

Anonymous – Was Shakespeare Real? And why wouldn't we think so?

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This evening you are going to see a tale told of intrigue and tragedy, history and supposition set in the tumultuous times of nation facing a change in monarchy. But more than this, you are going to take a look at a version of Shakespeare's life which is a little different than what we have come to expect. A different point of view of the man himself.

Anonymous is the story of Shakespeare based on a different interpretation of the facts. Or should I say, based on the theory that the facts we've grown up with apparently don't exist. Indeed tonight film is about piecing together the lack of evidence of such great a man as Shakespeare and putting it all back together to paint a portrait of someone very different.

But for this presentation, and from a teaching perspective perhaps it is the theories behind the film that are more interesting than the script itself. And I think it is in the words of the Lord of Oxford himself who lays down the gauntlet as to who Shakespeare really was when he say to Ben Johnson: "all art is political Johnson otherwise it would only be decoration. And all artists have something to say otherwise they would make shoes. And you are not a cobbler are you Johnson?"

So what is the story behind the film? And as we watch, what are the questions Roland Emmerich is trying to substantiate and support with such a film? Well, I took a look at an interview with the Director who puts forward a fair case as to why he believes "Shakespeare was a fraud" and the theories to support it.

So let's take a look at the reasoning to the theory that the Man we know as Shakespeare might not be quite as it seems:

1. Not one single manuscript or poem was ever found in Shakespeare handwriting: for a man who spent his time between London and Stratford, the question is would that not have required correspondences between the two cities? Think about it, when you are away from home for long period of time do you not call, send an email or text – even just to ask how the kids are? Of course in those days communication was down to letters but not even just one letter to his wife has ever been found. The largest body of handwritten English literature and this guy never wrote a note to his wife? A little strange
2. Shakespeare was born in Stratford to illiterate parents, and of course that isn't a problem, many people have gone on to be and do great things learning along the way. But did you know that neither of Shakespeare's daughters could read or write? That is a little strange....I mean would you as a parent not want your children to be better than you? Should we not expect at least from such a literary that he would want his children to be able to read his works? A little strange...
3. Shakespeare, as all historians agree, was not born to as we say with a silver spoon in his mouth. He didn't belong to the aristocracy. So why did he write so much and base all of his plays in such a world? Where all are part of the upper social classes, of kings and queens, princesses and princes? Ok this could be imagination...but how could he have know the habits, and behaviors, manners and nuances of these classes so well to describe and write of them in each character if he did not belong and live among them in real life? Think of Ben Johnson as a playwright. His plays clearly reflect the working man...interesting...
4. Did you know that the only examples of handwriting existing which belong authentically to Shakespeare are 6 shakingly, inconsistent signatures at the bottom of several documents. You could liken it to an elderly person, or a very young person who struggles to hold a pen, and struggle to write his own name...curious when this is the man who had written such a body of work by hand....and if we were to compare them to the signature of his peer – Ben Johnson, Francis Bacon the difference is incredible – just google them...the

question is, did Shakespeare really have difficulty writing his own name or was that someone else? There is a wonderful scene in the film where Edward De Vere, scribbles the signature of Shakespeare as if he were pondering the possibility of the name, as if he were playing with the name of a main character....

5. Artists from all genres have always taken inspiration from the heart. From the events that shape and form their lives emotively. Is it possible the death of Shakespeare's son at the age of 11 did not merit some kind of expression poetically be it in a sonnet, poem or a play? Think mark twain and huckleberry fin, John Lennon and Julia...is it possible Shakespeare drew inspiration from other parts?
6. No record has ever been found of Shakespeare attending Stratford Grammar School, yet his work includes clear understanding of history, astronomy, art, music, medicine, military, law and philosophy as well as aristocratic pastimes such as Tennis and falconry. Is it possible even If he were a genius that he did not in any way leave a trace of his learning somewhere? I mean he had the largest active vocabulary of the english language in the world at that time and not one single record exists as to how he learnt so much and so well?....
7. Shakespeare we know retired from his work at the young age of 40. Returning to his home town and remaining there until his death. Never to write a single poem, letter, note, play or anything ever again. Is it possible that such a person could just STOP writing completely. Never lifting a quill again to jot down even a thought? Is that even possible? Just look at the greats in history and they worked or continued acting upon their talents well and poorly right up until their death. Is it possible that Shakespeare was unique here too?
8. No record shows that Shakespeare left the borders of his home country – the UK. Yet his work contains in frightening details Italian cities, customs and culture, French court life as well as etiquette and nobility of foreign lands...How on earth did the author get such detailed knowledge? Remember a third of Shakespeare's plays were set in Italy...I mean the lonely Planet guides are good...as is trip adviser but back in those days when the mail from Italy took nearly 4 months to arrive???
9. There is a famous engraving of the man Shakespeare with a quill and parchment. It is the image we have all come to know well when we visualize the face of Shakespeare. What perhaps is interesting is that art historians agree that extensive restoration was done on the original work and that in an earlier version Shakespeare was holding a sack of grain.....interesting....
10. In the last will and testament of William Shakespeare did not leave a single not, copy or manuscript to anyone. Did he really not care at all as to what happened to his entire life's work? And was it really more important the "comfortable Mattress" he so famously left to his wife?

Anonymous is a tale of words. Of intrigue and violence. And magnificently puts forward the case that Shakespeare as we have been brought to know may never have been that man but someone else...someone who could fit the doubts that we've mentioned here. And if there are any teachers here tonight then may I make a suggestion: watch and enjoy tonight film. But listen to the reasoning and if you would like to do something a little bit different with your class the next time you study literature and Shakespeare then why not see if your students cant support his existence as the history books tell us. Get them to look for examples within his text, work on the comprehension as if it were a riddle to be solved, a map to be followed. Shakespeare isn't always about the rhyme or the sonnet or the play on words. It is also a chance for students to delve into a language so rich in expressionism and meaning but that they will only be open to see if they are given the incentive to do so... and reading, pure reading as you know today just doesn't cut the rug.