

Truth and Truthiness

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The baptismal register of the Holy Trinity parish church of Stratford, England, shows the following entry for April 26th, 1564: “Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakespeare”—or William Shakespeare son of John Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s birthday is traditionally celebrated on the April 23rd. In preparation for his birthday 448 years later, and this sermon, I sat down a couple of months ago to view the movie *Anonymous*, directed by the German born Roland Emmerich. Emmerich is well-known for such hit and miss epic Hollywood movies as *Stargate*, *Independence Day*, *Godzilla* and *10,000 BC*. Unsurprisingly, the production design and costumes of *Anonymous* are uniformly superb. After years of working as a history curator in museums and historical site restoration projects, I appreciate the accurate assembly and presentation of material culture—for costumes, stone, metal and woodwork, table ware, furnishings, lighting—these details are on sumptuous display in the movie—they are a feast for the eyes.

I wish that I could also say that *Anonymous* was a feast for the mind; unfortunately it was not. Though ably acted by some of the frothy cream of Britain’s seemingly depthless pool of quality actors, *Anonymous* is, in the words of A.O.Scott: “a vulgar prank on the English literary tradition, a travesty of British history, and a brutal insult to the human imagination.” (Scott, “How Could a Commoner Write Such Good Plays?” *NYTimes*, October 27, 2011) What the writers of *Anonymous*, and the agenda driven interest groups behind them are trying to pull off raise important issues that have everything to do with what I want us to explore just days now after William Shakespeare’s birthday.

Here's the premise of the movie, and hang in there with me if it's a bit confusing: according to the movie, the poems and plays attributed to William Shakespeare were actually the work of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. Oxford, in this telling, was the secret, illegitimate son of a then young Queen Elisabeth. Years later, Oxford had an incestuous relationship with the Queen who then gave birth to a lad who became the Earl of Southampton. *Officially* childless and without an heir, the Earl of Oxford conspired to place his (and Elisabeth's) son on the throne to continue the *English* Tudor line and to thwart the nefarious Stuarts of Scotland from attaining the throne upon Elisabeth's death. Got that?

According to the movie, poor Oxford, prevented by lofty status and family circumstances from pursuing his literary dreams, spent a lifetime writing one secret masterpiece after another and placed these works on the shelf for future political use. "All plays are political," the movie's Oxford asserts; but how to release them in a timely way that: a) would further his political ambitions while not drawing attention to secret bedchamber goings on and c) find an appreciative audience for his literary genius—though, poor, tragic lord, he would have to remain anonymous. *Anonymous*, get it? (That's title of the movie.)

How to pull it off? Find a dupe, a front—someone willing, for sizeable sums of money and vainglory—to pass Oxford's plays off as his own; and that person without scruple?—William Shakespeare of Stratford. In Emmerich's movie, Shakespeare is presented as a shallow, illiterate, sleazy provincial buffoon, as well as a whoremonger, blackmailer and murderer—someone who could not possibly have written the plays and poetry attributed to him.

As a work of serious history, this whole scenario—the anonymous, inspired noble amateur, an illiterate, criminal Shakespeare, the idea that only the politically powerful could produce theatre of real consequences, the existence of a conspiracy so vast, so well disguised that

virtually no one had a clue—as a work of serious history, the movie and its premise are beyond useless. You could drive a Mack truck of truth through them from one end to the other.

Yeah, but wouldn't it be cool if Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare? Wouldn't be cool if the US military was keeping extraterrestrial remains at a secret site in the Nevada desert? If aliens with powers beyond our imagination built the pyramids? If the ancient Mayans correctly predicted that the end of the world will take place on December 21, 2012? You don't have to be Mel Gibson, or the director of *Anonymous* to enjoy a conspiracy theory. Haven't we at one time or another fantasized in ways that makes the world more glamorous, and much simpler than it really is? But then we rouse from our reveries, shake off the cobwebs and read a book by someone who is actually familiar with both solid historical methodology and the facts.

