

Anonymous: An ignorant assault on Shakespeare

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23 November 2011

Written by John Orloff, directed by Roland Emmerich

Roland Emmerich prepared himself to film a story about the greatest literary figure in the English language by directing *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*, *The Patriot* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. In 2000, I commented that *The Patriot*, with Mel Gibson, was “a ridiculous work, which could only be taken seriously in a period like ours in which ideas and ideals are held in such generally low esteem.”

In both his disaster and horror films and his misguided foray into the history of the American Revolution, the German-born Emmerich has shown himself given to bombast, simplification and crudity. He has easily matched his previous unfortunate efforts in *Anonymous*.

The premise of the new film is that English dramatist and poet William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was not the author of the three dozen or so plays attributed to him, rather they were written by Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604). This claim has been around for more than a century, and has been thoroughly refuted by both internal (Oxford was not a remarkable poet, while the real Shakespeare was) and external evidence (personal and historical facts too numerous to mention). Whether or not Emmerich and his screenwriter, John Orloff, actually subscribe to the theory is unclear. Orloff may, but one suspects that Emmerich, while he defends the Oxfordian thesis in public, could hardly care less. The film is merely another opportunity to display his questionable inventiveness.

To recount the convoluted plot of *Anonymous* is to discredit it. A work entitled “Anonymous” is playing at a contemporary New York City theater. Derek Jacobi marches onstage and presents a sort of prologue, in which he casts doubt that Shakespeare, the mere son of “a glove maker” and a “grammar school” graduate, could have produced such a magnificent body of work. There is a “darker story” to tell, he somberly informs us.

From there we are taken back to a computer-generated London circa 1600, in the latter days of the reign of the officially childless Elizabeth I (Vanessa Redgrave), a period dominated by political intrigue surrounding the question of her successor. Elizabeth’s Secretary of State and chief spymaster, Robert Cecil (Edward Hogg), is conspiring to bring James VI of Scotland (eventually James I of England)—the son of Mary, Queen of Scots—to the English throne.

Opposed to Cecil are a number of important aristocratic figures, centrally the Earl of Essex (Sam Reid) and the Earl of Southampton (Xavier Samuel). A more circumspect ally of theirs against the accession of James is the Earl of Oxford (Rhys Ifans), who was raised by William Cecil (David Thewlis), also a key advisor to Queen Elizabeth, and against whom William’s son and replacement, the aforementioned Robert, a villainous hunchback, bears considerable enmity.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Oxford had an affair as a teenager

with the younger Elizabeth (Joely Richardson, Redgrave’s daughter) and fathered a son by her (who also plays a prominent part in the story), that he was blackmailed into marrying Anne Cecil—and giving up playwriting—in exchange for covering up a crime he committed and, most extraordinarily, that Oxford is himself the illegitimate son of Elizabeth, so that incest tops off the whole lovely business.

Meanwhile, as they say, the playwright Ben Jonson (Sebastian Armesto) is recruited by Oxford in the present (i.e., 1600 or so) to introduce the latter’s plays, old and new (according to the film, the earl, a prodigy in every way, wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the age of eight!), into the London theater, while putting his (Jonson’s) name on them. Through his dramas Oxford hopes to elevate Essex (and lower Cecil and James) in the eyes of the population (the “mob”) and the queen herself. Jonson agrees to put the works in circulation, but draws back from assigning his name to them. An upstart, semiliterate buffoon of an actor, William Shakespeare (Rafe Spall), is not so modest and begins to take credit for Oxford’s works.

Anonymous climaxes with the staging of Shakespeare’s (Oxford’s) *Richard III*, a tragedy with a deformed evildoer at its center (intended to remind contemporaries of Robert Cecil), and the Earl of Essex’s rebellion, in February 1601, which has disastrous consequences for a number of the film’s central figures.

Emmerich’s “dark” film is, first of all, a deeply mean-spirited work. I will leave to the psychologist the task of determining why a couple of demonstrably mediocre contemporary artists feel obliged to portray the greatest single collection of dramatists in the history of the English language (Shakespeare, Jonson, Christopher Marlowe and a number of lesser lights, including Thomas Nashe and Thomas Dekker) as fakers, thugs, imbeciles, informers and worse. Can one detect hints of jealousy and self-justification?

The depiction of Shakespeare is the most stupid and offensive. Does it really strengthen the case for the Earl of Oxford’s or anyone else’s authorship of the famous 37 plays to present the generally recognized author as a semiliterate braggart, drunk and ... murderer?

When *Anonymous* is not unpleasant and noisy, it is generally tedious and clichéd. Scenes of Mermaid Tavern regulars carousing, Shakespeare “wenching,” the Cecils conspiring, Essex and Southampton proudly, nobly riding and striding (their silly scenes manage to bring to mind the costume drama hilariously parodied by Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon in *The Trip*: “Gentlemen, to bed, we arise at dawn!”), the groundlings oohing and ahing at the Globe Theatre, etc., are taken from a manual of Elizabethan stereotypes.

A good many talented performers are disgracefully wasted here, including Ifans, Thewlis, Redgrave, Hogg and Jacobi. Redgrave, who generally appears in command even in minor or undistinguished roles, is unconvincing and at times simply distasteful as the increasingly senile monarch. Ifans, a fine comic actor, has an impossible job, of representing the Earl of Oxford as a brilliant, lady-killing aristocratic martyr to

Elizabethan police-state oppression, with the time on his hands to pen *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and the rest of the magisterial works. The whole thing is preposterous.

