Books

Brush Up Your... Marlowe?

Reviews of *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* by James Shapiro '77CC and *Shakespeare and the American Musical* by Irene G. Dash '72GSAS.

By
Julia Klein
|
Summer 2010



Romeo and Maria: Larry Kert and Carol Lawrence in the fire escape scene from the original 1957 Broadway production of West Side Story. (Hank Walker, Time & Life Pictures / Getty Images)

When James Shapiro ’77CC began plotting out *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*, a friend unnerved him by asking, “What difference does it make?” Shapiro, the Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia, answered, “A lot,” without articulating why. This intellectually passionate book represents his more complete and considered response: The controversy matters, he suggests, because a belief in Shakespeare’s authorship affi rms the power of the human imagination.

The authorship debate, though mostly ignored by specialists, has long intrigued writers from Mark Twain and Henry James to Helen Keller and the now-obscure Delia Bacon. It has fl ourished because so little biographical information has survived about the Stratford-upon-Avon-born actor and grain dealer — and the facts that *are* known point to a man of modest education, travel, and life experience. How in the world, the doubters say, could such a man, neither an aristocrat nor an intellectual, write such masterpieces, with their literary sophistication and references to law, foreign languages, courtly customs, the classics, and European geography?

In *Contested Will*, Shapiro has two aims: to provide insight into the debate and to make what is known as the Stratfordian case, which he does with gusto. His account of the theories of skeptics is purposely selective (though a bibliographic essay usefully points readers to more information). “My interest,” Shapiro writes, “is not in what people think — which has been stated again and again in unambiguous terms — but in why they think it.” Shapiro attempts to take the opposition seriously, locating its origins in the Higher Criticism that undermined Homer’s authorship and exposed the piecemeal composition of both the Old and New Testaments. But, in the instance of Shakespeare, he can’t help being dismissive of the briefs for Sir Francis Bacon and Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, the only two claimants to whom he allots full chapters. (The playwright Christopher Marlowe and other alternative bards receive only passing mentions.)

The history of the skeptics, Shapiro writes, is “strewn with . . . fabricated documents, embellished lives, concealed identity, pseudonymous authorship, contested evidence, bald-faced deception, and a failure to grasp what could not be imagined.” He uncovers a scam himself, involving what he says is a forgery of a 19th-century manuscript that spread doubt about Shakespeare’s capacities.

In Shapiro’s view, to believe that anyone but Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare’s plays is to succumb to conspiracy theories, weird cryptographic excesses, social

snobbery, and incipient lunacy, not to mention the anachronistic fallacy of reading Elizabethan and Jacobean literature as autobiography. This last is Shapiro's particular bête noir, and he is lacerating on the subject, indicting such early Shakespeare scholars as Edmond Malone for pointing the (wrong) way. "The plays are not an à la carte menu, from which we pick characters who will satisfy our appetite for Shakespeare's personality while passing over less appetizing choices," Shapiro writes.

It seems ironic that, despite his aversion to autobiographical readings, Shapiro interprets the skeptics' views through the lens of their life experiences — and even prides himself on it. He devotes considerable space, for example, to Delia Bacon (1811–59), an American teacher, writer, and aspiring playwright whose work, influenced by Shakespeare, was never staged. A friend of Emerson and Hawthorne, she would become the fi rst signifi cant proponent of the view that the philosopher-statesman Sir Francis Bacon (probably no relation), in concert with others, was responsible for Shakespeare's plays. In the wake of a scandalous and abortive romance, Shapiro writes, she was set "on showing the world the difference between surface and deeper meaning, . . . a distinction she knew all too well."

More problematic than Shapiro's biographical leaps is his assertion that it is wrong to assume that Shakespeare's psychology resembled ours, "that Shakespeare's internal, emotional life was modern." Evolutionary psychologists would certainly deny that a few hundred years have substantially altered human psychology.More to the point, why would Shakespeare's plays have retained such currency and psychological impact if they were the product of a psyche alien from ours?

There is no question that Contested Will, which has already occasioned considerable debate, lands at a time of great popular interest in the subject. As Shapiro acknowledges, this is a cultural high-water mark for the presumed authorship of de Vere, a celebrated poet and playwright who would have been intimate with court manners and politics, and whose life story evokes incidents in Hamlet and the rest of the canon. The progenitor of the Oxford hypothesis was the Englishman J. T. Looney, whose 1920 book, "Shakespeare" Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, was embraced by Freud, among others. Shapiro reads it as "a product of Looney's profound distaste for modernity," but also calls it a "tour de force."

The most fanciful versions of the Oxford hypothesis include assorted “Prince Tudor” theories, positing that de Vere was either Queen Elizabeth’s son or her lover or both, and sired her son, the Earl of Southampton. Oxford’s secret dramatic output supposedly represents an attempt to work through the resulting emotional turmoil. That de Vere died in 1604, before the later plays were produced, is seen as no obstacle, with his advocates suggesting he could have written them earlier. Various Supreme Court justices and the noted Shakespearean actors Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance are among those who have signed on to the Earl’s authorship. Roland Emmerich is directing a movie, *Anonymous*, scheduled for release next year, that imagines Oxford as the true Shakespeare.

In support of the Stratford Shakespeare, Shapiro points to early printed texts of the plays that refer, mistakenly, to actors in Shakespeare’s company rather than characters, as well as a few recollections by Shakespeare’s contemporaries — convincing enough evidence, however scanty, to satisfy most readers. From a lay perspective, Shapiro’s most surprising revelation, though not news in academe, concerns how extensively Shakespeare, especially in his later years, collaborated with other playwrights. His coauthors apparently included George Wilkins (*Pericles*), Thomas Middleton (*Timon of Athens*), and John Fletcher (*Henry the Eighth, The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and a lost play, *Cardenio*). The results fell far short of Shakespeare’s best work, raising the question of why he felt impelled to seek out writing partners.

Shakespeare’s plays, by whatever author or combination of authors, have long served as an imaginative prod to other writers. Irene G. Dash ’72GSAS, a former Hunter College professor best known for her scholarship on Shakespeare’s women, has now turned her attention to the impact of his work on the American musical theater. *Shakespeare and the American Musical* hypothesizes that the challenges of adapting Shakespeare helped transform the musical, speeding its evolution into an “organic” entity in which song and dance advanced the plot, and spurring such innovations as the tragic musical (*West Side Story*) and rock musical (*Your Own Thing, Two Gentlemen of Verona*).

Dash also shows how contemporary mores and the demands of the modern stage precipitated alterations in characters, structure, and stagecraft. In *The Boys from Syracuse*, first produced in 1938, Dash suggests that lyricist Lorenz Hart ’16JRN and librettist George Abbott created female characters who were less complex and resonant than their counterparts in *The Comedy of Errors*. By contrast, she argues

that Bella Spewack and Cole Porter successfully updated the battle of the sexes in *The Taming of the Shrew*, making *Kiss Me, Kate* a penetrating examination of a modern woman torn between love and vocation.

Dash employs archival research to shed new light on classic collaborations. She convincingly links *Kiss Me, Kate* to a lively Alfred Lunt–Lynn Fontanne production of *The Taming of the Shrew* and describes how *West Side Story* evolved from East Side Story, an earlier version about Jews and Italians.

But Dash's meticulous scene-by-scene, and even line-by-line, comparisons between Shakespeare and five musical adaptations are a bit of a slog, especially in the case of less familiar works. She can be repetitious, and too often allows her themes to become lost, like errant lovers, amid a welter of detail. We could have done with a bit more forest and fewer trees.

Read more from ***Julia Klein***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Julia Klein***