Vérité

By Scott Powell

This coming Saturday is the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare. I thought it fitting to mark this anniversary by focusing tonight on the author of the greatest collection of works ever produced in the English language.

I was introduced to Shakespeare at an early age. My mom was an English major at Northwestern, and then taught high school English for a couple of years before I was born. She passed along her passion for literature to me, and I loved to pick her books off the shelf and dig in. I was around eleven or twelve when I picked up this edition of Shakespeare's complete works – my mom's college textbook. She told me what it was, and encouraged me to give it a try. I remember it being a chore, but I was aided by the extensive marginalia she added in her perfect script. My favorite of the few plays I read then was *Henry V*, probably because there was a battle.

I, too, majored in English - at Ohio State. My favorite courses were lectures and seminars on Shakespeare, and I wrote an honors thesis my senior year on the role and characterization of women in Shakespearian comedy. I was dismayed to learn a few years ago that a copy of my thesis still exists. When I re-read it 20 years later, I concluded that the only remarkable thing about it was that I was able to squeeze 50 pages of real substance into 112 pages of text.

Later, when I had two daughters, I wanted to pass along my love of Shakespeare to them. I used to tell them stories at night, and if I was struggling for material, I sometimes would steal entire plots from Shakespeare's plays. My daughters' favorite was *Twelfth Night* – they liked the shipwreck, the clowns, the gender masquerade, and the happy ending. It warmed my heart when, at the age of 10, my older daughter chose one of Viola's soliloquys in *Twelfth Night* as her monologue for an audition for a Phoenix Theatre Circle production.

I have a confession, though. For a while I didn't tell my daughters that some of my stories really were written by Shakespeare – they thought I made them up. At some point, one of them asked me how I made them up so

quickly, and I had to come clean and tell the truth - the real author was William Shakespeare.

I recalled my admission of the true authorship of those stories when I began thinking about my essay. It brought to mind some vague references by my Shakespeare professors, quickly introduced and dismissed, to doubts regarding whether William Shakespeare, of Stratford-upon-Avon, was the true author of the works attributed to him. I started poking around what is referred to as "the authorship question", and was surprised by how much has been written on this issue.

So, tonight, I want to explore the Shakespeare authorship question, and perhaps arrive at the truth regarding whether this Saturday represents an anniversary worthy of recognition. I will discuss the origin of the authorship question, alternative candidates for authorship, prominent figures in the controversy (some of whom are household names and may surprise you), and the bases for arguments for and against Shakespeare's authorship. I'll also discuss another, more important truth I discovered, in the course of preparing this essay.

The history of the authorship question is littered with fraud, forgery, and deception, so let me start by summarizing what we actually know about the man, William Shakespeare, of Stratford-upon-Avon. He was born in April, 1564, in Stratford, the oldest son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. John Shakespeare was a glover, trader, and landowner. He also was ambitious, and filled many municipal offices in Stratford, including burgess and bailiff (which was the equivalent of mayor). As bailiff, John Shakespeare was responsible for licensing acting companies who applied to play at the Stratford guild hall. These offices would have entitled his son, William, to free schooling at Stratford's grammar school. The school's records were lost in a fire, so there is no concrete evidence that William ever attended.

In November, 1582, William married Ann Hathaway, and their daughter Susanna was born 6 months later. Their twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born in 1585. Sometime after this, Shakespeare made his way to London, and became a member of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The earliest evidence of this was in 1595, when Shakespeare was listed as one of the players in the company to be paid for a December performance at Greenwich. Shakespeare (and his father) received a coat of arms in 1596,

and thereafter they each were entitled to bear arms and use the title "Gentleman." In a deed of trust for the Globe Theatre, dated 1601, it lists as tenants "Richard Burbage and William Shakespeare, gent". After the death of Queen Elizabeth and the ascension of King James, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were re-licensed as the King's Men, and Shakespeare was listed as a member. There are a number of contemporary references to Shakespeare's literary greatness by playwrights, poets, and historians, in correspondence and publications during his lifetime, and in tributes after his death.

