

2 Shakespearean Actors Revive Debate Over The Bard's Identity

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STEVE INSKEEP, HOST: William Shakespeare was celebrated over the weekend on the 400th anniversary of his death.

LOURDES GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST: In fact, little is known about the life of Shakespeare - A few signatures, a handful of legal documents and a will in which he famously left his wife his second-best bed.

INSKEEP: I wonder what happened to the first. That dearth of biographical facts has not stopped scholars from writing scores of biographies of Shakespeare. But it's also given rise to an increasingly vocal group of skeptics. Our colleague Renee Montagne lent an ear to a couple of the bard's countrymen as they made the case that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare.

RENEE MONTAGNE, BYLINE: The whole question of whether William Shakespeare was a pen name is an old one. Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Freud were among those who challenged the idea that William Shakespeare of Stratford was the author of the plays and poems. Nowadays, the most prominent doubters are two leading interpreters of Shakespeare. Sir Derek Jacobi has starred in many productions of Shakespeare's work, as has Mark Rylance, the first artistic director of London's re-created Globe Theater. They are behind a document called the "Declaration Of Reasonable Doubt," signed by more than 3,000 actors, academics, lawyers and others who've come around to the idea that Shakespeare is not the true playwright. When we called Rylance and Jacobi at Jacobi's home in London, I asked them for a portrait of the person who could have written the works of Shakespeare.

MARK RYLANCE: This is Mark speaking. I think he would be someone who had documentary evidence from his lifetime that he was some sort of writer, unlike Shakespeare.

DEREK JACOBI: This is Derek. He'd need to have extensive education in a huge range of subjects.

RYLANCE: And then he'd have to be fluent in multiple foreign languages, including French, Italian, Spanish and Greek.

JACOBI: And also to have an easy familiarity with the ways of the nobility, Aristocratic pastimes such as falconry and the equestrian sports.

RYLANCE: So anyone who is a candidate to be the author of these plays - Man, woman or indeed a group of people - Would need to meet these basic characteristics of the work that we have.

MONTAGNE: In fact, the Shakespeare plays are threaded with arcane knowledge that would not be obvious to modern audiences but scholars celebrate - Elaborate wordplay, intricate puns and dead-on parodies of powerful players in the court of Queen Elizabeth. Rylance and Jacobi argue that such material would have been beyond William Shakespeare, who scholars believe never went beyond grammar school in Stratford, nor traveled outside of England. And 400 years ago, though the plays were famous when he lived, when Shakespeare died, no one seemed to notice. Nor was he given a spot in Westminster Abbey, where England's literary lights from Chaucer on down have been laid to rest.

RYLANCE: When Francis Beaumont, a lesser-known writer, dies a month before William Shakespeare, in 1616, he immediately goes into Westminster Abbey. When Richard Burbage, the famous actor who played Hamlet and Richard III first dies, they say the whole of London mourns.

MONTAGNE: How, in fact, unusual was it that William Shakespeare left no letters, no books?

RYLANCE: Well, we're talking about the greatest writer known to human consciousness, yes? We have no record of any letter written or received by William Shakespeare. There is evidence of correspondence, especially correspondence concerning literary matters, for Ben Jonson, Thomas Nashe, Phillip Massinger, Gabriel Harvey, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, George Peele, Michael Drayton, George Chapman, William Drummond, John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Kyd. Those are all writers of that period. So it's one of the many facts that makes us question. We're not questioning this out of any animosity to the author. Both Derek and I have committed our lives, since we were teenagers, to this author. We're questioning it because we love the author, and we think there's a little bit more of a mystery here.

MONTAGNE: And may I ask, too, there's evidence of a widely traveled person. The plays - Many of the plays are set in Italy.

JACOBI: Yes, the knowledge displayed comes from somebody who had to have been there. It wasn't knowledge that was picked up talking to a sailor in a pub.

RYLANCE: For example, at the beginning of "Romeo And Juliet," his mother or father asks where Romeo is. And it's reported by Benvolio that he's in the sycamore grove. An American scholar, an amateur scholar called Richard Roe, went to Verona and found that there was actually a huge sycamore grove outside the walls, outside the very gate that Benvolio mentions. Now, is that the kind of thing that an Elizabethan traveler to Italy will come back in a pub and say, oh, yeah, I've been to Italy - Not mention all the statues and the wonderful architecture but say, there's this grove of trees outside Verona? No, it's something that a writer, I think, when they're writing a scene thinks, I remember that grove of trees.

JACOBI: Writers write from their own point of view. And the point of view reflected in the works just isn't that of Mr. Shakespeare, based on what we know of his life.

MONTAGNE: There is a long list of these kinds of examples in the "Declaration Of Reasonable Doubt" - Circumstantial evidence, they contend, arguing against Shakespeare as the author, which might account for the fact that several U.S. Supreme Court justices have joined the ranks of doubters, including the late Antonin Scalia. Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and John Paul Stevens have actually signed the declaration. I wonder about the question of why the authorship question would have drawn fine legal minds? I mean, I'm wondering if they're more open to following where the evidence takes them?

RYLANCE: I think you're right, Renee, that the professional historians and lawyers and people are not so bound by a kind of thought set that exists in the English literature departments. And you'll find more people open-minded about this question because they're looking at the facts without a presupposition.

JACOBI: And they have much less to lose, reputation wise.

MONTAGNE: Although, as you know well, Shakespeare scholars especially have been pretty rough. They have called you - What? - Flat-Earthers?

JACOBI: Oh, they've told us - they've told Mark and I - they've said that we are mad, and we should be locked up in a lunatic asylum.

RYLANCE: Actually, quite - I mean, actually quite hurtfully, they say that we are anti-Shakespearean.

JACOBI: I just have a kind of sense of injustice that we are honoring somebody who really had nothing to do with it. And I would like to place that honor where it is due.

MONTAGNE: Thank you both very much for joining us.

JACOBI: Our pleasure.

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