

‘The Mystery of Shakespeare’s Identity’

The belief that someone other than a glover's son from Stratford wrote William Shakespeare's plays is a conspiracy theory that refuses to die. The theory of an alternate author has flirted with the mainstream as some scholars and researchers have tried to get the broader academic community to treat the question as a legitimate debate.

For a man who was so prolific with his pen, Shakespeare didn't leave much evidence of his life behind. Most scholars accept that there is enough to prove that a William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, became an actor in London and retired back in Stratford until his death in 1616. But that's where the agreement ends. Some researchers believe that this William Shakespeare is the same man who wrote what would become known as the greatest body of literary works in the history of the English language. Others say that there is nothing solid linking Shakespeare with the plays, poems and sonnets attributed to him.

And so begins the game of tit-for-tat. Stratfordians note that Shakespeare's name is printed on the title pages of many of the plays published during his lifetime. The Anti-Stratfordians point out that nobody even knows if that's how Shakespeare spelled his name: the only surviving examples of his handwriting are six scraggly signatures spelled several different ways.

Then there's the apparent disconnect between the life that William Shakespeare lived and the ones he wrote about. Shakespeare's plays show a keen grasp of literature, language, court life and foreign travel — not the kinds of things that a small-town actor without a university education would be familiar with. And so doubting scholars look to well-traveled writers and aristocrats as the more likely candidates.