



The Shakespearean Authorship Trust

THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE, JULY 2005

The question of who wrote Shakespeare's plays is one that can arouse considerable emotion. There are those who fervently defend their Shakespeare, the man from Stratford who has become a national and international icon. Others passionately wish to correct an injustice by revealing the true author of the plays. Some are just intrigued and excited by what they see as a great mystery in relation to the greatest works in the English language.

The different factions of the Shakespeare authorship debate are drawn together by a common urge to discover how such amazing plays and poetry were created. Yet sometimes the force of emotion felt by opposing sides threatens to destroy the interesting and engaging responses that each have to offer. With this in mind, The Shakespearean Authorship Trust (SAT) wishes to create a forum where the authorship of the plays and poems can be discussed courteously and rationally and from a variety of different perspectives, in the knowledge that conflicting and even opposing viewpoints can offer equally valid insight into the works.

Mark Rylance, Chairman of the SAT and Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe, expressed these sentiments when he opened the SAT's third annual conference. The conference was held at the Globe on the 9th and 10th of July and was made up of interested members of the public and distinguished academics and experts in the field of Shakespeare authorship studies. Rylance welcomed both those who believed Shakespeare of Stratford wrote the plays and poetry, known as Stratfordians, and those who do not, non-Stratfordians. He hoped that bringing these various groups together would create a spirit of collective investigation and, perhaps, reveal how traditionally diametrically opposed groups may be closer than they think.

Rylance set the agenda for the day by presenting the main difficulties of the Shakespeare authorship question. For Rylance, and many others at the conference, there is a discrepancy between what we know about Shakespeare the man from Stratford, and the works attributed to his name. How did a man with only grammar school education produce works that show a vast knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, philosophy, history, literature and other fields of learning? Why are the plays full of aristocratic characters, references and pastimes when Shakespeare of Stratford was a boy from the provinces who became a lowly London player? Why is the documented evidence

about Shakespeare so limited in comparison to other playwrights of the time such as Marlowe and Jonson? After raising some of these questions, Rylance read various excerpts from the Shakespeare canon asking the conference to imagine, in their mind's eye, their personal image of Shakespeare the author. He then suggested that the conference members might like to reassess this image at the end of the two days.

Considering the SAT's ethos of bringing those with different views about Shakespeare's authorship together, it was fitting that the conference began with a talk about collaboration. It is a point of agreement between Stratfordians and non-Stratfordians that some Renaissance plays were produced not by a single author but through a collaborative effort. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that a number of Shakespeare's plays were the work of several hands, though there is disagreement as to who those hands belonged to!

Mike Llewellyn, Chairman of the De Vere society, gave the conference a very informative talk about the ways in which Renaissance playwrights collaborated and why they did so. Llewellyn discussed the illuminating fact that nearly two-thirds of plays mentioned in the diaries of Phillip Henslowe, the owner of the Rose theatre, are identified as the work of more than one playwright. The reasons for this, Llewellyn suggested, were practical and financial. Theatres wanted new plays as quickly as

possible and so employed several playwrights, each skilled at writing different types of scene, to put together a play. For playwrights this way of working was a quick and easy way to earn money. Llewellyn also discussed in detail three of Shakespeare's plays that are believed to be collaborative: *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Timon of Athens* and *Pericles*. He offered insights into how academics ascertain whether a play is a collaborative piece and how they attempt to discover the different authors of different parts. The process includes analysing syntax, vocabulary, style and the metrical construction of the verse. Llewellyn concluded that understanding collaboration *can* illuminate the context in which Shakespeare's works were created and who he might have been. This talk on collaboration encouraged some members of the conference to think of modern parallels. For example, it was pointed out that the script for the classic film *Ben Hur* was a collaborative effort.

Dr Farah Karim-Cooper extended the concept of collaboration in her presentation which described the different shaping influences on a play text, as it made the journey from page to stage. Dr Karim-Cooper, a lecturer at Shakespeare's Globe, was the only Stratfordian speaker at the conference and came to share her knowledge about the theatre industry in which she believed Shakespeare worked. Her presentation described how the playwright might have changed the initial draft of his work after it was scrutinised by the players and shareholders in his company. Further alterations might be demanded by the Master of the Revels, the royal censor, who would check the play for blasphemy and sedition. The play might be amended again if the players found difficulties during rehearsals and in performance. Dr Karim-Cooper suggested that the traditional image of Shakespeare toiling alone to produce a perfected play that would go straight to the stage was inaccurate. Although he was the central imaginative force behind the canon, those involved in the theatrical process - theatre shareholder, player, Master of the Revels and others - also had an input. Dr Karim-Cooper's talk inspired the conference to speculate about Renaissance theatrical production and the role of the playwright in this process.

