This argument seems childish to me; could a writer who has never visited Mars write about that planet?

There is something about Shakespeare scholarship which engenders greatness: Greenblatt, Kermode, Wells, Shapiro, Bate, Bloom--these are not dry scholars, but deep thinkers, writers of powerful prose, all with a profound sense of life in other times. None of them believes that someone other than Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare's works. But there is a long tradition that Francis Bacon or Edward de Vere (or many others) wrote Shakespeare's works, and that somehow generations of scholars have been fooled. Why anyone would think anything so preposterous on the face of it, has always interested me. I once put it down to snobbery, that the son of a glove-maker from Stratford could not have been smart enough to write such plays. But it is more complicated than this. Shapiro's main idea is that many people want to believe that such great writing has to be based on experience, and Shakespeare could not have had the experiences which led to the poems and plays. Shapiro is a scholar of Shakespeare, but in this book he had to treat many times and subjects, from 19th century positivism to Freud, and had to try to explain why such great thinkers as Mark Twain, Henry James and Sigmund Freud believed that someone else wrote Shakespeare.

Surprisingly, Shapiro is respectful of what others would call lunacy. To explain one phase of the movement, which purported to find hidden codes in the plays, he explains how the development the telegraph and Morse code infused the culture of the times. Shakespeare's poetry is of such extraordinary depth and beauty that it seems that it could only have been written by a man of letters, not an actor.

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