Is this an Author I See Before Me?

Anonymous and the Interminable Shakespeare Question
When I read the novels of Jane Austen or the plays and stories of Anton Chekhov, rightly or wrongly I feel I have a roughly coherent sense of the author, of the entity I think of as ‘Austen’ or ‘Chekhov’. Admittedly, the fact that a good deal is known of their lives as well as of their work no doubt feeds into this. Why then don’t I – and no doubt many others – feel this way about ‘Shakespeare’? As far as he is concerned, in his own words, ‘The play’s the thing’. As for who ‘wrote’ Shakespeare, nothing is going to stop researchers and nutters of every hue from getting on with their obsession. But before they carry on too long, they should read Eric Idle’s very funny take on all this in The New Yorker, which begins:

While it is perfectly obvious to everyone that Ben Jonson wrote all of Shakespeare’s plays, it is less known that Ben Jonson’s plays were written by a teenage girl in Sunderland, who mysteriously disappeared, leaving no trace of her existence, which is clear proof that she wrote them.1

Idle carries on in this happily satirical vein. Despite its absurdity, the alleged controversy will presumably continue to keep academics off the streets for decades to come, as it seems unlikely, despite the earnest efforts of proselytisers for this or that faction, that the question will be definitively answered after so long. But as John Bell wrote in a recent book, ‘There is no worldwide conspiracy to keep Shakespeare alive. He survives because actors want to go on performing him and audiences want to listen.’2 That seems to me the nub of it, not whether it was the Stratford youth or any of the other claimants to the name that actually wielded the world’s most productive quill.

Two relatively recent films come to mind as one considers the latest attempt to answer the question ‘Who wrote Shakespeare?’ One is the charming romantic comedy Shakespeare in Love (John Madden, 1998), in which the author is depicted as a nice, sexy young guy suffering from writer’s block until falling for the
woman who inspires him to write *Twelfth Night*. He is a man who can walk into a pub and say convincingly ‘Give me to drink mandragora,’ to which the barman replies, ‘Straight up, Will.’ No nonsense here about his credentials.

The other (much more contentious) job was Michael Rubbo’s 1992 documentary *Much Ado About Something*. Rubbo resurrected the hoary old question of ‘Who wrote Shakespeare’s plays?’ Was it Sir Francis Bacon? Was it – and this is what the film concentrates on – Christopher Marlowe? Of course, Marlowe was killed in a fight in a pub in South East London, well before many of Shakespeare’s greatest plays were written – or was he? Perhaps, as his body was never definitively recovered, he really fled to Italy where he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and so on, sending them back to England where, with Francis Walsingham as go-between, they were staged at the Globe Theatre by Shakespeare, who proceeded to take all the credit. Part of the [snobbish] argument is that Shakespeare didn’t have the background or education to produce the plays, where Marlowe did. Again, by the time of Marlowe’s supposed death, he had produced much more notable work than his contemporary.

Most of this depends on supposition and questionable theory, with just the odd tantalising fragment of information. Why, demands one fierce Marlovian, was there no sign of tributes at the time of Shakespeare’s death? Rubbo has lined up a string of obsessives, academics (some looking a bit foolish) and other excavators, including a married couple who take violently opposing views on the matter. The most persuasive of the interviewees is probably Mark Rylance, then artistic director of the restored Globe Theatre, who makes his points with less hectoring than some of the others. It is easy to say that none of it matters, that what matters is that the plays are – magnificently – there, and still relevant after 400 years. But the issue of authorship – from various points of view and in relation to various kinds of texts – has attracted more explicit attention in the last half-century, and it’s just possible there is something useful to be gleaned here.

The Marlowe theory doesn’t by any means exhaust the list of possible contenders for the title of the world’s greatest dramatist. A recent commentator draws attention to ‘a roll call that includes Sir Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Sir Walter
Raleigh, John Donne and even Elizabeth I, the virgin queen herself'.

