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The Shakespeare Conspiracies

Hoyt Hilsman · Thursday, October 27th, 2011

The Shakespearean authorship controversy has spawned its own genre of books, films and plays, most recently the movie *Anonymous*, which dramatizes the theory that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the author of the Shakespearean canon. I haven't yet seen the movie, and the "Oxfordian" theory is just as weak as any of the other authorship theories. However, I am partial to the Christopher Marlowe authorship school, not because of any factual basis, but because I think it makes the best story. If you're going for fictional intrigue, I say, choose the best fiction.

Here are some of the juicy details. Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in 1564 to parents of modest circumstances, just two months before William Shakespeare's birth at Stratford-upon-Avon. Marlowe was a precocious young man, and attended Cambridge University on a scholarship, although the university nearly withheld his degree when it was rumored that he had converted to Roman Catholicism. Only after the Privy Council intervened, citing his "good service" to Queen Elizabeth, was he granted the degree. What was his "good service?" More about that in a bit.

Almost immediately upon graduation, Marlowe began having his plays produced in London, to great success. Tamburlaine, about the conqueror Timur, was one of the first English plays written in blank verse. His historical plays, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II* and *The Massacre of Paris* followed in quick order. His final play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, is perhaps his greatest work.

To say that Christopher Marlowe was outspoken would be a gross understatement. He made no secret of his beliefs and his proclivities. He openly proclaimed himself an atheist and is quoted as saying "that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest." He was defiantly homosexual, declaring that "all they that love not tobacco and boys are fools." A drinker and brawler, heretic and homosexual, Marlowe was the rock star of Renaissance dramatists, admired above all others by his contemporaries by the time he was twenty-five.

But there was an even more intriguing aspect to Marlowe's life – espionage. Apparently Marlowe was recruited by Sir Francis Walsingham, the principal secretary to Queen Elizabeth and her notorious "spymaster." As a spy for the Protestant Queen, Marlowe reportedly infiltrated the entourage of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots and other centers of Catholic resistance. However, in 1593, when the Privy Council learned of a threat to Protestant refugees, the dramatist Thomas Kyd was arrested and made several accusations against Marlowe. The Privy Council, who did not know that Marlowe was acting as a double agent for Walsingham, issued an order for Marlowe to

appear to answer the charges. Before he could appear, Marlowe was killed, allegedly stabbed in the eye in a barroom brawl, but more likely on orders from Walsingham, who wanted him silenced. The alleged killers were later found to be in the employ of Walsingham.

How then, if Marlowe died in 1593, could he have been the real Shakespeare, who continued to write for more than fifteen years? Here's where the fictional narrative gets really interesting, because it relies on speculation and improbable what-ifs – all grist for any good conspiracy tale. Marlowe's body was reportedly removed from the scene and buried in an unmarked grave in Deptford. In fact, no one actually saw the body or verified the identity of Marlowe. The theory is that Marlowe's death was faked and he escaped to exile in Italy with the help of Sir Francis's cousin, Thomas, who was also Marlowe's lover.

After a brief stint in the Italian sunshine attending commedia dell'arte plays, the story goes, Marlowe was again writing, this time under the pseudonym of William Shakespeare, an obscure actor who had either died or emigrated to America. In 1594, Marlowe had his first production as Shakespeare. The play was *Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy greatly influenced by the Italian style of commedia dell'arte and the first of his series of Italianate comedies.

The Marlowe authorship school argues that Marlowe then returned to England in a sort of Renaissance witness protection program, in which he assumed the identity of Shakespeare, including a revived marriage of convenience with Anne Hathaway, who had not seen the real Shakespeare for more than a decade. Marlowe was thus able to abandon his past as a renowned atheist, homosexual and spy, and assume the identity of Shakespeare, the successful and conservative dramatist, for the remainder of his life.

As long as some aspects of Shakespeare's life remain shrouded in mystery, there will be lots of conspiracy theories about his true identity. Which is why, if conspire you must, I'd say go for the tale that Shakespeare could have written – the tale of lust, intrigue, palace-plotting, and fake identities – even if, as many of Shakespeare's plays, it departs from history to make for terrific drama.

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