What does it say about the contemporary Hollywood elite that in its empty-headed fantasies about the Elizabethan era it heaps scorn on the possibility that the son of a lowly glove maker and a grammar school graduate could have created the remarkable works in question, and instead prefers a jaded aristocrat from one of the most distinguished families in England?

Emmerich and Orloff like to present any hostile reaction to their effort as proof that they have upset the academic-Shakespeare industry applectat with a “controversial” and “courageous” work. Confronted with the film’s idiocies, they fall back to their second line of defense, the pseudo-postmodernist argument that history and historical movies are all made up anyway, so why should anyone be irritated with them?

In any event, there are inaccuracies in Shakespeare, Orloff is quick to point out: “Now Shakespeare plays with history all over the place. Those plays are not history; they are drama. ... We’re just following the master,” he told an interviewer. What can one say?

As Holger Syme, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Toronto, and Chair, Department of English and Drama, University of Toronto Mississauga, notes in his blog: “Emmerich and Orloff certainly take the licence their philosophy of history gives them to impressive extremes, ignoring, basically, the entire archive of documented evidence for just about anything that happened in the sixteenth century.”

Syme goes on, “The film and its ludicrous script clearly just don’t care about history at all. That’s a filmmaker’s prerogative. But why would Orloff and Emmerich then try to have it both ways? It rankles a bit to have to sit through egregious tripe like this [the film itself] only to be told that both author and director have a better understanding of Tudor England than the entire academic community of literary scholars and historians.” [http://www.dispositio.net/archives/449]

Apart from the plot incongruities and absurdities (How many illegitimate offspring did Elizabeth produce? Why don’t any of Shakespeare’s associates in the theater world, who know perfectly well he can’t be the author of the great plays, do anything serious to expose him? Why is it that the brilliant spymaster, Cecil, and his network of hardworking spies have to be informed that a well-advertised production of *Richard III*, with its hunchback protagonist, is going to be produced under their very noses? Isn’t the final conversation between Oxford and Elizabeth about their son, by which time he knows (although she doesn’t) that the queen is his mother, just a little bit ... unsettling?), apart from all that, there are facts about Elizabethan literary life that the film simply gets entirely wrong.

Professor Syme points out a few. He observes when we first meet the crowd of playwrights in 1598, “Marlowe makes fun of [Thomas] Dekker for the failure of *Shoemaker’s Holiday* and claims preeminence among historical playwrights. Which is funny, since Marlowe hadn’t written a history play in five years at that point, largely because he was murdered in 1593. And Dekker’s play wasn’t written until 1599 (a fact recorded in that famous and fraudulent monument to government conspiracy otherwise known as Henslowe’s Diary).”

He continues: “How about a few dates? A 1558 *Midsummer Night’s Dream* [the year when the Earl of Oxford would have been eight] has a certain charm, to be sure, but a *Richard III*, ‘winter of our discontent’ and all, advertised as excitingly new in 1601 might have upset the handful of theatregoers who had already bought the *printed text* in 1597. Or the second edition of 1598. There is, of course, the additional slight problem that multiple witnesses spoke of a performance of *Richard II*, sadly lacking a hunchback, on the eve of Essex’s uprising, and the fact that this performance was used as evidence against the Earl and his conspirators at multiple trials in 1601.” And so on.

The anti-Shakespeare, pro-Oxford arguments hold no water, from any standpoint. In his valuable *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1998), Jonathan Bate, now at the University of Oxford, introduces his chapter on “The Authorship Controversy” in this fashion: “There is a mystery about the identity of William Shakespeare. The mystery is this: why should anyone doubt that he was William Shakespeare, the actor from Stratford-upon-Avon?”

Bate points to the overwhelming evidence that Oxford could not have been the author, including the references to or hints about events that took place after the illustrious earl’s death in 1604 in Shakespeare’s later plays.

Anti-Stratfordians claim that none of Shakespeare’s letters survive, a claim repeated by Orloff. Bate points out that letters addressed to the Earl of Southampton “may be read at the beginning of the texts of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* [poems by Shakespeare] in any complete edition of his works.” He notes the servile tone of the epistles, and adds, “Pride of place was so important to Elizabethan society that the idea of the mighty Earl of Oxford in the forty-third year of his life writing such words to one of [Lord] Burghley’s [William Cecil’s official position] whipper-snapper wards is even more fantastic than the thought of him writing plays after his own death.”

The Genius of Shakespeare gets to the nub of the matter when it discusses the anti-Stratfordian argument as it emerged in late-Victorian England, when, “for the first time, English culture became resolutely middle class. The middle classes were highly sensitive to intruders from ‘below’ and firmly committed to the ideals of ‘above’. ... Anti-Stratfordianism makes William of Stratford into the peasant, shuts him away, and attributes his work to any lord it can find.”

Bate cites the comments of one Christmas Humphreys, Barrister at Law, in his introduction to a mid-20th century work entitled *Who Was Shakespeare?* (1955), which championed the Earl of Oxford’s cause: “It is offensive to scholarship, to our national dignity, and to our sense of fair play to worship the memory of a petty-minded tradesman while leaving the actual author of the Shakespeare plays and poems unhonoured and ignored. Moreover, I have found the plays of far more interest when seen as the work of a great nobleman and one very close to the fountainhead of Elizabethan England.”

Aptly, Bate adds, “‘Our national dignity’, ‘a petty-minded tradesman’, ‘a great nobleman’: those three phrases tell the whole story. Like so many English questions, it all boils down to class.”

Anonymous is a lazy, careless, irresponsible, latter-day, third-rate, Hollywood-tawdry, postmodernist-charlatan rendering of the Shakespeare “authorship controversy.” The imposture and forgery here are entirely the work of Orloff and Emmerich.



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