“Facts are stubborn things,” wrote the British essayist William Hazlitt, and truth, wrote Shakespeare, “Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning.” The fact, the truth is—it is impossible that the Earl Oxford, or others were the authors of Shakespeare's plays and poetry. The brute fact is that Oxford died in 1604, while Shakespeare continued to write until 1613. *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, for example, were inspired by events that took place after Oxford's death. Another example, a brute fact: whereas Shakespeare had an on-going relationship as actor, producer and writer for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Oxford was removed from the rough-and-tumble, frantic world of play production in Elizabethan London. Shakespeare was a day-to-day observer of what his company could accomplish, actor-by-actor. He created plays and speeches tailored specifically for the known strengths of the great Richard Burbage, the clown Will Kemp and the intellectual jester Robert Armin. “The trickiest job was to write for that rare commodity, the boy actors who played women's roles.” Typically, young apprentices were given small parts to memorize. But when, according to Garry Wills, “he had a spectacular boy like John Rice, he

was able to write as big a role for him as that of Cleopatra [who has 693 lines]...Only Shakespeare, who knew and wrote for and acted with and coached John Rice, knew what he could do and how to pace him from play to play.” (see Wills, “Shakespeare and Verdi in the Theatre,” *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2011)

In London’s remarkably tight-knit literary community, where everyone knew everyone else, passed gossip along freely, and shared patrons, publishers and living quarters, it was common knowledge that Shakespeare was one of their preeminent playwrights. Here are just a few quotes from contemporaries who knew him, his writing and theatrical productions intimately well: Richard Barnfield, in 1598 wrote: *And Shakespeare thou, whose honey-flowing vein/(Pleasing the world) thy praises doth obtain...Thy name in fame’s immortal book have placed.*” Francis Meres, again in 1598, “likened modern English writers to ancient Roman ones (so that, for instance, “*the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare*”). And as to “the best for comedy and tragedy,” he concludes only Shakespeare “*among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage.*”

In 1604, William Camden, the leading historian of the day, included Shakespeare among the greatest of contemporary writers. Numerous book-buyers, who snatched up contemporary editions of his plays, people like Robert Burton, the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Richard Stonely, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Edward Alleyn, the chief actor of the Admiral’s Men Company—these and others acknowledged, in private documents and correspondence, that Shakespeare was the author of plays and poetry attributed to him, “because each one knew who Shakespeare was and didn’t doubt that he had written these works.” (See James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* 2010, pp. 234-40. Also, Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, 1998, and Bill Bryson, *Shakespeare*, 1999, chapter nine.)

One more quote comes from the great playwright Ben Jonson who knew Shakespeare well and personally and was a frequent rival for patronage and audiences. After Shakespeare's death, Jonson wrote: "*I remember, the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing (whatsoever he penned) he never blotted out a line...I loved the man, and do honour his memory on this side of idolatry as much as any. He was honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy; brave notions, and gentle expressions wherein he flowed with facility.*" (Shapiro, 240)

Put all this together: chronological anachronisms, Shakespeare's practical knowledge of the stage and his actors, widespread recognition of Shakespeare by fellow writers and the public. This kind of well-researched information, gleaned from the past by careful, professional scholars matters *not one whit* to the backers of the Oxford thesis; no argument can ever persuade them. "How could Shakespeare," they ask, "the half-educated son of an unlettered provincial glove maker, how could he have composed works of such power? Surely it is more plausible to suppose that they were the work of one of his betters." And the proof, the evidence you may ask? When it comes down to it, what this is really about, I think, is a reactionary fantasy of class prejudice, of snobbery, and a shining example of *truthiness*—that "quality of stating concepts or facts *one wishes to believe* to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true."

In the October 2005, the TV comedian Stephen Colbert faced a dilemma. He was about to tape his first solo TV show. One segment of the program was a skit in which Colbert was going to satirically send up the widespread misuse of appeals to emotion and gut feeling in social commentary, and in political speeches and policy decisions, especially those of then US President Bush. But the originally scripted word—"truth"—just didn't cut it. How do you explain Bush's "certainty in his choices as a leader," Colbert later remarked, "[when] the facts

that back him up don't exist?" In this situation the word "truth" just wasn't absolutely ridiculous enough. "We're not talking about truth, we're talking about something that *seems* like truth—the truth we *want* to exist" unburdened by facts. Colbert had his inspired moment, and taped the show using the word "truthiness." (see "truthiness" in Wikipedia)

Like the phenomenon of the omnipresence of zombies I talked about a couple of months ago, truthiness is one of those zeitgeisty kind of things—a trend of thought, or widespread feeling of our times that haunts our culture and our politics seemingly at every turn. It is, in the words of Frank Rich "a perfect embodiment of the fashionable excess of an era." At the silliest level, it is manifest in show-biz phenomena like the manufactured marriages of juvenile pop stars. In middle brow culture we have the nonsense of entertainments like *Anonymous*. As well, we have so-called autobiographies like James Frey's fact-challenged *A Million Little Pieces*, a book endorsed by Oprah who made it clear that no one except pesky nitpickers cares whether Mr. Frey's autobiography was true or not, or whether it sat on the fiction or nonfiction shelves of Chapters bookstores.