As for what Shakespeare was like as a human being, away from the theater, the only surviving records portray him as a landowner, businessman, and money lender. He purchased New Place, the second-largest home in Stratford, for 60 pounds in 1597. Other records show that he filed a lawsuit, in the Court of Queen's Bench, against John Clayton for the repayment of a seven-pound loan. There is an unexecuted conveyance document for an old Stratford freehold to Shakespeare, and a record of Shakespeare's purchase of half a leasehold interest in a parcel of tithes in Stratford for the large sum of 440 pounds close in time to the first performance of *Othello*. Shakespeare at one point took an apothecary to court for the repayment of twenty bushels of malt and a small monetary loan. There is a record of an assignment of another parcel of tithes to Shakespeare the same year he was writing *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and a pair of letters by Stratford neighbors during that same period mentioning Shakespeare in connection with hoarding malt (which was an important crop in the Stratford area) and other financial dealings (including the neighbor's request for a loan).

Shakespeare had John Addenbrooke, a Stratford resident, arrested for failing to repay six pounds at the time he was writing *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare demanded an additional twenty-six shillings in damages. Finally, in a transfer document for the Blackfriar's Theater gatehouse, in 1613, the buyer is listed as "W. Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon". That's essentially all we know about his life away from the theater.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. In his will, which was executed less than a month before he died, he penned three of the six surviving examples of his signature, and spelled his last name two different ways. In it, he famously left only his "second-best bed" to his wife. There is no record of

another William Shakespeare living in London or Stratford during his lifetime.

For over 150 years after his death, there is no evidence of any controversy or question regarding Shakespeare's authorship of the plays and poems attributed to him. The first rumblings regarding the authorship question can be traced to the late 1700's. By then, the popularity of his works, and the general recognition of the genius behind them, had swelled to the point where Shakespeare was elevated from the status of gifted poet and playwright, to literary God. For instance, in 1769, David Garrick, the pre-eminent English actor at the time, mounted a three-day Shakespeare "Jubilee" in Stratford. Garrick had earlier built a "temple" to Shakespeare on his estate in Hampton.

Around this time, Shakespeare scholars and enthusiasts also started to search for clues to Shakespeare's life, what he was like as a person, and any evidence that linked the man from Stratford to the plays and poems. In 1785, James Wilmot, an Oxford-trained scholar who lived near Stratford, after an extensive search, found no papers, correspondence, original manuscripts, or other records connecting the William Shakespeare of Stratford to the plays and poems attributed to him. Others searching for clues to Shakespeare's life were disappointed to discover only the records of his money lending, malt hoarding, and pursuit of title and wealth.

Finally, in 1794, a young man named William-Henry Ireland announced the discovery of a trove of documents that linked Shakespeare to his works, and cast Shakespeare's life and dealings in a more literary and courtly light. The discovery included Shakespeare's original manuscript of *King Lear*, correspondence with the Earl of Southampton (to whom Shakespeare had dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*), poems sent to Queen Elizabeth (and her note back to him thanking him for the "pretty verses"), correspondence regarding the financial terms for the printing of quarto versions of plays, and Shakespeare's Protestant "Profession of Faith." These documents created a sensation in the literary community. There was only one problem – William-Henry Ireland had forged every single document, apparently with the aim of pleasing his Shakespeare-enthusiast father. The truth was discovered by Edward Malone, the leading Shakespeare scholar of the time. Among other anomalies, he noticed that one of Shakespeare's poems included in the collection, referenced serving rolls and

tea. Apparently, William-Henry Ireland was unaware that tea was not available in England during Shakespeare's lifetime.

This forgery, and a number of clever attempts by others, only heightened awareness of the dearth of hard evidence that the man, William Shakespeare, had been an author. Without such evidence, scholars started to look to the works themselves for clues to the life of their author. This approach led many to infer that the author was well educated, had legal training, possessed a knowledge of falconry, traveled extensively, served as a soldier, was an experienced swordsman, and was a lifetime courtier. The evidence of Shakespeare's life, however, establish none of this - only that he was an actor in a playing company who appeared to be as concerned with money and title as he was art. Skeptics arose, and concluded that there was an unbridgeable gap separating the *author* William Shakespeare, from the *man* William Shakespeare. These skeptics could not understand or imagine how an uneducated actor from the backwater town of Stratford-upon-Avon would have been able to produce such brilliant and powerful poetry and plays. It was only a matter of time before people started asking – who *really* wrote the works attributed to him?

