

QUESTION: Apart from the fact that they were all venerable, intelligent men, what did Sigmund Freud, Charles Dickens, Henry and William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, Orson Welles, and Walt Whitman have in common? Not one of them believed that William Shakespeare, a country lad from Warwickshire with a grade six education, who signed his surname six different ways, all illegibly, was capable of producing the single greatest canon of western literature: 38 transcendent histories, comedies, and tragedies, as well as 154 sonnets. They believed the Shakespeare legacy to be a colossal hoax, a charade designed to conceal an author who was unable or unwilling to acknowledge authorship.

THE VERIFIABLE FACTS OF SHAKESPEARE'S life are few. He acted in two of Ben Jonson's plays, owned shares of the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars, sued people for petty sums, and bought land in Stratford. How, asked distinguished British actors Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance in their 2007 "declaration of reasonable doubt" (signed online by some 1,700 people), did this Shakespeare acquire his knowledge of foreign languages, which the plays' author clearly demonstrates? Where did he develop, seemingly overnight, dramatic mastery of the Elizabethan worlds of law, the court, mathematics, heraldry, medicine, horticulture, falconry, astronomy, and the military, to which he had no known exposure? Why did he leave a last will and testament that made no mention of anything he wrote? Why is there no contemporaneous evidence of his actual authorship? As Jacobi and Rylance note in their declaration: "Not one play, not one poem, not one letter in Mr. Shakspeare's [their spelling] own hand has ever been found...."

It is true that Shakespeare acted in the company that performed the plays after 1594, and that the same name appeared on the long poems, on the 15 plays pub-

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lished in Quarto after 1598, on the First Folio, and in documents of the acting company. But no evidence demonstrates that he actually wrote the plays. The playwright Ben Jonson wrote in his diary that although Shakespeare passed manuscripts of plays to the actors, who in their "ignorance" admired Shakespeare for providing clean unblotted copies, he was to be "most faulted" for telling them that the copies were his original drafts.

IF SHAKESPEARE DID NOT WRITE THE plays, then who did?

The Shakespeare Authorship Trust, founded in 1922 "to seek, and if possible establish, the truth concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and poems," has to date endorsed the alternate candidacies of almost a dozen other Elizabethans, including statesman and essayist Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere (the Earl of Oxford), playwright Christopher Marlowe, writer Mary Sidney, Roger Manners (the Earl of Rutland), and diplomat/courtier Henry Neville. There's also a group theory, suggesting that many backstage hands were complicit, conspiring to use Shakespeare as a mere cardboard prop.

In April 2007, the Trust added a new name to the list and, at first blush, it's a complete shocker: Amelia Bassano Lanier (1569-1645), daughter of a Venetian-born court musician and *converso* (a Jew who is forced to convert to Christianity

but still considered a Jew). Last year, *The Oxfordian*, a peer-reviewed journal of Shakespeare authorship studies, published essays on four leading rival authorship candidates, including Bassano.

A feminist of her day, Bassano composed *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (Hail God, King of the Jews)*, a 3,000-line book of original poetry. Its appearance in 1611 made her the first woman to have published a work of original verse in the English language. Andrée Brooks (who has written about this period) points to a poem in which Bassano writes of "evil disposed men who forgetting they were borne of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the means of women, they would be quite extinguished from this world." Certain men, Bassano declares, "have tempted even the patience of God himself."

The Bassano authorship theory's principal proponent is John Hudson, a graduate of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham, England. Hudson has spent the last seven years poring over Shakespeare texts and scholarly material as well as mounting productions of the plays with his New York-based troupe, the Dark Lady Players. He's also written an 800-page manuscript in support of his contention that if Amelia Bassano did not author all of the works, she was a major collaborator, influenced them all, and contributed their underlying allegorical plots.