What we take to be true and our understanding of it have, for good reason, been around for a very long time. My *Canadian Dictionary* puts it like this: truth is "the quality or state of being true; it is conformity to fact or reality...to circumstance as it really is... it is a report or account consistent with fact or reality...a fixed or established principle." As we well know, truth's opposite—lies and lying, and our understanding and experience with them—have also been around for a long time.

In a classic essay on BS written twenty-five years ago, the philosopher Harry Frankfurt contends that truth telling and lying share a deep agreement—that is, "Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides...in the same game. Each responds to

the *facts* as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of truth, while the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands... Each assumes that there are indeed *facts* that are... determinate and knowable.” The difference between liars and truth-tellers on the one hand, and a BS artist on the other, is that BS “pays no attention” to truth and facts at all. “And by virtue of this, BS is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are... BS is disconnected with a concern for the truth” altogether. (see Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*)

And so here, we return to “truthiness”—Stephen Colbert had to come up with a new term to describe the weird situation in which we find ourselves today—a situation where the word “truth” just wasn’t absolutely ridiculous enough. Truth, lies and BS have been joined by something else—by truthiness. The comedian had to describe a situation where show biz types and writers, and politicians aren’t exactly spreading BS around, and neither are they obviously, necessarily lying. Instead, they are stating “concepts or ‘facts’ they wish or believe to be true, rather than facts known to be true, or that correspond to reality.

Examples of push back against truthiness in contemporary literature are the great novels by the late David Wallace Foster, William Vollman and Francis Spuuford who meticulously footnote the facts and historical settings of their fiction, and place them for reference at the end of their novels. They know how perilous it is to play fast and loose with reality, for an author who pays no attention to the facts—those stubborn things—or who substitutes what she *wants* to believe or *feels* should be the case—whether it’s true or not—such authors undermine the trust of their readers, and the plausibility and persuasive force of their writing.

When truthiness moves beyond the realm of entertainment and culture, when it moves beyond movies like *Anonymous*, then things become really perilous. Truthiness corrodes truth, it’s the midwife of cynical disregard for reality; it’s the slippery slope, the toboggan ride into

disillusioned disengagement from participation in a politics that expects, that demands, peace, order and good government. As just about everyone knows now, it was the truthiness of all those imminent mushroom clouds that sold the invasion of Iraq. It was the truthiness about the capability of F-35s and of the gut feeling that we just had to have them that has pushed us ruinously close to their purchase. It is messianic truthiness in the Middle East that's currently straining to let loose the dogs of war. Truthiness labels climate change a hoax. Truthiness claims that all mental and emotional distress arises from chemical imbalances of a broken brain. Truthiness would have us believe that somehow food banks in this country can adequately, humanely feed those in want.

To bring these remarks to end—two observations. At the end of his magisterial study of the Shakespeare authorship controversy, James Shapiro asks: “what difference does it make who wrote the plays?” to which he answers “a lot.” To insist that only a nobleman, or someone with an advanced degree in history, writing and the classics, could write about politics, could write about classical and historical persons and settings, could write in iambic pentameter, “diminishes the very thing that made [Shakespeare] so exceptional: [and that was] his imagination.” Shakespeare *did* read classical literature and historical chronicles again and again for the stories and portraits of his plays. He did his homework. But when he turned to writing, as an experienced actor and producer who knew what worked on the stage, when he took up pen and ink as a reader of history, when he created his plots, his characters, and his language, he demonstrated “an even more powerful imaginative capacity, one that allowed him to create roles of such depth and complexity...that even the least of them, four centuries later, seem fully human and distinctive.” (Shapiro, 277-80)

Finally, one of the things that binds me to this religion of ours, and to service in its ministry, is our principled affirmation and commitment to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” *To truth, not truthiness.* To the belief that we can—to the best of our ability—that we can describe the world correctly, that there are indeed facts out there that are both “determinate and knowable.” And we claim that our living tradition is nourished by a blessedly wide range of sources—spanning from intuitive experiences, to the guidance of reason and the results of science, from spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions to the wisdom from the world’s religions. These sources of insight, wisdom and those stubborn facts will help guide us in our search, so that we can winnow out the chaff of BS and truthiness from the life-giving, life sustaining grain of truth and meaning.