Since 1800, skeptics have promoted dozens of different candidates as the true author of Shakespeare's works. Today, the leading contender is Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, whose proponents are known as "Oxfordians". Other candidates include Sir Francis Bacon, whose proponents are known as "Baconians", and Christopher Marlowe, whose proponents are known as "Marlovians". Those who believe that William Shakespeare is the true author, are known as "Stratfordians". The arguments in favor of each of these alternative candidates are fascinating, and rival conspiracy theories surrounding the Apollo missions, Elvis' staged death, and government possession of UFOs.

Christopher Marlowe was the author of such famous plays as *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine*. He was born in Canterbury in 1564, and received a bachelor of arts degree from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1584. Records indicate that he was stabbed to death in 1593. Marlovians argue that his education and the quality of his plays recommend him as the true author. The obvious problem with Marlowe's candidacy is the date of his death – 1593. Marlovians acknowledge that most of Shakespeare's works were produced during the period after Marlowe's death, but argue that Marlowe

was a secret government informer, and his death was staged to protect him. He then was whisked off to the Continent so that he could spend the rest of his days writing in safety under the pseudonym William Shakespeare. There is no evidence to support these claims, and very few remain in the Marlovian camp.

Sir Francis Bacon was a true man of the Renaissance. He was the father of the modern scientific method, a courtier, a prolific writer, a jurist, and a philosopher. He was born in 1561, and studied at Cambridge and at the Inns of Court. He traveled extensively on the Continent. In 1594, Queen Elizabeth appointed Bacon as one of her learned counsel. His written works include parliamentary speeches, translations of the Psalms, political tracts, histories, his Essays and many other philosophical works. Baconians highlight that it is curious that two of the few forms of writing Bacon never explored were plays and poems. He was involved in politics, ultimately attaining the positions of attorney general and lord chancellor under King James. He fell out of favor in 1621 on trumped up charges of corruption, and was briefly jailed in the Tower of London. After his release, Bacon decided to "retire from the stage of civil action and betake myself to letters." He died in 1626.

There are a number of components to Baconians' argument in favor of his authorship. First, they cannot fathom that two geniuses of the caliber of Shakespeare and Bacon could have been living in London at the same time. Second, Bacon's education and life experiences fit the profile inferred from a reading of the plays and poems. Third, the more hard-core Baconians believe that Bacon's authorship explains the long-standing mystery regarding why Bacon never completed the fourth part of his philosophical work, *Instauratio Magna*. They claim that he did, in fact, complete it, but it is hidden in code throughout the poems and plays attributed to Shakespeare. In other words, they believe that Bacon wrote these great plays and poems not as works of art, but rather as a means for secretly transmitting his "new philosophy." Baconians struggle to explain why he needed to do this, but some have spent lifetimes and fortunes devising formulae, and even designing and constructing code-breaking machines, to decipher Bacon's hidden philosophy. No one has succeeded, and over time the number of proponents of Bacon as author has waned.

Today, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is the most-popular alternative candidate. Oxford was born in 1550, and was heir to the second-oldest earldom in England. He was a favorite of Queen Elizabeth's for a time, and a patron of the arts. After the death of his father in 1562, he became a ward of the Queen, and was sent to live in the household of her principal advisor, Sir William Cecil. He married Cecil's daughter, Anne, with whom he had five children. Oxford was a champion jouster, and travelled widely throughout Italy and France. He composed poetry and a few plays (none of which survive). He was reckless with finances, and ultimately squandered his family fortune and estates. He had a violent temper, evidenced by the fact that he stabbed one of his servants to death. He was exonerated from murder charges when the investigating authorities were persuaded that the servant's death was a suicide – apparently the servant had willingly impaled himself on Oxford's sword. Oxford fell out of favor with the Queen in the early 1580s after getting one of the Queen's maids of honor pregnant. Court records indicate that he didn't help his cause when, about the same time, he audibly broke wind while bowing to the Queen. He died in 1604.

Like the arguments for Bacon, the case for Oxford has several components. Oxfordians first argue that he better fits the profile of the artist behind the plays and poems, and that a number of incidents in his life were similar to scenes in the plays. They claim that Oxford's skewering of his servant is played out in Hamlet's stabbing of Polonius and, like Hamlet, Oxford's father died when he was young and his mother remarried. As with Lear, Oxford had three daughters, and as in *All's Well that Ends Well*, legend has it that Oxford was duped into sleeping with his wife by the use of a bed trick.

