

The Play's The Thing

"The Case for Oxford" by Tom Bethell and "The Case for Shakespeare" by Irvin Matus, in *The Atlantic* (Oct. 1991), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

No fewer than 58 individuals have been proposed at one time or another as the true author of the works attributed to William Shakespeare (1564–1616) of Stratford. The anti-Stratfordians' current favorite is Edward de Vere (1550–1604), the 17th Earl of Oxford, a courtier who was a scholar, athlete, and poet. Journalist Tom Bethell contends the available evidence supports their claim, but independent scholar Irvin Matus firmly insists that the plays and sonnets were written by the man from Stratford.

In the eyes of anti-Stratfordians, there exists a vast, unbridgeable gap between the apparently unlettered Stratford man and the glorious works that now bear his name. "To credit that amazing piece of virtuosity [*Love's Labour's Lost*] to a butcher boy who left school at 13 or even to one whose education was nothing more than what a grammar school and residence in a little provincial borough could provide," declared J. Dover Wilson, editor of the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*, "is to invite one either to believe in miracles or to disbelieve in the man of Stratford."

Two characteristics in the Shakespeare canon, Bethell argues, "suggest powerfully that its author was not a small-town burgher [such as Shakespeare] but rather a well-traveled nobleman [such as De Vere]. One is the very attitude. The author displays little sympathy for the class of upwardly mobile strivers of which [the Stratford man] was a preeminent member . . . Shakespeare's frequent disgust with court life

sounds like the revulsion of a man who knew it too well." Also, Bethell says, there is "the author's apparent knowledge of foreign lands . . . [It] is implausible that the Stratford man ever went abroad." However, while the man who wrote the plays set in Italy was evidently familiar with its topography, Matus notes that the playwright's characters "are always of contemporary England."

Matus says that "very little in Shakespeare's plays . . . required knowledge beyond materials that were publicly available." Formal schooling was not really a necessity. Ben Jonson (1573–1637), for example, "could not . . . have had much more than a few years of rudimentary schooling before he was put to work, probably at his stepfather's trade, bricklaying. Nevertheless, Jonson would become . . . Britain's most admired playwright in the 17th century" and a leading scholar of the classics. "Evidently," Matus observes, "there may be more to both scholarship and literary genius than a formal education."

The partisans of De Vere and other candidates, Matus says, have failed to demonstrate how any of them gained "the intimate knowledge and experience of theater and drama to create plays that remain the standard by which all other stage works are measured. Those qualifications are possessed uniquely by the man who was an active member of an extraordinary theatrical ensemble—William Shakespeare, gentleman of Stratford."

OTHER NATIONS

China's Generation Gap

"Chinese Youth: The Nineties Generation" by Beverley Hooper, in *Current History* (Sept. 1991), 4225 Main St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19127.

Since the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, little news of open dissent by Chinese university students has reached

the West. But some young people, reports Hooper, of the Asia Research Center at Murdoch University in Western Australia,