

An Oxfordian Triumph

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A *anonymous* sets the cat among the pigeons.

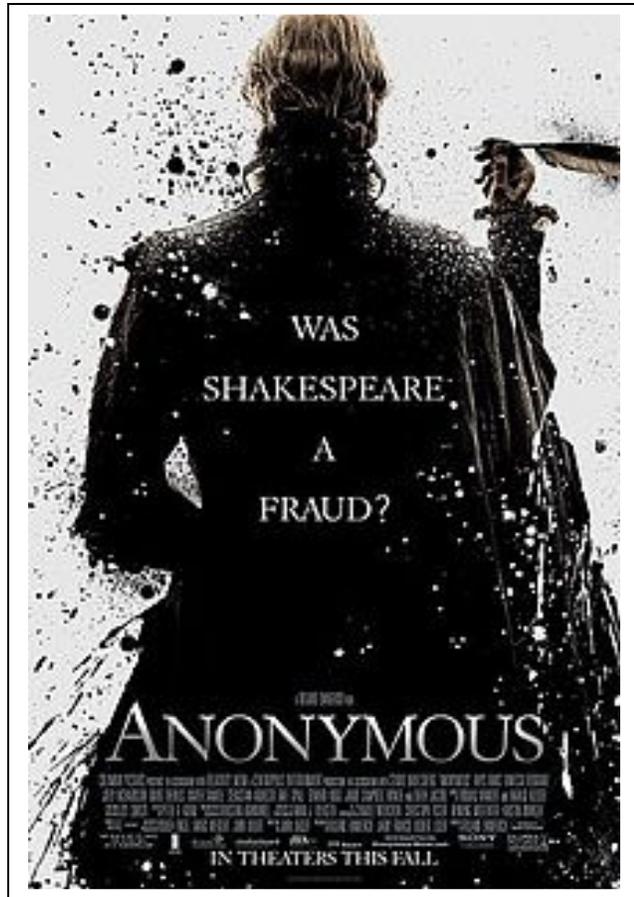
First, it's a marvelous movie, made with all the skill director Roland Emmerich is famous for, and enriched with great performances by Vanessa Redgrave (Queen Elizabeth I), Rhys Ifans (Edward de Vere) and Sebastian Armesto (Ben Jonson). The story is well told, cutting back and forth between the young de Vere (played by Jamie Campbell Bower) and Princess Elizabeth (Joelly Richardson), and their later years, when they confront the consequences of their youthful passion.

Yes, the plot embraces the "Prince Tudor" hypothesis, by which Henry Wriothesely, third Earl of Southampton, is the illegitimate offspring of Oxford and the Queen, but the whole thing is so well handled that this unlikely possibility (in my view) is given credibility and made to do solid dramatic work. It is placed

at the heart of the Shakespeare mystery, accounting largely for Oxford's need to conceal forever his identity as the great dramatic poet. His love for his son trumps his ambitions as a playwright.

It's important to note too that this theme does not overwhelm or cheapen the story's main thrust that Shaksper the actor was never Shakespeare, the greatest writer who ever lived. Rafe Spall makes a wonderfully weasel-like opportunist, who seizes a confused moment in the theater to claim credit for Oxford's work and then ruthlessly blackmails him forever afterwards. He's an illiterate actor with an eye for the main chance, taking his smarmy bows before the cheering groundlings with sufficient aplomb to make the fraud appear possible. One sees the myth in its creation and understands how, by a combination of guile and good luck, a poorly educated provincial nobody might have succeeded to literature's chiefest crown. One can almost hear the gods laughing.

Hovering behind the scenes is Ben Jonson, a second-rate dramatist to whom Oxford first offers the role of front-man. Like Peter Shaffer's Salieri, he is the prince of medioc-



rities who recognizes true genius when he sees it. He becomes, at the end, the custodian of the great man's reputation, responsible for preserving his manuscripts and implicitly (though as many scholars now reasonably believe) the true force behind their publication in the 1623 folio.

Among the movie's memorable triumphs is the way it evokes the moods and moments of The Globe and the Elizabethan/Jacobean theater in general. Like *A Man for All Seasons* and *Anne of a Thousand Days* (but unlike *Shakespeare in Love*) *Anonymous* brings 16th-17th century London to life, and especially of course the raw political power of Shakespeare's dramas in their time. At one point a downpour drenches actors and audience in the middle of a performance: no one notices or moves a muscle, they are so enraptured. The murder of Polonius is instantly recognized as the outrageous assault on Sir William Cecil that it was: his friends, family and supporters are apoplectic but impotent. Later the movie (with cheerful ahistoricism) suggests that *Richard III* was the play staged the afternoon before Essex's rebellion, and deliberately so to provoke a riot.

Hunchbacked Richard III is plainly Sir Robert Cecil and de Vere makes him so in calculated support of Essex's political goals. When the whole scheme goes awry and Essex is beheaded (and Oxford's son imprisoned)

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the playwright watches in horror and despair, forever afterward a broken man. Like Shakespeare himself, Emmerich alters the historical facts in order to bring out his story's deeper truths.

Anonymous will do the Oxfordian cause no end of good. Millions who never heard of the Authorship Question will now be engrossed in it. Stratfordians will be compelled to answer, and while as we know their response will be a giant "Pshaw!", that will be insufficient. Schools and colleges will embrace the movie and its thesis precisely because it brings the dead to life—dead Shakespeare, as he is taught in schools, and the live question of how an uneducated grain dealer and businessman could have created *The Complete Works*.

For this triumph, Oxfordians will and should take credit. It's remarkable how a tiny group of just a few hundred largely amateur scholars have managed to shake the great Shakespearean establishment to its foundations. The analogy is with the Ibsen revolution, which at the end of the nineteenth century took European (and especially British) theater by the neck and shook it until modern tragedy spilled ringing from its pockets. The Authorship Question and Shakespeare studies will never be the same after *Anonymous*. This movie is the biggest thing to hit the Oxfordian movement since the publication of *Shakespeare Identified*.

We should spruce up the parlor and stock our pantries because a great number of visitors will soon be calling. I predict that the conference of 2012 will be the biggest in anti-Stratfordian history.