Oxfordians are not deterred by the fact that Oxford died prior to the dates of a number of Shakespeare's greatest works. They claim that he had written *all* of the plays prior to his death, and that others took the manuscripts and dribbled them out to the King's Men over time. The explanation for why Oxford remained anonymous revolves around the aristocratic perception of the theatre as a base profession. But some Oxfordians propose another reason he had to remain anonymous – he actually was Queen Elizabeth's secret lover and their liaisons produced an illegitimate son, the Earl of Southampton. This, in turn, explains the dedications to Southampton, in Shakespeare's name, in *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. Some Oxfordians

take this conspiracy theory even further by asserting that Oxford himself was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth and her step-father, Thomas Seymour. That's right – Oxford was conceived incestuously, and then committed further incest with his mother, the Queen, to produce Southamption. This theory, referred to as the "Prince Tudor" theory, recently was dramatized in the film *Anonymous*, starring Mark Rylance and Derek Jacobi. I found the film to be laugh-out-loud ridiculous and almost unwatchable.

The list of skeptics includes authors, actors, and intellectuals. It's hard to imagine another issue that would link together Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller, Henry James, Malcolm X, Supreme Court Justices Stevens, Blackmun and Brennan, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and actors Mark Rylance, Jeremy Irons and Derek Jacobi.

In his later years, Mark Twain was obsessed with his literary legacy, and turned his focus to Shakespeare – the one author whose reputation had stood the test of time. In his last book, titled *Is Shakespeare Dead?,* Twain explained his belief that great fiction, including his own, was necessarily autobiographical. Twain saw nothing in the recorded life of Shakespeare that would suggest he would have had the experiences necessary to produce the body of work that he did, and was convinced that someone else must have been the true author. For Twain, if the man from Stratford had actually written the plays, his firm beliefs about the nature of fiction, and how great writers necessarily rely on their own life experiences, would have been off base. As a result, I read Twain's skepticism regarding Shakespeare's authorship to be much more about Twain's case for his own enduring greatness, than about Shakespeare. Twain first lent his support to Bacon as the real author, but later stated that he didn't really care who the actual author was, as long as people acknowledged it wasn't Shakespeare.

Sigmund Freud was an Oxfordian and, like Twain, had personal motives for questioning Shakespeare's authorship. In the period following his father's death in 1896, Freud transitioned from his seduction theory to an Oedipal theory, to explain some of his patients' psychosis and claims of sexual abuse. Freud turned to *Hamlet* as illustrative of his new theory. Freud believed that "it can of course only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in *Hamlet*." At the time, the dating of *Hamlet* was 1601, shortly after the death of Shakespeare's father. Freud concluded that an actual event in Shakespeare's life – the death of his father – triggered Oedipal experiences in

Shakespeare that were similar to Freud's own feelings about his father. His theories on *Hamlet* became problematic when Freud later learned that scholars had re-dated *Hamlet* to 1599 - *prior* to the death of John Shakespeare. Freud remained convinced, though, that the author of *Hamlet* had written the play after the death of his father and in the midst of an Oedipal struggle. Freud read publications by Oxfordians, and found a way to resolve his reading of *Hamlet* and its Oedipal overtones. He concluded that *Oxford* must be the true author, since his father had died in 1562, well before *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's other works. Freud died in 1939, and to the end, was an ardent supporter of Oxford.

Henry James is a good example of many of the skeptics who questioned Shakespeare's authorship but were concerned about the impact to their reputations if they made their doubts public. It is pretty clear from his correspondence, his short story *The Birthplace*, and his essay on *The Tempest*, that he was convinced that Shakespeare's life was inconsistent with the profile of the artist who wrote the plays attributed to him. James never revealed who he believed to be the actual author.

Malcolm X took a different, more logic-based approach. Because King James retained the services of the leading minds of the time to produce the King James Version of the Bible, and because there is no documentary evidence that Shakespeare was involved in this translation, Malcolm X concluded that the man, William Shakespeare, didn't exist. He instead believed that King James himself may have been the author of the plays and poems.

I am convinced that William Shakespeare was the true author, and I think the evidence is overwhelming. Shakespeare was a member of the acting companies that first performed the plays, and he was the playwright listed on the printed quarto and folio versions of the plays when they started to reach print as early as the mid-1590's. As a member of the most well-known playing company in England, he would have been a familiar face around town and at court. If his fellow actors or playwrights suspected that someone else actually wrote the plays and poems, there would be evidence in correspondence or, at the very least, the glowing tributes and jealous references to him during and after his lifetime would never have been penned.