All the foregoing information is by way of introducing another candidate, Edward de Vere, who is put forward in Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011). And look how easily one slides into attributing authorship here, as if Emmerich, the director of this heavily publicised new film, were unquestionably its author – its auteur. I wonder how screenwriter John Orloff feels about that. Even if one accepts the director as merely first among equal collaborators, ‘first’ is what’s generally allowed, at least since the heady days of *Cahiers du cinéma* and Andrew Sarris in the 1960s. Just think of the number of book-length studies of directors as compared with those of, say, screenwriters or producers. The *politique des auteurs* was valuable at the time, especially for rescuing some Hollywood directors from the status of being mere studio hacks, but it now seems somewhat passé when other concepts, such as that of intertextuality, have muddied the waters. And in the very impressive and unsettling 2010 Iranian film teasingly entitled *This Is Not a Film*, a director under house arrest (Jafar Panahi) is filmed by a friend (Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, now also under arrest) as he ‘tells’ the story of the film he would make if he were at liberty. Who is the author of this film – or non-film?

Even at the time when auteurist monographs were regularly issuing from the presses, the concept of the author was subject to a different sort of scrutiny in Roland Barthes’ famous and iconoclastically titled 1967 essay, ‘The Death of the Author’. For Barthes, ‘it is language which speaks and not the author’; put another way, ‘writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin’. For him, it seems, it could scarcely have mattered less if Bacon, Jonson, Marlowe, de Vere or Queen Elizabeth herself had ‘written Shakespeare’. It is, he claims, the reader, not the author who matters: ‘a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’.

It has to be said, though, that as stimulating and influential as Barthes was for a decade or so in the field of literary theory, he hasn’t really managed to stop us from thinking about ‘authors’ as the originators of words on the page – or, in particular, about the still shadowy figure of Shakespeare. We may know what he *did* but we can’t be too certain who he was, even if proponents for one name or another keep insisting on their choices.
Shakespeare (Rafe Spall) is portrayed as a fool in Roland Emmerich’s Anonymous.
To come back to *Anonymous*: the auteur notion as applied to film directors could scarcely have prepared us for taking Emmerich seriously as the author of this film, considering the sorts of projects – special effects–fuelled disaster movies such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) – on which he has made his name. But there he is on the internet seriously trying to persuade us about his candidate for the authorship of all those plays and poems, and explaining to us why ‘Shakespeare was a fraud’. He is on record as being convinced that Edward de Vere was the real author. In turn, the author of this theory is the unfortunately named J Thomas Looney, whose hypothesis runs into a couple of problems. The most important is that de Vere, too aristocratic as the Earl of Oxford to have his actual name on the plays, allegedly wrote and acted in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at age nine, and is known to have ‘died inconveniently young in 1604, well before *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* were written and/or staged’. Another commentator joining the fray surrounding *Anonymous* wrote recently in *The Age* that ‘To believe the Oxfordian theory one must accept any number of wild speculations and outrageous implausibilities.’ In a letter to the newspaper on the following day, an outraged Oxfordian responded angrily about ‘evidence ... that clearly points to the Earl of Oxford’, decrying ‘this push to denigrate Edward De Vere’.

*Anonymous* is centrally (though not single-mindedly) concerned with this issue of authorship and, one would suppose, with the power of words. On that matter it seems unnecessary that it should be bookended with a modern sequence set in New York’s St James Theatre in which Derek Jacobi addresses the audience (and us) about ‘the ultimate expression of humanity in the English language’ and, at the end, intones the final couplet from Sonnet 18:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

To end on this note seems almost to undermine the body of the film, which is so taken up with who wrote the words; almost, that is, as if what really matters is that they were written at all. Regardless of who wrote them, they were listened to by large enthusiastic audiences, from the huddled groundlings to those like Oxford, sitting in galleries at a safe remove from the smelly crowds below.

