

SHAKESPEARE AS CONTROVERSY: WHY PUSHING AGAINST THE GRAIN SHOULD MATTER TO US

Op-Ed

Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare? The majority view is yes. But for almost a century, the question has been seriously posed by a select group known as the Oxfordians. Originating in 1920 by an English schoolteacher named [J. Thomas Looney](#), the theory holds that it was not William Shakespeare of Stratford, but rather Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, who wrote the plays and poems that are revered today and will be for years to come. From that day to the present day, two sides have emerged: one comprised of [loyal Shakespearean scholars](#) and one comprised of resistant Shakespearean deniers.

In late-April 2016, on the 400th-anniversary of Shakespeare's death, I heard an [interview](#) on NPR's Morning Edition, conducted by Renee Montagne, with two of the most prominent Shakespearean actors today: Mark Rylance and Derek Jacobi. Both unapologetic Oxfordians, they questioned Shakespeare's authorship based off what is known and, frankly, not known about his life. Rylance and Jacobi, and the Oxfordian collective as a whole, question and interrogate the widely-accepted, or widely-assumed, scholarship that Shakespeare was the author of the acclaimed works.

They discuss how the extensive education, language, and travel that would have been required to write the plays and poems do not coincide with what scholars know about the projected author (in that, over the course of his life, he had very little exposure to these experiences). At one point, Jacobi says, "Writers write from their own point of view. And the point of view reflected in the works just isn't that of Mr. Shakespeare, based on what we know of his life."

And yet, scholars insist that it was Shakespeare's well-read lifestyle and his place and friends at Elizabethan court, among other reasons, that unequivocally prove his authorship. Are the Oxfordians just a bunch of [rebellious conspiracy theorists](#) who want to stir up controversy toward one of the most—if not the most—exalted writers to have ever lived, or might they have a point?

My aim here is not to provide an answer for one side of the debate or the other. I also do not wish to point fingers. On the contrary, my aim is to promote the idea that there is something to be said for someone who is willing to push back against consensus and assumption. This kind of person, who researches and considers all sides of an issue

(especially sides that have been unconsidered), is rare because of the temptation toward comfort and ease. In other words, familiarity breeds reality. Perhaps it is why I admire those who are brave enough to interrogate or, at the very least, question the world around them and the root of their beliefs.

Now, I admit I may run into some trouble here. Allow me to clarify. For issues that are considered high-stakes and that are [scientifically verifiable](#), such as climate change, my admiration for those who are prone to resist runs thin. For instance, there is a difference between scientific research and scholarly research. While both contain tools to observe and examine, only one can be tested in a scientific and mathematical sense.

For matters of Shakespeare and scholarship, much of what we know comes from the musty remains of history: letters, books, pamphlets, plays, art, and photographs left behind. As citizens of a collective, we ought to examine that information, just as scholars in their respective fields do, in order to make sense of our puzzling world. Questioning and measuring, though, should not just begin in the wells of history and end in the hands of scholars. At best, that is too easy, and at worst, it is irresponsible.

As citizens of a collective, we owe it to ourselves, at the very least, to pause before accepting consensus or tradition as truth-with-a-Capital-T. If we create meaning in our lives from what we know, then that knowledge—spread across generations—should be investigated. When we come across a widely-held belief and especially one that has been influential across many platforms, such as [the belief that Shakespeare did indeed write Shakespeare](#), granting ourselves permission to push back on it—despite the criticism we may receive—is tantamount for a just and civil society.

In this kind of society, truth is a cornerstone for the value we place on our lives. Resistance to established thought should not be regarded as an excuse to fulfill our attraction to controversy for the sake of controversy. Rather, it is an act of freedom and one that we should not feel apologetic for. After all, thinking for oneself against the noise of the chaotic consensus is not an alien idea. For is that not, at the core, the fundamental goal of the four walls of higher education that parents, lawmakers, and teachers encourage young people to pursue? I think so.