A number of these references have survived. The earliest, by a fellow writer named Robert Greene, appeared in a pamphlet in 1592. Greene calls Shakespeare an "upstart crow" and snidely concludes that he "is to his own conceit, the only Shake-scene in a country." In *Palladis Tamia*, published in 1598, Francis Meres refers to "honey-tongued Shakespeare" as the foremost English writer of both comedies and tragedies, and lists a dozen of his plays. Unfortunately for Oxfordians, who claim Shakespeare and the Earl of Oxford were the same person, Meres lists both Oxford and Shakespeare, and distinguishes Shakespeare's range, from Oxford's. In 1605, William Camden, a prominent historian at the time, includes Shakespeare in his book *Remaines Concerning Britaine*, as one of the great contemporary writers, along with Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, and Michael Drayton. In an undated letter from the playwright Francis Beaumont to his mentor Ben Johnson, Beaumont praises Shakespeare by observing "how far sometimes a mortal man may go by the dim light of nature," suggesting that Shakespeare's greatness was in contrast with his training and education. There are a number of other references, including the tributes in the First Folio, the publication of Shakespeare's complete works in 1623. In one of Ben Jonson's poems from the First Folio, he refers to Shakespeare as the "Sweet Swan of Avon", clearly linking the London playwright with the William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon.

Skeptics point to Shakespeare's lack of education. Shakespeare did not attend college, but it is highly likely that he attended grammar school in Stratford, since his father's position as bailiff would have entitled him to free tuition. Scholars have meticulously researched the curriculum of Elizabethan grammar schools, and have concluded that students would have received an education roughly equivalent to a college degree today, with a more-advanced knowledge of Latin than a 21st-century classics major.

Claims that Oxford or Marlowe wrote the plays from afar, without a clear understanding of the range and limits of the actors in the company performing them, ignore evidence that Shakespeare knew exactly who his actors were as he wrote the plays. In some cases, this resulted in him naming the actors, rather than the characters, in stage directions. When Will Kemp, the actor whose raucous comic style made the role of Falstaff famous, left the company in 1599, he was replaced by Robert Armin. Armin was a musician and singer who had a more subtle comic style. Shakespeare immediately

changed the nature of the comic parts in his subsequent plays to fit Armin's style.

Skeptics have made much of the spelling of Shakespeare's name. He did not include the "e" after the "k" in the six examples of his signature, yet the printed spelling of his name always included an "e" and/or a hyphen after the "k". Many believe this is evidence that the playwright and man were two different people. Typesetters of the time would have been able to explain the different spellings quite easily. Shakespeare's name, with an "s" following a "k", was a major problem for typesetters, as the font caused the two letters to overlap, risking a snap of the valuable font type. Typesetters typically would have inserted an "e" or a hyphen, or both, to avoid this risk.

Finally, unlike skeptics, I am not troubled by the seeming disconnect between the greatness of the works, and the life of the man. Life was hard in Shakespeare's time, and I don't fault Shakespeare if he used his talent to acquire wealth and title. I am also disappointed in skeptics who point to his lack of education and life experiences as proof of alternative authorship. Instead, I am inspired by the thought that a young man from the countryside, with raw talent and a solid grasp of basic human nature, could blend this with his understanding as an actor of what gripped an audience, and produce such powerful, entertaining, insightful, and emotional works. To me, his background enhances, rather than detracts, from the genius of the works.

The title of my essay, Vérité (or "truth" in French), of course is a red herring. I cannot stand up here and say that it is an absolute truth that William Shakespeare, of Stratford-upon-Avon, wrote the plays and poems attributed to him. Until the discovery of a signed manuscript, or some other concrete evidence of his authorship, the most I can say is that there is significantly more credible evidence supporting Shakespeare than any other candidate.

I did discover one truth in the course of preparing for this evening – how grateful I am to my mom for passing on her love of literature to me, and for her encouragement 40 years ago when I picked up this volume. I thought about her a lot as I wrote this. I realized I never got around to thanking her for introducing me to Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Poe, Fitzgerald, Wouk, Hemingway, and many others. I so wish I had.

So, in closing, I firmly believe that April 23, 2016, is an anniversary worthy of recognition. If you think of it on Saturday, lift a glass in a toast to William Shakespeare. I probably will, but more importantly, I'm sure I'll also whisper a thanks to my mom.

Thank you.