In the afternoon session the conference heard more from the non-Stratfordian side of the authorship debate. Carol Sue Lipman, the President of the Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable, offered the conference the first of many insights into the non-Stratfordian argument. Lipman's talk concerned the experience of Delia Bacon, the first person to publish work which argued Shakespeare of Stratford was not the author of the plays. Bacon's 1857 book, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, suggested that a literary group penned the plays and poetry. The group consisted of

eminent Elizabethan figures such as Walter Raleigh and Philip Sidney, and was led by Francis Bacon. Lipman described how Delia Bacon believed the group worked in secret and accredited their works to Shakespeare because of the dangerous political and social climate. Delia Bacon had travelled to England in 1853 to research her ideas and had even contemplated opening Shakespeare's grave to search for documents she believed would confirm her beliefs. Lipman concluded her talk by suggesting that although Delia Bacon has been both criticised and praised for her work, ultimately Bacon should be recognised for opening the door to the debate about Shakespeare's authorship.

Certainly Bacon's theory, which Carol Sue Lipman adeptly outlined, solves some of the difficulties about who wrote Shakespeare's works. A well educated and aristocratic literary group would account for the extensive learning and knowledge displayed in the plays, as well as the familiarity with the aristocratic lifestyle. However the conference offered an opportunity for many other alternatives to Delia Bacon's theory to be heard.

Members of the de Vere society, including conference speaker Kevin Gilvary, discussed their belief that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and poetry ascribed to William Shakespeare of Stratford. They suggested that he may have worked in collaboration with known Renaissance playwrights such as Anthony Munday and John Lyly. It is known that both these dramatists were employed by de Vere. If Edward de Vere was the author of Shakespeare's works this would undoubtedly explain the vast learning and knowledge of foreign cultures found in the plays - de Vere was both well educated and well travelled.

Peter Dawkins as Director of the Francis Bacon Research Trust presented the conference with his conviction that Francis Bacon was responsible for Shakespeare's plays and poetry. Bacon, working as the leader of a literary group, wrote the plays in order to disseminate his new philosophical ideas. For example, Dawkins suggested that in *Love's Labour's Lost* Bacon introduces cabbalist philosophy. Dawkins revealed that Francis Bacon had expressed a wish to write plays and referred to himself as a 'concealed poet'.

During the conference members also heard from Robin Williams, the President of the Mary Sidney Society. Williams described how she has done extensive primary research on Mary Sidney and her circle. This has led Williams to believe that Sidney created the plays ascribed to William Shakespeare as part of a literary group, which included her brother Phillip Sidney. Williams was keen to point out to the conference that her theory is based on documented historical evidence and not subjective interpretations of the plays.

Alex Jack, author of *Hamlet by Christopher Marlowe and*

William Shakespeare, differed from other conference speakers in offering a theory that did not present Shakespeare merely as front man for a secret author. Instead, Jack suggested that Shakespeare was involved in a secret collaboration with Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe, Jack argued, staged his own death in 1593 to avoid torture and execution for sedition and heresy, but continued writing in secret collaboration with Shakespeare. However, according to Jack, Marlowe revealed his role in the creation of the plays by having some registered at the printers on May 20th, the date of his supposed death.

The different non-Stratfordians presented persuasive arguments, nevertheless the conference rigorously questioned the various theories. Some were intrigued as to why the various candidates chose to write anonymously and to allow Shakespeare to be credited with the plays. In response several speakers suggested that aristocratic authors wished to remain anonymous because playwrighting was considered a demeaning occupation for gentlemen. Also anonymity allowed them more artistic freedom of expression.

Nevertheless, the issue of anonymity remained a difficulty for some members who wanted to know how the anonymity of the different 'true' authors was maintained. Indeed, how has the secret of who authored Shakespeare's plays remained intact hundreds of years after the death of anyone at risk from its revelation? Richard Malim of the De Vere Society argued that de Vere's secret was an open one: 'everyone who needed to know, knew'. Others pointed out that interest in Shakespeare's authorship only began in earnest in the eighteenth century, and therefore the secret didn't begin to unravel until then.

At the end of the first day of the conference Mark Rylance concluded with a brief discussion of *Pericles*, which conference members were going to see at the Globe that evening. *Pericles* is an important play for the authorship controversy as it is agreed, by non-Stratfordians and Stratfordians, to be a collaborative piece. The last three acts of the play are identified as the work of Shakespeare, in contrast to the first two acts which are considered inferior. Rylance asked the conference to see if they could notice the difference between the two voices in the play and to think about how the play might have been created.

At the beginning of the second day the conference members discussed their responses to *Pericles*. Members of the De Vere Society felt struck by the play's personal and emotive theme of losing and being reunited with loved ones. They believed that the prominence of this issue in *Pericles* suggests it was the work of Edward de Vere who had, like *Pericles* himself, been separated from his wife and daughter. However these events had

occurred fairly early in de Vere's life, therefore Kevin Gilvary of the De Vere Society argued that the traditional dating of *Pericles* is incorrect. Traditional consensus is that *Pericles* is one of the last plays, written around 1607. Gilvary suggested, though, that de Vere began writing *Pericles* around 1576, when he was first separated from his wife.