The other matter at the heart of *Anonymous* is that of the succession to the British throne when the elderly Queen Elizabeth (a great ‘turn’ from Vanessa Redgrave, and played in youth by her daughter Joely Richardson) dies. Essentially, it is a conspiracy thriller which works (more or less) on two levels: first, as the title implies, about the question of authorship, and second, in relation to the throne. Both issues involve treachery and betrayal and opportunism in a bloody time, and Orloff’s screenplay seeks to unite them in ways that are not wholly convincing. For instance, the Queen’s advisers, the Cecils père et fils, are portrayed as prototypes for the conniving Polonius and the treacherous Richard III. Nearer the film’s centre, de Vere (Rhys Ifans) is presented as both the Queen’s son and lover, the son-in-law to William Cecil, and also the film’s candidate for the author of ‘Shakespeare’.

This isn’t meant to suggest that *Anonymous* is a potently constructed piece of work. In fact, it darts about between its two main strands of action and among different times in ways that are not always clear. Perhaps the key link between the strands is that, just as de Vere’s plays will not carry his name into posterity, so his son will not succeed the Queen. De Vere offers his own life if his son’s will be spared, to no avail.

I don’t want to enter any further into the often lunatic-sounding debates about the authorship of some of the greatest plays ever written, but just to focus briefly on what is actually before us as we sit through the two-plus hours of Emmerich’s film. In line with the director’s professed belief in de Vere’s authorship, de Vere is presented sympathetically as a sensitive aristocrat – when he’s not being the Queen’s youthful lover and opportunistically marrying Cecil’s daughter, Shakespeare (Rafe Spall), on the other hand, emerges as a semi-literate actor (odd that he can read well enough to learn his lines but can’t write). He is basically a sleazy, toping fool, willing to take any credit going when the audience demands to see the playwright and carry him out of the theatre triumphantly. As Ben Jonson’s biographer, Ian Donaldson, has said in relation to the latter moment:
What Emmerich has made is lively enough costume melodrama: overlong perhaps, but with enough going on in terms of action and conspiracy to ward off boredom, if not incredulity.

“You don’t have to believe for a moment any of the authorship stuff – or, for that matter, de Vere’s role in the succession struggle – to have a moderately enjoyable time with the film. The actors involved – Rhys Ifans as de Vere and Rafe Spall as Shakespeare – differentiate their sketchily and dubiously drawn characters skilfully enough to maintain a certain level of interest in the film’s plot. If you’re expecting enlightenment about facts in relation to either plot strand, forget it. What Emmerich has made is lively enough costume melodrama: overlong perhaps, but with enough going on in terms of action and conspiracy to ward off boredom, if not incredulity. There is more jumping around in time than is helpful, making it somewhat difficult to follow the convolutions of plot and pursue the two main strands to the conspiracy. But if you don’t take it too seriously (and to do so might easily promote outrage), there are some rewards to be had. For one thing, the film frequently looks marvellous, especially in the wonderful long shots in which Anna Foerster’s cinematography colludes with Sebastian T. Krawinkel’s production design to evoke an impression of Elizabethan London. This is most notable in the beautiful shot of the old Queen’s funeral procession on the iced-over Thames. Elsewhere the model work recreating the city recalls that in Laurence Olivier’s Henry V (1944), which is also invoked in the ‘O for a muse of fire’ speech before Agincourt. The comparison doesn’t put the new film too much in the shade.”
The other main pleasure of the film is in some of the performances, and Redgrave as the Queen grown old towers, literally and metaphorically, over the film, imbuing her every scene with the appropriate authority and touches of shrewd knowingness. David Thewlis and Edward Hogg as, respectively, William and Robert Cecil are impressively shifty as they exploit their courtiers’ access to the seat of power. Some of the younger actors seem almost interchangeable behind their moustaches and ruffs, but apart from the few named this isn’t really an actor’s film. In the end, Anonymous is perhaps not so far removed from Emmerich’s earlier work: it is really no more than a big-budget period piece, lavish and easy enough on the eye and the mind – just don’t expect a serious commentary on a matter that might be better laid to rest.

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Endnotes

3 Robert McCrum, ‘De Vere or not is the question’, The Observer, reprinted in The Age, Life & Style, 5 November 2011, p. 18.

6 McCrum, op. cit.
8 McCrum, op. cit.