



A letter from Sir Derek Jacobi to the SARC annual conference —

Let me first thank you very much indeed for the honour you do me by conferring upon me the conference's *Vero Nihil Verius* Award for Artistic Excellence. My deep regret is that I cannot be with you to receive it in person. I must plead the peripatetic life of the strolling player, the vagabond, a life that keeps me traveling as a chronicler of the times, often to bournes from which I am only too eager to return. I wish I could be with you, but fate and the need to earn a living decree otherwise [Note: Sir Derek, on the night of the conference's Awards Banquet, was performing with Diana Rigg, Ian Richardson and the Royal Shakespeare Company in *The Hollow Crown* at the Michael Fowler Centre in Wellington, New Zealand].

Like a growing number of interested parties, I have had grave doubts for some time now of the validity of the Stratford man's claim to have written some of the greatest literature the world has produced. Indeed, I must admit that it still seems incredible to me that one mind could possibly have encompassed such a monumental feat--but if so, that man is most likely to have been Edward de Vere--possibly with a little collaboration.

Like you, I live in hope that an acceptable solution is possible and that this most fascinating riddle will finally be solved. My reactions are, of course, hardly academic, and I haven't the minutiae of knowledge or arguments at my fingertips like your good selves--I'm still studying and discovering--but, as an actor, my instincts and antennae tell me that only someone connected with the vicissitudes of stage production could have created these complex dramas. Is there indeed any incontrovertible, unequivocal evidence that Stratford Will was even an actor? But, of course, with doubt comes not discussion but accusation. We are labeled eccentrics and loonies (oh, if only old Thomas had himself used a pseudonym!).

All these years of academic dedication lavished on the wrong man must be defended, at all costs it seems. Reputations tremble, an industry turns pale, and the weapons of ridicule and abuse are leveled and fired. But at least the battle lines have been drawn, and it is heartening to see how many recruits are enlisting in the Doubters Army: people, like myself, who cannot reconcile the illiteracy of Shakspeare's offspring alongside his own deep and adept knowledge of medicine, art, music, geography, law and his almost nonchalant use of metaphor from, for example, sporting activities that were exclusively the pursuit of the aristocracy--not to mention his mastery of history, languages and the intricacies of survival at court. The only evidence of Shakspeare's literary life was produced after he died and is open to dispute. Nothing, while alive, apart from some shaky signatures, puts a pen in his hand.

Legend, hearsay and myth have created this writer.

I have taken part in thirty-one of the plays so far, and I can imagine--I can feel--someone behind the words whose education and life experiences, whose knowledge of all strata of society, whose relationships and temperament simply do not fit the grain hoarder, the money lender and the entrepreneur, but chime accurately, and at times indelibly, with what we know about de Vere. And it's not enough to say, "Oh, but the works of Shakespeare survive whoever wrote them; it doesn't therefore matter." Yes, it does! The disclosure of the real author would enhance not only the historical significance but also the contemporary excitement of these treasures for both actors and spectators; and it shouldn't be regarded as potential professional suicide, heresy or an actor's silliness to come out and say so.

As a performer in the public eye and therefore subject to public criticism and attack, I am acutely conscious of the significance of accepting this token of committed involvement in the authorship debate. My wish is that more actors, with similar suspicions, would nail their colours to the mast and accept whatever brickbats the eminent and learned critics have to throw. The restrictive orthodox analysis must be open to seriously considered debate. There must be a challenge to the selective evidence of the scholars, based on their desire to justify their man rather than assess objective criteria. Too much is conjecture, guesswork, allegory and assumption--what one writer has called "a well documented blank."

However, I would also urge the anti-Stratfordian to avoid over-egging the de Vere pudding. "The lady doth protest too much" is not a healthy slogan for the cause. Take a lesson from we actors who constantly are told that "less is more." Our lifeblood as performers is constant questioning, research, analysis, intellectual and emotional honesty: the play's the thing, not the player. Without the dramatist, we have no opportunity to strut whatever stuff we possess, and in this particular case above all, if we could find the true author of these exquisite dramas, the rewards for both actor and audience would be immense. A spotlight would be thrown on hitherto unfathomable passages, and centuries of delight would be highlighted by the knowledge of the real events, situations and characters that guided and informed the author's hand. Let there be vigorous and legitimate debate!

Once more, my heartfelt thanks and my sincerest regret that I cannot be with you this evening.