This discussion led the conference to debate the validity of autobiographical readings of Shakespeare's work. Some members of the conference argued that autobiographical readings are illuminating and important to analysing the plays. Therefore the question of authorship, if resolved, would immensely enhance our understanding of Shakespeare's works.

Other members of the conference pointed out, though, that the autobiographical route was only one of many ways to read the plays. One member of the conference suggested that any individual was affected by the larger socio-political landscape in which they lived. Accordingly, it is important to read Shakespeare's plays with the history of the era in mind. Dr Farah Karim-Cooper also agreed that autobiographical readings were one amongst many ways to approach the plays. For example, Dr Karim-Cooper revealed that she finds it illuminating to read the plays from a feminist perspective.

Robin Williams, President of the Mary Sidney society, pointed out to the conference that autobiographical readings of the plays could be misleading. She argued that it is easy to interpret the works in accordance with almost any biography - Shakespeare's plays at times mirrored her own life events. Thus she suggested that using autobiographical readings of a play to determine authorship is of limited use.

Moving on from the issue of autobiography, the conference turned their attention to the First Folio. The First Folio was published as the collected plays of William Shakespeare in 1623, seven years after his death. Many conference members had difficulty with the opening dedication by Shakespeare's fellow King's Men shareholders and players John Heminges and Henry Condell. Some argued that the evidence suggests that the real author of the dedication was Ben Jonson, who wrote the First Folio's commendatory epistle. The question mark over Heminges and Condell led some conference members to question the First Folio as a reliable historical document.

The conference also explored why the First Folio was published in 1623. The First Folio was arguably the ultimate tribute to Shakespeare seven years after his death. Yet some conference members were intrigued by the lack of tributes to Shakespeare at the time that he died. Unlike other Renaissance playwrights no tributes were written about Shakespeare immediately after his

death. This led some conference members to doubt the Stratford man's involvement in the plays. Nevertheless, Dr Karim-Cooper pointed out that many great artists have died in obscurity, for example Mozart, only to be properly lamented by future generations. Dr Karim-Cooper described how Stratfordians believe that it took Heminges and Condell seven years to produce the First Folio in memory of their friend and fellow shareholder, William Shakespeare. In contrast, members of the De Vere Society suggested to the conference that the First Folio was produced by de Vere's family and close associates as a political statement.

In the last afternoon session of the conference, Julia Cleave used further evidence from one of the surviving copies of the First Folio to explore the authorship controversy. Cleave described how, by chance, she had discovered an important annotation in the copy of the First Folio held at Glasgow University Library. In this particular copy of the First Folio the unknown owner had written 'leass for making' under Shakespeare's name as it appears in a list of the King's Men players. Cleave described the etymology of the word 'leass' concluding that it meant 'least' or 'less', while the word 'making' meant writing poetry or plays. The phrase suggested, Cleave concluded, that the annotator believed Shakespeare was known 'less' for 'making' plays and more for being a player. Cleave argued that the annotator had heard rumours about the collaborative nature of Shakespeare's plays, or that Shakespeare was a front man for an anonymous author. Cleave's talk inspired the conference to discuss their interpretations of the phrase 'leass for making'.

In the final part of the conference Mark Rylance interviewed Dr. Daniel Wright, a Professor of English at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, and the Director of the Institute of Shakespeare Authorship Studies. Professor Wright holds an annual conferences on the Shakespeare authorship controversy at Concordia University. Rylance revealed that it was these conferences that had inspired the SAT to organise their own annual gathering in London.

Professor Wright described his often difficult experience in academic circles as someone who doubted

the Stratfordian belief that William Shakespeare was the author of the plays. The professor described how he began questioning Shakespeare's authorship during his study of the history plays when he was frustrated and intrigued by the lack of documentary evidence for Shakespeare's authorship. However, Wright's interest in the authorship question became the subject of 'academic censorship' - he was advised by other academics not to pursue the question further. Professor Wright argued that his experience was not unusual. In fact, he suggested that questioning Shakespeare's authorship was 'taboo' in University English departments and that many academics face professional reprisals if they do so. Professor Wright told the conference how he found this state of affairs frustrating as the question of authorship and how the plays were created was a 'legitimate intellectual' concern. With this in mind, Professor Wright created the Institute for Shakespeare Authorship Studies and began holding conferences to explore the authorship controversy. These conferences, Wright concluded, allowed non-Stratfordians who might be marginalised by the academic world a space to be heard.

Mark Rylance ended the conference by reading the 'Declaration of Reasonable Doubt', a document being sponsored by the SAT. The Declaration, like Professor Wright's conferences, aims to give encouragement to those who wish to question the authorship of Shakespeare's works. By proving that the question of authorship is a legitimate and justifiable one, the declaration prevents non-Stratfordians from being marginalised and dismissed.

The SAT conference, however, proved that the question of authorship is not only legitimate but also significant. Although the mystery of Shakespeare's identity may never be solved, the discussion about his authorship will always stimulate enriching and enlightening responses to the plays.

Sarah Dustagheer, July 2005.