

## Teaching Shakespeare through Authorship: Lesson Plan

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For four hundred years, most people have never thought that the author of Shakespeare's poems and plays could be anyone else but a William Shakespeare from Stratford. But from Supreme Court justices to Sigmund Freud, from Mark Twain to Malcolm X, a surprising number of thoughtful persons have expressed doubt. Is Shakespeare's identity a mystery?

Potential candidates for the "alternate Shakespeare" include Sir Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth, and others. But for the past 80 years, the leading candidate has been the brilliant and pugnacious poet, playwright, and actor, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

There are reasons for taking De Vere seriously. He was distantly related to William Shakespeare of Stratford; his uncle was the translator of Shakespeare's favorite book. Another uncle first used the Shakespearean sonnet form in English. The First Folio was dedicated to de Vere's daughter's husband. A recent "Oxfordian" scholarly biography, *Shakespeare by Another Name*, points out hundreds of echoes from de Vere's experience in Shakespeare's work. If Shakespeare wasn't de Vere, he may very well have known him.

In recent years, authorship studies have achieved scholarly repute. At least two university centres have been established; there are yearly lecture series at the Globe Theatre and in Los Angeles; M.A. Programs in America and England offer a specialization in authorship-based studies.

There is intense popular interest as well. In talking about *Chasing Shakespeares* with audiences all over the country, I've heard thousands of people's opinions about Shakespeare. Everyone has one. Some people are indignant that anyone should question Shakespeare; many more are curious; but from bridge groups to taxi drivers, everyone wants to know more about him.

In the classroom, authorship studies lead students into historical research, close reading, and even thinking about the process of creativity.

In this lesson, students will plan and stage a debate about the authorship of the Shakespeare canon.

### Objective

- λ To teach students about Shakespeare's work, life, and times through the medium of studying authorship.
- λ To involve students in close reading and more active understanding of Shakespeare's work.
- λ To teach students to think critically about the nature of evidence.
- λ To improve student skills in reading, writing, public presentation, and use of interactive media.

### Materials

- λ Computers with Internet access.
- λ Presentation materials, depending on presentation type.

### Time required

- λ 1 class day: choosing sides, choosing topics
- λ 1 week (outside class): researching topics, writing drafts
- λ 1 class day: preliminary presentation within groups
- λ 2 days: critique, rewrites
- λ 1 class day: presentation of material to judges

### Procedure

A group of unbiased judges is chosen. These could be other students, a local arts critic, actor, or writer, a judge, a town librarian.

Students divide into groups, "Stratfordians" vs "Oxfordians."

Using library resources and the Internet, students research and develop an argument. (See resources below.) For example, they might discuss:

- λ Shakespeare's education

- λ The dating of Shakespeare's plays (or of a particular play, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)
- λ Shakespeare's sources
- λ History in the plays
- λ The Sonnets
- λ The history of Shakespeare's reputation

Students draft a presentation alone or in groups, mustering facts or presentations to argue for one side of the argument. Depending on time and class resources, they might deliver a speech, create a PowerPoint, etc.

Students critique each other's preliminary presentations and prepare a finished presentation as a group.

Jurors decide which group is more convincing.

### **Extension Activities**

This group activity could provide a prewriting opportunity for a formal essay in which students analyze the influence of Shakespeare's source materials on a given play, discuss Shakespeare's education, etc.

### **Assessment**

Assessment of student work is based on:

- λ Web logs and notebooks
- λ Research
- λ Critiques of others' presentations
- λ Presentation
- λ Persuasiveness

### **Online resources**

Among the many available sources are:

- λ Mark Anderson, *Shakespeare by Another Name*  
<http://shakespearebyanothername.com/>
- λ The Shakespeare Fellowship  
<http://www.shakespearefellowship.org/faq.html>
- λ The Shakespeare Oxford Society  
<http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com>
- λ Shakespeare Resource Database – a huge site with everything from Shakespeare's will to lesson plans; no authorship bias either way  
<http://www.bardweb.net/index.html>
- λ Shakespeare Treasures: The British Library quartos  
<http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/homepage.html>
- λ First Folio  
<http://dewey.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=firstfolio>
- λ For more resources, see  
[www.chasingshakespeares.com](http://www.chasingshakespeares.com)

Adapted from

- λ "Standing on the Bookshelves of Giants"  
<http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-3/online.htm>
- λ "Shakespeare Authorship: You Be the Judge"  
<http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/pages/webshakespera.html>

Sarah Smith's *Chasing Shakespeares* is available in trade paperback from Washington Square Press.

This lesson plan and other research and teaching resources are available at  
[www.sarahsmith.com/books/chasingshakespeares/cs-main.htm](http://www.sarahsmith.com/books/chasingshakespeares/cs-main.htm)